



Response to “Call for input: Report on freedom of religion or belief in relation to death and the honouring of the deceased” issued by the Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of religion or belief.

23 October 2025

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 in response to the Call for Inputs by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for the upcoming report on freedom of religion or belief in relation to death and the honouring of the deceased, to be presented at the 61st session of the Human Rights Council in March 2025. Humanists International wishes to express its gratitude to the Special Rapporteur for the explicit mention of humanists and atheists in the Call for Inputs, allowing us to clearly communicate the value and welcomeness of the humanist input to our members. Humanists International also expresses its gratitude to the numerous member organizations who provided input for this submission, and endorses the submissions made directly by several members.
2. The submission will address all four questions posed to civil society in the Call for Inputs, particularly highlighting the challenges facing humanists, the best practices our members report, and the lack of public consultation generally. Many examples will be cited from an internal call to our members, and more information is available on any of those to the Special Rapporteur on request. These responses come from Colombia, Denmark, Lithuania, Malta, New Zealand, Nigeria, the United Kingdom. Other examples will be cited too.
3. The headings under which the four questions will be explored are: dominance of religious traditions, social stigma and family, end-of-life decision-making, inequitable access resulting from limited recognition and provision, and public consultation.

Dominance of Religious Traditions

4. A recurring issue is the privileged role of religious institutions in funerary services and death registrations. This dominance often leaves people without choice in how to exercise their right to FoRB in death, by choosing to be buried with or without certain symbols, or that their funeral would be presided over by a religious individual or a non-religious individual. This extends to where and how someone is buried or how their body is dealt with in death, as the forthcoming examples show.
5. In Colombia, public burial sites are often run by the Catholic Church or follow Catholic customs by default.¹ Those who wish to adapt or remove religious symbols within ceremonies can sometimes do so, but often face pushback from community members or family. For a family who choose to honor a deceased member in this way, this can lead to even greater alienation at a time of grief. This aligns more broadly with the experience of those who are non-religious in Colombia. Such trends have also been documented in Nigeria.²

¹ Submission to HI from Colombian member

² Dr Leo Igwe, Humanists International Board Member, <https://www.newtimes.com.ng/lived-non-religious-buried-religious-forb-death-and-humanism-in-nigeria/>

6. The dominance of religious bodies can also manifest in legal rules that reflect religious doctrine: for example, in Lithuania, an executive rule requires that bodies be placed in a coffin for cremation, effectively imposing a Christian-derived norm and disallowing the use of a simple shroud preferred by some humanists for environmental or personal reasons.³ Such regulations, though facially neutral, may have roots in religious conceptions of dignity or purity, and they prevent alternative rites, like natural burials or eco-friendly cremations, that align with humanist values.
7. In Denmark, most “humanistic” funerals take place in chapels, which are mostly owned by the National Church.⁴ There is significant ambiguity about whether religious symbols can be removed or covered up, or the ability to access other spaces. Danish law guarantees that everyone is entitled to be buried in the cemeteries of the Danish National Church. However, since 2008 forest funerals have been legalized and in 2025 more than 20 locations in Denmark and several more are planned.⁵ These natural woodland sites are not consecrated ground; they are regulated by environmental and civil laws. Humanists appreciate forest burials for their simplicity and alignment with values of sustainability and connection to nature. Importantly, they also provide a neutral ground where, for instance, a religious and a non-religious family member could conceivably rest in the same grove, each honored in their own way. Denmark’s model, which involved amending burial laws and cooperation between municipalities and private landowners, could be replicated elsewhere as both a best practice in inclusivity and environmental responsibility.
8. A notable example comes from Sweden, which in 2016 opened the country’s first cemetery entirely free of religious symbols. This “neutral cemetery” in Borlänge was established through collaboration between a local humanist advocate and municipal authorities, even with the Church of Sweden agreeing to administer the grounds without imposing any religious imagery. The cemetery welcomes people of all faiths or none, on the condition that headstones bear no religious marks, creating a truly shared resting place on equal terms.⁶ Contrasted with this is Colombia again, where, while individuals have begun choosing more secular or non-religious symbols emphasizing values through a humanist lens rather than a religious one, this is only limited to certain cemeteries, some of which simply do not allow non-religious iconography.⁷
9. In some countries, state funerals can create a tension between a person’s non-religious worldview and the state’s desire, sometimes even requirement, to have such a funeral be religious in nature. This can extend to gatherings beyond funerals, where honoring of the deceased is the main goal, such as commemorative events for war veterans. In some places, like Ireland, humanists have

³ See Full Submission from Humanist Ideas Ambassadors, Lithuania, a Member Organization of Humanists International, for more information

⁴ Submission to HI from Danish member

⁵ <https://skovbegravelse.dk/skovbegravelsens-historie-og-udvikling-i-ind-og-udland/>

⁶ <https://www.atheistrepublic.com/news/sweden-first-atheist-friendly-cemetery-opens>

⁷ Submission to HI from Colombian member

been invited to deliver reflections alongside religious or state representatives.⁸ Elsewhere, like New Zealand, there has been a trend of including more non-religious elements, although the holding of events in churches can create a feeling of alienation or exclusion among non-religious individuals.⁹

Social Stigma and Family

10. The tension between a religious family and the wishes of an atheist or humanist who has died cannot be understated. In parts of the world where there is great cost to “coming out” as atheist or humanist, a person may have had to live their entire life without having their right to FoRB respected, and in death, this violation continues, as even the most well-meaning of families and funeral planners cannot be expected to know. Therefore, investigation of the nexus between the right to FoRB and death cannot be disaggregated from the social stigma around being humanist or atheist generally.
11. In Nigeria, a lack of awareness of non-religious options for funerals can allow religious families to feign ignorance when planning the funeral of an atheist family member. This speaks to a broader trend across the world, where religious families sometimes override the wishes of the deceased, for example the case of Mr. Patrick Naaghanton in Nigeria.¹⁰ This has been documented in multiple countries. Religious family members have even gone so far as to make an active decision not to inform the non-religious community of the deceased, as seen with the death of a humanist in Kogi state, Nigeria, so that a religious burial could go ahead without any pushback.¹¹

End-of-Life Decision-Making

12. Another area of concern is end-of-life decision-making, closely tied to how one’s death is honored. In some countries, laws on assisted dying or medical intervention are influenced by religious morality rather than secular ethics. For instance, in the United Kingdom, assisting a terminally ill person to die at their request remains a criminal offense, reflecting in part the influence of certain religious doctrines about the sanctity of life.¹² Humanist organizations argue that this blanket ban forces everyone to endure the dying process according to one set of religious values, rather than permitting individuals to choose a death consistent with their own beliefs about dignity and suffering.¹³ The denial of an individual’s wish for a humane death can be viewed as a violation of the right to FoRB, where the state effectively compels a person to remain alive and die in a manner

⁸ <https://www.humanism.ie/hai-ceo-delivers-humanist-reflection-at-1916-state-commemoration/>

⁹ Submission to HI from New Zealand member

¹⁰ Dr Leo Igwe

¹¹ Dr Leo Igwe

¹² See Full Submission from Humanists UK, a Member Organization of Humanists International, for more information

¹³ *Ibid*

prescribed by others' religious standards. This can be contrasted with the experiences of humanists in Belgium as an example of a legal regime that support an individual's right to die.¹⁴

Inequitable Access Resulting from Limited Recognition and Provision

13. Humanists remain deeply concerned about situations where the law may allow for a plurality or diversity of death rites or honoring of the deceased, but where there is practical difficulty in accessing that. Those situations often split along socioeconomic lines, allowing those with the financial means or in urban areas to have more rights, in effect.
14. In Malta, cremation has been legal since 2019, although there are, as yet, no crematoriums. As such, if it is the wish of the deceased to be cremated, the family must, at great financial cost, send the body to Sicily and for the ashes to be returned. Progress on the building of crematoria has been slow due to a dearth of political interest and opposition from those in the relevant locale.¹⁵ This is an example of where the legal regime is satisfactory but ultimately creates inequitable access.
15. Similarly, in Colombia, best practices in the honoring of a non-religious individual are usually only provided by private funeral services in urban centers, almost never in rural regions.¹⁶ Even within urban centers, it is up to the willingness of individual companies to provide exceptions from religious traditions, and there is no legal guarantee of such. This deprives individuals without means or in rural areas of equal access.
16. To return to end-of-life decision making briefly, many individuals who would like to die by assisted dying are forced to travel to other countries with a legal regime that allows that choice.¹⁷ This creates another layer of inequitable access.

Public Consultation

17. In many countries, there is minimal consultation with the non-religious community by public authorities. The Danish humanists, for example, who have been providing "humanistic" funerals since 2009, highlight that they have not been consulted despite their many years of experience, having conducted over 400 ceremonies.¹⁸
18. One notable example of neglect is in the area of public health or emergency response planning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries issued guidelines on handling deaths (from rules on last rites in hospitals to limits on funeral attendance). Few if any governments thought to

¹⁴ <https://demens.nu/nieuws/?search=&daterange=&tags%5B%5D=53&tags%5B%5D=632>

¹⁵ Submission to HI from Maltese member

¹⁶ Submission to HI from Colombian member

¹⁷ See HUK submission

¹⁸ Submission to HI from Danish member

consult humanist organizations in crafting these guidelines, despite the fact that such rules directly affected how non-religious (and religious) people could honor their dead. By contrast, major religious denominations were often consulted or at least considered (for instance, states adjusted policies to allow priests or imams some access under restrictions). The non-religious, lacking an obvious “hierarchy” or large institutional presence, were frequently ignored until our groups themselves spoke up.

19. Finally, consultation must extend beyond just regulations to practical administration. Even where laws are fair, if local officials (local cemetery boards, hospital morgues, etc.) are only liaising with religious leaders, the implementation of services may skew religious. Regular dialogue between public service providers and non-religious community groups can ensure, for example, that a city crematorium knows how to accommodate a secular ceremony, or that a war memorial committee considers humanist input on symbolism. These are granular aspects that higher-level consultations might miss but are crucial to lived experience, and speak to how individuals will be made to feel by a state.

Conclusion and recommendations

20. The above has illustrated the challenges facing humanists who wish to be honored as such in death, as well as best practices, which are increasingly prevalent. Even in the above analysis on inequitable access, within that is the fruits of *access*, that merely need to be expanded and guaranteed. The Special Rapporteur’s attention to this matter should hopefully spur further action by states to ensure that inclusive practices for honoring and mourning the deceased become widespread and are inclusive of a diverse cross-section of society, including humanists and other minorities.
21. We would ask the Special Rapporteur to issue the following recommendations to states in her much-anticipated report:
 - a. Guarantee legal recognition of humanist and other non-religious ceremonies. This includes recognizing the status of humanist officiants/celebrants for the purposes of conducting funerals (and other life ceremonies) and ensuring that marriages or death certificates resulting from such ceremonies are given equal validity as religious ones. States should remove any legal barriers that prevent secular funerals or require religious participation by default.
 - b. Ensure equal access to public burial and cremation facilities for people of all faiths and none. Where cemeteries are publicly funded or regulated, there must be no discrimination in allocation of plots or services. States should provide for non-denominational burial grounds or sections, and/or allow humanist organizations to establish their own cemeteries on an equal footing with religious groups

- c. Respect individuals' end-of-life and post-mortem wishes as a matter of law and policy. Clear protocols should be in place to uphold a deceased person's known beliefs and preferences regarding funeral arrangements and other end-of-life decisions.
- d. Provide public information and education to normalize non-religious funerals. States (and NHRIs) can help counter stigma by publishing guidance that acknowledges secular options, such as updating government websites or brochures on funerals to mention that families may choose a civil or humanist ceremony.
- e. Institutionalize consultation with non-religious and belief minority groups. Whether through standing advisory councils or regular stakeholder meetings, authorities should actively include humanist, atheist, and other belief representatives in the development and review of policies concerning death and the honoring of the deceased.
- f. Uphold freedom of expression and association in memorialization. This includes allowing secular or humanist symbols on grave markers, memorials, or in remembrance services (no unwarranted censorship of messages like epitaphs reflecting lack of belief). It also means protecting the right of humanist organizations to conduct memorial gatherings in public spaces on equal terms as religious groups.