Since at least 1733 - when Voltaire spoke of it in his essay, “***Lettres anglaises***” we have known that free trade can promote religious tolerance and peace among different faiths and world views. The French enlightenment philosopher described the Royal Exchange in London, as “a place more venerable than many courts of justice, where the representatives of all nations meet for the benefit of mankind. There the Jew, the Muslim, and the Christian transact together, as though they all professed the same religion, and give the name of infidel to none but bankrupts.”

Voltaire’s observations help us understand how free trade has always been essential in promoting mutual understanding and overcoming religious and ideological barriers between people of all cultures and faiths, especially in times when Europe was far from being a spearhead for tolerance in the world.

But this tolerance and peace can only be achieved and guaranteed when we are attuned to the fact that having a fair free trade system, a respect for human rights and the protection of the environment go together.

In the 21st century, at a time when globalization and the proliferation of trade treaties have brought us to new heights of economic freedom and connectivity, but also of corporate power absent accountability, Voltaire’s observation is more relevant than ever.

Diplomats must realize that trade has the potential not just to be a passive facilitator of peace and tolerance, but can play an active role in the promotion and protection of human rights.

As noted in the European Commission’s recent *Trade Policy Review*[[1]](#footnote-1) one of the EU’s top trade priorities over the next few years is for the EU to pursue closer economic integration with the “Southern Mediterranean” States, as well as ‘stepping up its engagement’ with African states in order to ‘unlock the potential’ of the continent.

I am personally pleased with this priority because I myself originate from Morocco, and understand the need to strengthen its economy, empower its vulnerable and open it up to the world. I also know first hand as a secular activist the importance of ensuring a much better human rights situation in the country and that benefits from trade should be gained in tandem with improvement on human rights responsibilities.

It is crucial therefore, that the EU sees these trade deals as opportunities for it to open a dialogue with States about their position on human rights issues. If the EU were to formulate a policy that required its trading partners to observe certain basic human rights standards – like the standards it already sets when it comes to imported goods and products - this would act as a positive incentive to States to work harder to improve their human rights records.

To take an example of blasphemy laws: of the ten EU partner countries in the ‘Southern Neighbourhood’, almost all have laws on their books that criminalize acts of blasphemy. This includes Libya, Tunisia, Israel, Jordan, Morocco and Lebanon. There is no justification under international human rights law for the continued existence and implementation of blasphemy laws, and the EU external guidelines on FoRB explicitly call for their repeal. For humanists in particular, for whom even the expression of their deeply held belief might be interpreted as blasphemous, I can tell you that such laws are particularly punitive.

We should also not overlook another important aspect of trade and human rights, which is, accountability for human rights abuses by global multilateral corporations. There is no place for corporate impunity in modern trade agreements. Many of these unscrupulous corporations continue to take advantage of the situation in many countries that do not have a functioning judiciary or their laws are not strict enough. They rely on child labour or destroy the environment without fear of consequences. And often claim that their activities are in accordance with the country laws they are operating in. The multinationals who commit these corporate crimes are registered in the EU, yet rely on a complex web of corporate structures to avoid responsibility for violations of labour rights or environmental harm. This must change!

Finally, free trade should be fair and be mindful of the human right of all to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications. We need to emphasize the importance of free source content, and allow people outside the EU to get free or reduced fee access to the latest research and papers. The democratizing of scientific research and access to information is crucial for encouraging the liberalization and circulation of new ideas.

Lowering barriers around intellectual property and technology transfer could also play a role in helping trade partners in developing countries to build capacity to address the crises of rising inequality, climate change and resilience to future pandemics.

Covid-19 has shown us the unethical face of some multinationals.

Health, which should not be a profitable business, has been exploited in the face of this pandemic. Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson paid billions to shareholders in profits and buybacks last year, despite this, these companies receiving huge public funding to produce anti-Corona vaccines. This equated to an amount sufficient to vaccinate 1.3 billion people, representing the entire population of Africa.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This injustice in dealing with a global pandemic is not something that the current world or European economic system can be proud of. It is entirely removed from the philosophy of Voltaire who saw free trade and cooperation between nations as a tool for promoting peace, democratizing opportunity, and a chance for all.

I feel it is my duty as a humanist, to remind those in power of the excesses of the current economic system; a system that has forgotten that accumulating wealth should not be on the account of destroying our planet, violating human rights, monopolizing access to knowledge and health care, but it should be a means to maximize human happiness and promote co-existence.

Thank you.

1. https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2021/april/tradoc\_159541.0270\_EN\_05.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/pharmaceutical-giants-shell-out-billions-shareholders-world-confronts-vaccine [↑](#footnote-ref-2)