

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 55th Session
26 February to 5 April 2024
Item 3 – Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on
freedom of religion or belief
Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Antonia Mäurer¹**

This statement is made jointly by Humanists UK and the Danish Humanist Society.

We thank the Special Rapporteur for her report and welcome her statement that while offensive expression can be deeply and profoundly hurtful, it does not justify criminal sanctions.²

We are therefore dismayed that Denmark amended its Penal Code to ban the 'inappropriate treatment' of religious texts.³ Having repealed its blasphemy laws in 2017, this is a backwards step for Denmark in fulfilling its obligation to promote and protect the rights to freedom of religion or belief and of expression. Together these rights allow for the exchange of ideas which is necessary for a tolerant society to flourish because it allows for hatred to be challenged.⁴ We are further alarmed that the UK Government does not appear to recognise Denmark's new law as a de facto anti-blasphemy law.⁵

Northern Ireland is the last part of the UK to have blasphemy laws. England and Wales abolished its blasphemy law in 2008 and Scotland's repeal comes into force this year. However, there are examples where expression is stifled. Last year, the Advertising Standards Authority banned an advert in part for being 'likely to cause offence to Christians'.⁶ The following month, four pupils at a school with no religious character were suspended for damaging a copy of the Quran. They received death threats when the news broke, yet one of the pupil's mother's said she did not want to press charges for threats of violence at a press conference alongside the police.⁷

We ask the Special Rapporteur how she will work with states to prevent further backsliding on the repeal of anti-blasphemy laws and de facto blasphemy bans.

¹ Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

² Human Rights Council, 'Hatred on the basis of religion or belief', A/HRC/55/47, 8 January 2024, para 8.

³ Library of Congress, 'Denmark: Parliament Approves Government Amendment of Penal Code Criminalizing "Inappropriate Treatment" of Holy Texts' <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2023-12-14/denmark-parliament-approves-government-amendment-of-penal-code-criminalizing-inappropriate-treatment-of-holy-texts/>

⁴ A/HRC/55/47, para 30.

⁵ UK Parliament, 'Question for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office' UIN 10554, 18 January 2024 <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-01-18/10554/>

⁶ Advertising Standards Authority, 'ASA Ruling on Universal Music Operations Ltd' 11 January 2023, <https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/universal-music-operations-ltd-g22-1168872-universal-music-operations-ltd.html>

⁷ Humanists UK, Shock as school suspends pupils for minor damage to Quran, 27 February, 2023, <https://humanists.uk/2023/02/27/shock-as-religious-groups-pressure-school-into-suspending-pupils-for-minor-damage-to-quran/>