

United Nations Human Rights Council, 55th Session
26 February to 5 April 2024
Item 3 – General debate
Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Lucy Potter¹

Non-religious people are discriminated against and at risk of persecution globally. The right to hold non-religious beliefs is enshrined in international law. However, non-religious minorities are still treated with violence and discrimination² which leads some people to claim asylum.

My forthcoming research³ shows that non-religious people face significant disadvantages seeking asylum and in receiving protection for holding non-religious beliefs. For example, the United Kingdom's religious persecution guidance overwhelmingly focuses on Christian convert cases, leading to asylum claimants being subjected to inaccurate questioning such as referring to atheism as a conversion and seeing atheism as analogous to adhering to a religious doctrine. This leads to an unfair burden of evidence where the non-religious must materialise their claims, in ways not compatible with atheistic beliefs.

These findings are being replicated around Europe⁴ where non-religious claimants are labelled as 'converts' in Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. For example, converts can point to a church or pastor who has provided support, but the non-religious often do not have the equivalent support to evidence their beliefs.

The continuation of these cases suggests that human rights protections for the non-religious are under-developed⁵ and they are at risk of being disadvantaged in asylum determination processes in the UK and elsewhere.

We call for states to close the gaps in asylum assessment processes for and knowledge about the non-religious. Non-religiosity should be understood and questioned in its own right and on equal footing with religiosity, but it cannot be treated the same as a religious conversion claim.

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

² Carpenter, D. (2017), *So Made That I Cannot Believe: The ICCPR and the Protection of Non-Religious Expression in Predominantly Religious Countries*, Chi. J. Int'l L., 18, 216.

³ Potter, L. (Forthcoming, 2024), *Blasphemy and Asylum in the British Asylum System*.

⁴ Laws, B. (Forthcoming, 2024), *Asylum and Nonreligion: emotions, evidence-making and credibility* (Palgrave); Van Schaik, M & Hillary, L. 2023. 'Conceptualization Shapes Practice: Apostasy-Based Refugee Claims and International Human Rights Law. *Journal of human rights practice*'.

⁵ Nixon, A. G. 2020. "Non-Religion" as Part of the "Religion" Category in International Human Rights', *Religions*, 11, 79