



Submission in Response to “Call for input to the report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues on the contribution of the UN to the full realization of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities”

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This submission is made by **Humanists International** (NGO with Consultative Status at UN ECOSOC)

Humanists International is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) and the global representative body of the humanist movement, uniting a diverse community of non-religious organizations and individuals. Inspired by humanist values, we are optimistic for a world where everyone can have a dignified and fulfilling life. We build, support and represent the global humanist movement and work to champion human rights, equality, and secularism. We campaign on humanist issues and defend humanists at risk of persecution and violence. We work to promote human rights priorities based on humanist values at international institutions, including the United Nations. Our Members and Associates include humanist, rationalist, secular, ethical culture, atheist, and freethought organizations from all over the world. Our community also includes many individual supporters who share our vision and values.

1. This submission by Humanists International is a response to the call for input to the report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues on the contribution of the UN to the full realization of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.
2. This Submission aims to tackle the question: “Please provide examples of minority issues which should have been included in the UN political and programmatic work and were not?” with reference to the issues of the non-religious, and point to sufficient justification for their explicit inclusion within the UN minority rights framework, pursuant to the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (hereinafter, the Declaration).

The inclusion of the non-religious

3. In 1992, General Comment 22 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) was adopted. It notes that, Article 18 of the ICCPR “protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief”.¹ That document also repeatedly refers to Article 27, and highlights the cross-over between those two articles.²
4. The Recommendations of the Forum on Minority Issues at its sixth session in 2013 outlined the following: “The term “religious minorities” as used in the present document ... encompasses a broad range of religious or belief communities, traditional and nontraditional, whether recognized by the State or not, including more recently established faith or belief groups, and large and small communities, that seek protection of their rights under minority rights standards. Non-believers, atheists or agnostics may also face challenges and discrimination and require protection of their rights”.³
5. In 2020, the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues discussed the inclusion of atheists and humanists as minorities at length, with the following paragraph worth highlighting: “The Special Rapporteur agrees that, although the term “religious minority” is theoretically inclusive of those of no religious belief, discussions on religious minorities frequently result in non-religious or non-theistic minorities being overlooked. Persons who are non-believers in a religious faith, such as agnostics, humanists and atheists, would not necessarily identify themselves as members of a “religious” minority. A more inclusive and accurate wording, which would fully encapsulate the scope of this category, would be to refer to “religious or belief minorities.” The Special Rapporteur has concluded that, henceforth, activities and documents under the mandate and United Nations agencies should, whenever possible, use the expression “religious or belief minorities” to more properly encapsulate the scope of minorities this category refers to.”⁴ The

¹ CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, General Comment No. 22. (General Comments), para. 2 <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/hrc/1993/en/13375>

² *Ibid*, para 9.

³ A/HRC/25/66, para. 8. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/25/66>

⁴ A/75/211, para 53. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/75/211>

Special Rapporteur's Report concluded with a formal recommendation to this effect.⁵

6. The Special Rapporteur followed up his 2020 comments in his end of mandate Report, with the following: "It is also finally clear that religious or belief minorities in the United Nations system can be made up of persons who belong to non-hierarchical or non-formalized religions or beliefs ... or of non-believers and new faiths (atheists ...)".⁶
7. Against this backdrop, the additional consideration of being included for consideration in this, according to OHCHR "...is a numerical one. A minority in the territory of a State means it is not the majority. Objectively, that means that an ethnic, religious or linguistic group makes up less than half the population of a country." 2012 research from the Pew Research Center therefore sees the non-religious as potentially amounting to a majority in only 5 countries.⁷ This research, however, broadly referred to the "religious unaffiliated" and encompasses several groups, including humanists, agnostics, and atheists, who do not, in and of themselves, reach the 50% threshold. We therefore argue that humanists, atheists, and the non-religious, however they self-identify, should not be excluded on numerical grounds from this thematic item.
8. In echoing the previous Special Rapporteur's recent recommendation, and in looking to over 30 years of explicit recognition of the rights of the non-religious as they pertain to both the right to freedom of religion or belief and the rights of minorities, we believe that this is a concrete example of a minority issue which should have been included in the UN's political and programmatic work and has not been.

Beyond the UN

9. While it has not been made explicit that minorities falling under the Declaration should be those that are persecuted, and instead it covers the rights of all minorities in all situations, it is understandable that the UN would focus its resources and therefore attention on those which are persecuted. This is particularly the case amidst greater funding constraints. As such, this submission seeks to highlight the trends in the persecution of atheists, humanists, and the non-religious, to provide context for the importance of renewed UN-level focus.
10. In 15 countries, it is illegal or unrecognised to identify as an atheist or as non-religious.⁸ Indonesia recently affirmed its position with the decision of the Constitutional Court confirming that one is not allowed identify as non-religious or atheist.⁹ Such explicit persecution highlights the need for UN programmatic and political intervention, due to the obvious contravention of international law, norms, and standards.

⁵ *Ibid*, para 76(b).

⁶ A/78/195, para.56. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/78/195>

⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-unaffiliated/>

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https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1DHbP_FmNPqm0EuFrBFaBu8y621eUICXPp7tZ9hZJg0w/edit?gid=1498068920#gid=1498068920

⁹ <https://verfassungsblog.de/godly-constitution-and-divine-enlightenment/>

11. Even when it is not illegal, challenges persist to the formation of non-religious organizations which seek to create community around the shared identity. In 2024, NGO and associate member of Humanists International, Atheists in Kenya Society successfully appealed to the High Court of Kenya to ensure its registration was not revoked. The need for this appeal came from the challenge it faced to its registration as an organization and the difficult context in which it operates. In 2016, it became the first non-religious society to be registered in Kenya under the Societies Act (CAP108) in February 2016 after its initial rejection. Such a judgment emphasises the importance of their activities, in furtherance of Article 2(4) of the Declaration.

12. Moreover, we note that ‘blasphemy laws’ are often used as a tool for the suppression of the legitimate rights of religious minorities. Our research shows that ‘blasphemy’ laws exist in 89 countries across the globe as of December 2024.¹⁰ In seven countries, a convicted ‘blasphemer’ may be sentenced to death, and simply being accused can put your life at risk long before any trial.¹¹ A further 63 countries prescribe prison sentences ranging from months to years. It is possible to receive a fine or other administrative sanction in 19 countries.¹² These laws are enforced to varying degrees worldwide and although the severity of the punishment may vary, the effect remains the same: to stifle dialogue, criticism and expression, and they serve to undermine the rights of religious minorities, including the non-religious. Such laws have been criticized by multiple UN officials including the Secretary-General,¹³ and they undermine the rights of minorities, pursuant to the Declaration.
 - a. In January 2021, the far-right Christian portal, vasarnap.hu in Hungary published an article about Gaspar Békés - a member of the Hungarian Atheist Association - claiming he offended religious sensibilities and was a blasphemer because he shared memes in closed Facebook groups dedicated to political satire and argued in favour of banning baptisms. Békés subsequently received more than a dozen death threats and was fired from his job at Budapest City Hall.¹⁴ Then Deputy Prime Minister, Zsolt Semjén, leader of the Christian Democratic People’s Party also demanded he be fired. More broadly, reports from Humanists International’s members in Hungary describe that the promotion of certain types of education in the country, especially those that promote critical thinking, have been labelled as blasphemous.
 - b. In Nigeria, the President of Humanist Association Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was arrested in April 2020 for alleged “blasphemous content” on his Facebook page.¹⁵ In April 2022, he

¹⁰ <https://fot.humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FOTR-PAGE.pdf>

¹¹ *Ibid*; see examples of extrajudicial violence against those accused of ‘blasphemy’: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-53582578>, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-police-killed-blasphemy-suspect-shootout-26eb1fa565e894063e88cd8d38ffd0a>, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/30/iraqi-man-who-burned-quran-in-swedish-protests-shot-dead>

¹² <https://fot.humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FOTR-PAGE.pdf>

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<https://humanists.international/2024/11/humanists-international-submission-cited-by-united-nations-secretary-general/>

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¹⁵ <https://humanists.international/case-of-concern/mubarak-bala/>

was sentenced to 24 years in prison.¹⁶ The Facebook posts were an expression of his belief under Freedom of Religion or Belief and his rights under the Declaration. As such, the use of blasphemy laws to criminalise such speech is actually infringing on his right to Freedom of Religion or Belief as well as his rights under the Declaration.

13. Finally, to underscore the above persecution as a reason as to why the non-religious should be a focus of UN programmatic and political work, there are numerous examples of the need to grant asylum to the non-religious, as a result of the persecution they face.¹⁷ Many governments are beginning to accept the breadth of this issue and many NGOs are advocating for initiatives like training of asylum case officers in the persecution of the non-religious.

Conclusion

14. This submission has forwarded a brief response to the question posed: “Please provide examples of minority issues which should have been included in the UN political and programmatic work and were not?” In doing so, it has laid of the basis in international law for the inclusion of the non-religious in the purview work of the UN on minority issues, as well as highlighting the grave need for this work in the context of the persecution of the non-religious, and their denial of rights under minority issues.

¹⁶ <https://humanists.international/case-of-concern/mubarak-bala/>

¹⁷ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-71765-9_1