



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## **Written statement\* submitted by Atheist Alliance International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 January 2020]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## **The right to be secular Campaign**

Since the advent of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, freedom of religion has made great progress. The freedom to manifest a religion in teaching, practice, worship and observance is now well established (if not yet universally practiced).

It is ironic then, that as these vital freedoms have gained traction, non-religious people (secular people) have become one of the most discriminated against groups in the world.

Atheism is considered synonymous with terrorism in at least one country. In others, any expression of non-belief may be condemned as blasphemy or apostasy and may receive harsh punishments up to, and including, the death penalty.

Whilst religious freedoms have been defined and incorporated into international law, none of the declarations or covenants ratified since 1948 has explicitly recognized the right to be secular and defined what that means.

Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief admitted in 2016, “Believers, atheists and non-believers must all be equally protected. Many humanists and non-believers are still widely stigmatized and persecuted around the world.”

He concluded, “In the face of increasing diversity, the freedom of religion or belief can be upheld only with the acceptance and full inclusion of atheists and non-believers. All of them have important roles to play in building pluralistic and inclusive societies for the 21st century that are peaceful and prosperous.”

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights commits signatories to respect the civil and political rights of individuals, including the right to freedom of religion.

### **Article 18 of the Covenant states:**

- Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
- No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
- Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others...”

Article 18 focuses on the rights of believers to choose and manifest a religion. It could be argued that 18 (2) prohibits coercing secular persons to believe. And it could be argued that it does not. This should not be a matter for the erudite to debate at length. The right to hold no religious belief, or to believe that all religions are mistaken, must be explicitly protected. The right not to be coerced into participating in any kind of religious worship, observance or practice should be equally protected.

The 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief provides a detailed catalog of rights related to freedom of conscience, religion, and belief, and their exercise in practice, but makes no reference to the right not to believe and not to practice a religion.

### **Article 6 states:**

“In accordance with article 1 of the present Declaration, and subject to the provisions of article 1, paragraph 3, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief shall include, inter alia, the following freedoms:

- To worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes;
- To establish and maintain appropriate charitable or humanitarian institutions;

- To make, acquire and use to an adequate extent the necessary articles and materials related to the rites or customs of a religion or belief;
- To write, issue and disseminate relevant publications in these areas;
- To teach a religion or belief in places suitable for these purposes;
- To solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions;
- To train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders called for by the requirements and standards of any religion or belief;
- To observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief;
- To establish and maintain communications with individuals and communities in matters of religion or belief at the national and international levels.”

There is no analogous declaration regarding the rights of the secular.

No UN document defines religion and belief. However, in 1993 the UN Human Rights Committee approved General Comment 22 in which they state that the terms belief and religion are to be “broadly construed,” thus protecting “theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.”

In so far as it goes, this is a welcome clarification. But it is disassociated from the texts that member states have ratified and it does not address the issue of the secular being coerced into participating in religious worship, observance or practices.

Atheist Alliance International is a global federation of atheist groups and individuals committed to making the world a place in which atheists are safe and accepted. We work to protect atheists who are excluded, disparaged, criminalized or at risk. All individuals must have the unfettered right to be secular and we call for the UN to adopt unambiguous language that protects this right.

The United Nations stands at the forefront of non-discrimination. In protecting freedom of religion and belief, it must also urgently and courageously defend those who chose not to be religious. We are asking the United Nations to reconsider the extent to which freedom from religion is protected alongside freedom of religion.

States must not only refrain from imposing religious precepts or enforcing practices on the secular but must also actively protect the secular from threats and impositions made by non-state actors.

We seek to clarify the human rights of people who hold no religious beliefs. We hold that non-believers’ rights should be explicitly equal to believers’ rights and should be recognized as such in international treaties. Accordingly, we wish to have the following declaration recognized by the United Nations and human rights organizations worldwide:

“Freedom of religion and belief entails the right to be secular. That is, the right not to be coerced or presumed to: adopt a belief; practice a religion; behave or dress according to religious precepts; identify with any faith; belong to a religious community, organization or association; adopt religious ceremonies associated with births, deaths or other life events; or be registered in official documents as a member of a religion, faith, church or any institution related to religion.”

This declaration does not seek to diminish the existing rights of the religious in any way—we staunchly defend these rights. Nor do we seek to create ‘special’ rights to benefit non-believers uniquely. We seek equality of rights for the religious and the secular.

Recognition of the right to be secular may be unwelcomed in some states, but this fact speaks only to the challenges of implementing these rights, not that these rights do not exist or should not be pursued. The extent to which a person is free from religion becomes a measure of freedom of religion and belief for everyone. If a secular person is not free to voice his views and to disengage from religious practices, it is moot whether anyone truly has freedom of religion.

Since 1924 when the Rights of the Child were ratified, the world community has identified and acted to protect groups subject to discrimination and disadvantage. In this process women, the religious, racial minorities and LGBTQ have been protected. With more than 1.2 billion nonreligious people in the world, the secular may be the last great constituency that needs our protection.

Let us not fail in this historic task.

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