

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 53rd Session**  
**11 September to 13 October 2023**  
**Item 3 – General Debate**  
**Speaker: Humanists UK Representative: Kathy Riddick<sup>1</sup>**

Humanists UK shares the Council's alarm at the rise in hatred, violence, and discrimination against persons on the basis of their religion or belief. We abhor expressions of religious hatred and incitement to violence.

The rights to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief, and to freedom of opinion and expression, are mutually reinforcing.<sup>2</sup> The exchange of ideas is necessary for a tolerant society to flourish because it allows for religious hatred to be challenged,<sup>3</sup> and we remain staunch supporters of this Council's resolution 16/18, which was adopted by consensus.<sup>4</sup>

We are therefore dismayed that this Council adopted the contested resolution 53/1 at its last session.<sup>5</sup> The resolution falls short of the longstanding consensus on how to tackle religious intolerance in line with international law. It evokes the language of anti-blasphemy laws by repeatedly equating the desecration of sacred books and religious symbols with manifestations of religious hatred. However, there is no basis to protect venerated objects under international law.<sup>6</sup> International law does not protect religious feelings from offence, nor does it protect religion or belief itself per se.<sup>7</sup>

The human rights framework is there to provide protections for the person. We support the need for renewed commitment to protect persons from incitement to violence or religious hatred in line with international law. Resolution 53/1 fails to do this, and we urge this Council to dedicate the time necessary to properly frame that commitment in line with the consensus established by resolution 16/18.

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<sup>1</sup> Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief* A/HRC/40/58, 5 March 2019, para 7. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4058-freedom-religion-or-belief-report-special-rapporteur-freedom>

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Council, *Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, and stigmatisation of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief* A/HRC/RES/16/18, 12 April 2011, para 4.

[https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/a.hrc.res.16.18\\_en.pdf](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/a.hrc.res.16.18_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Council, *Countering religious hatred constituting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence* A/HRC/RES/53/1.

[https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4017979/files/A\\_HRC\\_RES\\_53\\_1-EN.pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4017979/files/A_HRC_RES_53_1-EN.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> A/HRC/40/58, para 62.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*