

United Nations Human Rights Council, 58th Session
24 February to 4 April 2025
Item 3 – Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on
freedom of religion or belief
Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Donna Craine¹

We welcome the Special Rapporteur's recommendation that States uphold an absolute prohibition on coercion as a vital intersect between the rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom from torture and other cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment.

We would like to highlight that states also have a positive obligation to prevent coercive actions by non-state actors, including coercion from within the family or a community.

Through Humanists UK's Faith to Faithless programme, we see what happens to those in need of state protection when they leave a high-control religious group. Often referred to as 'apostates', they may be shunned by their family and community, losing their homes, employment, or even custody of their children. This can result in exceptional isolation and vulnerability to abuse.

A study² of the experiences of nearly 230 apostates from 30 countries shows a widespread culture of abuse hidden within the home, carried out under the guise of protecting or honouring a sense of religious tradition. Perpetrators are almost exclusively close family members, which means that victims are unlikely to report the abuse to the police. Only 6 percent of those surveyed who had experienced assault reported the incident to police, with only one charge being made against a perpetrator. 27 percent stated that they feared not being believed by police or felt that the police were not capable of helping.³

We therefore recommend appropriate training for all relevant public authorities and ask the Special Rapporteur how she can support states to protect apostates from coercive control from non-state actors?

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

² Hari Parekh and Vincent Egan, 'Apostates as a Hidden Population of Abuse Victims', *J Interpers Violence* 36 (23-24), December 2021 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31928309/>

³ Ibid. See also Johnson, E, 'Apostasy, Human Rights and Hate Crime in England And Wales: A Mixed Methods Study' (2019) https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3475161