

United Nations Human Rights Council, 57th Session
9 September to 11 October 2024
Item 3: General Debate
Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Yehudis Fletcher¹

We note this Council marks the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family as an opportunity to consider the role of family in supporting the human rights of its members,² and draw attention to its resolution 54/17 that reaffirms state responsibility to protect and fulfil the human rights of all family members, that includes protection from violence or abuse from within the family.³

Humanists UK's Faith to Faithless programme exists because we see what happens to those who need state protection from their families in order to preserve their rights. Faith to Faithless supports those who leave high-control religious groups – often referred to as 'apostates'. We raise awareness of the issues they face: apostates are often rejected by family and community, and may lose their homes, employment, or even custody of their own children, resulting in exceptional isolation, and vulnerability.

An American study shows that leaving groups that are theologically and culturally exclusive – such as the Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses – is associated with poor health outcomes.⁴ A Finnish study found that apostates are likely to experience fear, guilt, sorrow, pain, loss, and suffering on an existential level, often with serious implications for an individual's well-being and health.⁵ An Israeli study showed that many of those who leave their Charedi Jewish communities experience poverty; the loss of community and familial financial support is compounded by a lack of access to secular education during childhood.⁶

The right to freedom of religion or belief protects the right to change religion or belief, as well as to hold non-religious beliefs. We urge states to protect these rights of those leaving, or trying to leave high control religious groups, when protecting the rights of family members.⁷

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

² United Nations Human Rights Council, 'Panel discussion on the implementation of States' obligations on the role of the family in supporting the human rights of its members: Concept note (as of 10 September 2024)' https://hrcmeetings.ohchr.org/HRCSessions/RegularSessions/57/DL_HRC_Panels/CN-Family_panel.docx

³ UNHRC, 'Res 54/17. Contribution of the implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes in the promotion and protection of human rights' UN Doc A/HRC/C/RES/54/17, 13 October 2023. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/54/17>

⁴ Christopher P. Scheitle and Amy Adamczyk, 'High-cost religion, religious switching, and health', *Journal of health and social behaviour* 51(3), 30 September 2010. p. 326
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022146510378236?journalCode=hsbb>

⁵ Maria Björkmar, Peter Nynäs and Camilla Koskinen, 'Living Between Two Different Worlds': Experiences of Leaving a High-Cost Religious Group', *Journal of Religion and Health* 61(6), 17 August 2022, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10943-021-01397-1>

⁶ Ronit Pinchas-Mizrachi and Baruch Velan, 'The Effects of Sociocultural Transitioning on Accessibility to Healthcare: The Case of Haredi Jews Who Leave Their Communities' *Contemporary Jewry* 42(1), 26 April 2022, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12397-022-09433-2>

⁷ UN Human Rights Committee, *CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)*, 30 July 1993, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4: www.undocs.org/en/CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4