

NON-BELIEF: LEGAL AND SOCIAL PROFILES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Rebecca Riedel and Norman Doe

PANEL I: THE MEANING AND EVOLUTION OF THE TERM NON-BELIEF AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

(a) Has there or has there not been an evolution in the way non-belief is understood in the national cultural debate?

There has been a gradual evolution in the way in which non-religious belief has been understood in national cultural debate in the UK. Two understandings may be offered here. First, what might be styled a subjective view from within the humanist community. Non-religious belief is a longstanding phenomenon, but its public promotion is of relatively recent origin. The British Humanist Association (Humanists UK), which is a registered charity, is typical: it was formed in 1896 and the organisation describes itself as ‘a growing movement at the forefront of social change’, ‘an expanding...organisation’, and ‘the national voice of Humanism and a leading national voice for the non-religious and for secularism’.¹ The organisation claims that humanism has existed c. 2,500 years, but ‘the denial of religion only became publicly acceptable’ in the UK during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²

Second, there is the approach of scholars. Lois Lee may be offered as an example. Lee defines ‘non-religious’ as ‘the quality of being differentiated from religion’. These ‘non-religious’ people distinguish ‘non religion’ from, on the one hand, ‘areligion’, which denotes ‘the absence of religion’, and, on the other hand, ‘secularity’, which denotes a turning ‘away from religion so that the religious becomes a secondary concern’. Lee then writes about the diversity of categories within ‘non-religion’, some of which also overlap with religion: ‘Phenomena with non-religious characteristics are diverse, and combine with religion, spiritual, and secular characteristics in numerous configurations’. As a result: ‘They can include forms of anticlerical protest; a- and non-theistic worldviews; the irreligious emotion experienced by someone performing a religious ritual from which they feel alienated; diverse forms of identification which may or may not be combined with other forms of non-religious belief or practice’ – indeed, Lee suggests that ‘secular humanist’ and ‘spiritual but not religious’ are both ‘examples of non-religious practices.’³ In short, needless to say, for both the Humanists UK and scholars like Lee, ‘religion’ is key to the definitions of ‘non-religion’.

(b) What forms of non-belief are present today within the national society?

The various forms of non-belief are summed up systematically by Humanists UK. First, there is the ‘agnostic’, described as ‘having an open mind about religious belief, especially the existence of gods’. However, the term ‘agnostic’ can also mean that ‘nothing is known, or can possibly be known, about gods or other supernatural phenomena, and that it is wrong of people to claim otherwise’. Second, there are those who identify themselves as ‘atheist’ which translates as ‘without gods’. These are individuals who reject the existence of a god or

¹ <https://humanists.uk/about/>

² <https://humanists.uk/humanism/humanism-today/non-religious-beliefs/>

³ L Lois, *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

gods. Third, there are the ‘freethinkers’ – this was a term popular in the nineteenth century and ‘used to reject authority in matters of belief, especially political and religious beliefs’.⁴

Fourth, the word ‘humanist’ is ‘used today to mean those who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs’. The organisation, therefore, recognises the category of ‘morality’ and this is based on ‘reason’. It asserts: ‘All humanists believe that moral values follow on from human nature and experience in some way. Humanists base their moral principles on reason (which leads them to reject the idea of any supernatural agency), on shared human values and respect for others’. As a result: ‘They believe that people should work together to improve the quality of life for all and make it more equitable’. This belief is ‘a full philosophy, “life stance” or worldview, rather than being about one aspect of religion, knowledge, or politics’. Fifth, ‘non-religious’ people include ‘those who are uninterested in religion or who reject it’. Moreover: ‘this category may include the vague or unaffiliated, those who are only nominally or culturally affiliated to a religious tradition, and the superstitious’. The sixth group consists of those who are ‘rationalist’ – and a rationalist ‘means someone who prioritises the use of reason crucial in investigating and understanding the world’; and thus: ‘Rationalists usually reject religion on grounds that it is unreasonable’.⁵

Seventh, there is the ‘skeptic’, which ‘usually means someone who doubts the truth of religious and other supernatural or “paranormal” beliefs, typically on rationalist grounds’. Finally, there are ‘secularists’, amongst whom some may advocate non-belief (see below).⁶

(c) Is the phenomenon of non-belief increasing or decreasing at national level? What criteria are used to calculate the number of non-believers? How many non-believers are there?

The numbers who profess non-religious belief are increasing at national level. The criterion used to calculate this is whether a person self-identifies as such in various recent surveys. According to statistics offered by Humanists UK, 39% of the population currently have ‘no religion’. The data (taken from the Annual Population Survey 2018) shows the number of non-religious people has increased by nearly a half since 2011 – 8 million in the UK. The figures also show ‘a 15% decline in the number of people who say they are Christian’. But those people who self-identify as Muslim grew by 22%, Jewish by 17% and Hindu by 13%.⁷

(d) What forms of alternative spirituality are present at national context?

First, with regard to a general belief in a divinity, according to government sources: ‘A quarter of Britons say they believe in “a god”. Four in ten neither believe in “a god” nor in a “higher power”’. 16% believe in the existence of a ‘higher spiritual power’ but not ‘a god’.⁸

⁴ <https://humanists.uk/humanism/humanism-today/non-religious-beliefs/>

⁵ <https://humanists.uk/humanism/humanism-today/non-religious-beliefs/>

⁶ <https://humanists.uk/humanism/humanism-today/non-religious-beliefs/>

⁷ <https://humanists.uk/2019/04/09/number-of-non-religious-people-in-britain-jumps-by-46-new-figures-show/#:~:text=The%20data%20from%20the%20ONS,saying%20they%20have%20no%20religion;https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/adhocs/009830religionbylocalauthoritygreatbritain2011to2018>

⁸ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2020/12/29/how-religious-are-british-people>

Second, with regard to types of non-religious belief, statistics from 2011 indicate: Agnostic - 32,282; Atheist - 29,267; Free thinker – 513; Heavy Metal – 6,242; Humanist - 15,067; Jedi Knight – 176,632; Realist – 348; Heathen – 278; and in relation to other beliefs – 19,306.⁹

Third, the category ‘spiritual belief’ was recognised by the Supreme Court in 2013 in a case in which Lord Toulson stated that, for the purposes of the Places of Religious Worship Registration Act 1855, a religion could be described as ‘a spiritual or non-secular belief system, held by a group of adherents, which claims to explain mankind’s place in the universe and relationship with the infinite, and to teach its adherents how they are to live their lives in conformity with the spiritual understanding associated with the belief system’.¹⁰

(e) How is the relationship between non-belief and secularism interpreted?

Different sources provide different views about the relationship between non-belief and secularism. As we have seen, according to scholars like Lee, for some secularists religion may be a ‘secondary concern’.¹¹ And some religious organisations (such as the Methodist Church) seek something akin to a secular State insofar as they advocate the separation of the State and religion – but they would not suggest that the State should not legislate on religion.

Humanists UK offer a rich treatment of the relationship between non-belief and secularism. It asserts that ‘secularists’ hold the belief ‘that laws and public institutions (for example, the education system) should be neutral as between alternative religions and beliefs’. In turn: ‘Almost all humanists are secularists, but religious believers may also take a secularist position which calls for freedom of belief, including the right to change belief and not to believe’. The principles of justice and equality are therefore crucial for the secularists: they ‘seek to ensure that persons and organisations are neither privileged nor disadvantaged by virtue of their religion or lack of it’. So is the principle of democracy: ‘They believe secular laws – those that apply to all citizens – should be the product of a democratic process, and should not be determined, or unduly influenced, by religious leaders or religious texts’. Also, however, Humanists UK observes that: ‘The word “secularism” was once used to describe a non-religious worldview more generally (sometimes described in similar terms to humanism) but this original meaning is very old-fashioned’ and it has ‘fallen completely out of use’.¹²

PANEL II: INDIVIDUAL NON-BELIEF - THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RIGHT TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND NON-BELIEF

(a) Recognition or non-recognition of non-belief as a form of religious freedom? What national arguments do doctrine and sources of law (laws, case law, administrative acts) use to justify this inclusion?

The law on discrimination provides for the protection of (non-religious) belief and it does so alongside its protection of religion broadly within the wider framework of religious freedom. Discrimination on grounds of ‘religion’ or ‘belief’ has been forbidden since 2003 in relation to employment and since 2006 in relation to goods and services.¹³ The law is now found in

⁹ <http://www.brin.ac.uk/census-2011-any-other-religion/>

¹⁰ *R (on the Application of Hodkin) v Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages* [2013] UKSC 77.

¹¹ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/what-is-secularism.html>

¹² <https://humanists.uk/humanism/humanism-today/non-religious-beliefs/>

¹³ Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 SI 2003/1660.; Equality Act 2006 Part 2.

the Equality Act 2010. A contentious issue has been the definition of religion.¹⁴ Although the original EU Framework Directive gave no further definition of ‘religion or belief’, the 2003 Regulations originally defined ‘religion or belief’ as any ‘religion, religious belief, or similar philosophical belief’.¹⁵ Early employment tribunal decisions suggested that the Regulations took a broad view of ‘religion’ and a narrow approach to ‘belief’. *Hussain v. Bhuller Bros*, for instance, found that ‘attendance at home for bereavement purposes formed part of the Claimant’s religion or religious belief’ and seemed to go further than current human rights principles in recognizing that ‘If a person genuinely believes that his faith requires a certain course of action then that is, sufficient to make it part of his religion’.¹⁶

By contrast, claims were excluded because the belief was not a ‘similar philosophical belief’. In *Williams v. South Central Limited* loyalty to a national flag or to one’s native country did not constitute ‘a religious belief, or similar philosophical belief’,¹⁷ while in *Baggs v. Fudge* it was held that discrimination on the basis of membership of the British National Party (BNP) was outside the scope of the Regulations: it was a political party and not a ‘religion, nor a set of religious or similar philosophical beliefs’.¹⁸ The Equality Act 2006 changed the definition to include ‘lack of religion or belief’ and the Act also removed the requirement that philosophical beliefs had to be ‘similar’ to religious ones in order to be protected.¹⁹ The definition in the Equality Act 2010 (s. 10) is the same as that in the Equality Act 2006.²⁰

Moreover, the number of cases in the courts which recognise non-religious belief has increased - for example: humanist beliefs;²¹ and beliefs in psychic powers and spiritualism.²² In contrast, other beliefs have not been recognised, such as: beliefs in conspiracy theories regarding 9/11;²³ a belief that a Poppy should be worn the week prior to Remembrance Sunday;²⁴ and Marxist / Trotskyite beliefs held by trade union members.²⁵ In one case, described by two commentators as ‘muddled’²⁶, the Employment Tribunal concluded that a belief in vegetarianism was not capable of equality law protection.²⁷ But, the same judge, in a different case, held that ‘ethical veganism’ is a legally protected philosophical belief.²⁸

(b) What formula is used by national legislation to recognize rights to non-believers? Right to religious freedom, right to freedom of religion and belief, or right to freedom of religion and conscience? What consequences in the individual sphere depending on the formula used?

¹⁴ See P. Griffith, ‘Protecting the Absence of Religious Belief? The New Definition of Religion or Belief in Equality Legislation’, 3 *Religion & Human Rights* 2, 149 (2007) and R. Sandberg, ‘A Question of Belief, in Religion and Law’ 51 (N. Spencer ed., *Theos* 2012).

¹⁵ Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 reg 2(1).

¹⁶ ET, Case no: 1806638/2004 (5 Jul. 2005).

¹⁷ ET, Case no: 2306989/2003 (16 Jun. 2004).

¹⁸ ET, Case no: 1400114/2005 (23 Mar. 2005).

¹⁹ Equality Act ss 44, 77(1).

²⁰ M. Hill, R. Sandberg, N. Doe, C. Grout, *Religion and Law in the United Kingdom: Great Britain* (Wolters Kluwer, 4th edition, 2021) 146-147 (pars. 330-333).

²¹ *Streatfield v. London Philharmonic Orchestra Ltd* [2012] 2390772/2011 (22 May 2012).

²² *Greater Manchester Police Authority v. Power* [2009] EAT 0434/09/DA (12 Nov. 2009).

²³ *Farrell v. South Yorkshire Police Authority* [2011] ET 2803805/2010 (24 May 2011).

²⁴ *Lisk v. Shield Guardian Co Ltd & Others* [2011] ET 3300873/2011 (14 Sep. 2011).

²⁵ *Kelly v. Unison* [2009] ET 2203854/08 (22 Dec. 2009).

²⁶ F. Cranmer and R. Sandberg, ‘A critique of the decision in *Conisbee* that vegetarianism is not "a belief"’, (2020) 22 (1) *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 36

²⁷ *Conisbee v Crossley Farms Ltd*, unreported, 6 September 2019 (ET (Norwich)).

²⁸ *Casamitjana Costa v The League Against Cruel Sports*, 21 January 2020 (ET (Norwich)).

Various formulae are used in national laws to recognize non-believers' rights. As we have seen, in 2003 discrimination law protected 'religious belief, or similar philosophical belief', and under the Equality Act 2010 protection is given to the 'lack of religion or belief'. Non-religious belief may also be protected under the Human Rights Act 1998 on the basis that it may be classified a form of 'thought' or 'conscience' under Article 9 of the ECHR – as we see below (II.d-e), non-religious belief may stimulate assertions under the ECHR Article 9, and, thus, may generate practical legal consequences for non-believers who assert the right.

(c) What are the main demands made by non-believers in the name of the right to freedom of religion at national context?

As set out above, the right to non-belief has been seen as both related to religious freedom and as a freestanding right independent of religion. In terms of the latter, a typical general statement of demands by non-believers is that of Secularism UK, namely: separation of religious institutions from state institutions; a public sphere in which religion may participate, but not dominate; freedom to practise belief without harming others, or to change it or not have one, according to one's own conscience; and equality so that religious belief or lack of it does not (dis)advantage people.²⁹ As we see below, other specific demands made by non-belief bodies, principally Humanists UK, relate to e.g., marriage, charities, and education.

(d) What effect, if any, has the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights had on the national approach?

Under the auspices of the Human Rights Act 1998, incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law, and, specifically on Article 9 ECHR, courts in the UK have made use of some Strasbourg jurisprudence in relation to rights of non-religious believers. One fundamental which is recognised is the right of people not to hold any religious belief.³⁰

Whilst Article 9 concerns freedom of religion in particular, the protection afforded by this provision is much broader and applies to all personal, political, philosophical, moral convictions. It extends to ideas, philosophical convictions of all kinds, with the express mention of a person's religious beliefs, and their own way of apprehending their personal and social life. For example, as a philosophy, pacifism falls within the scope of application of Article 9 of the Convention, since the attitude of a pacifist can be regarded as a 'belief'.³¹ In other words, the right embraces freedom to hold or not to hold religious beliefs and to practise or not to practise a religion (*Kokkinakis v. Greece*, 25 May 1993, § 31, Series A no. 260-A, and *Buscarini and Others v. San Marino* [GC], no. 24645/94, § 34, ECHR 1999-I).

The term 'belief' is considered in Strasbourg jurisprudence to require a worldview rather than a mere opinion: it was defined in *Campbell and Cosans v. United Kingdom*,³² in reference to Article 2 of the first protocol to the ECHR, as denoting 'views that attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance'.³³ However, provided that this threshold is

²⁹ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/what-is-secularism.html>

³⁰ See: European Court of Human Rights Research Division: 'Overview of the Court's case-law on freedom of religion' (19 January 2011, Council of Europe): https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/research_report_religion_eng.pdf

³¹ *Ibid.* pp. 6-17.

³² EHRR 4 (1982): 293.

³³ Para. 36. This definition was applied to Art. 9: *Eweida and Others v. United Kingdom* (2013) 57 EHRR 8.

satisfied, the Strasbourg Court has held that ‘the state’s duty of neutrality and impartiality is incompatible with any power on the state’s part to assess the legitimacy of religious beliefs or the ways in which those beliefs are expressed’.³⁴ Strasbourg has only been prepared to use the belief filter in exceptional cases, such as in relation to a strong ‘personal motivation’ to have one’s human remains in ashes scattered at home,³⁵ support of the notion of assisted suicide,³⁶ and preferences on the part of prisoners as to prison uniform.³⁷ As we see in the next section, these ideas have been influential in the decisions of the courts in the UK.

(e) To what extent are the rules of international law protecting non-belief applied in the national legal system?

The Strasbourg approaches have been replicated at the domestic level. In the House of Lords decision of *R v. Secretary of State for Education and Employment and others ex parte Williamson*,³⁸ Lord Nicholls noted that the protection of ‘religion or belief’ meant that the question of ‘deciding whether a belief is to be characterised as religious...will seldom, if ever, arise under the European Convention’ because it does not matter whether the belief is religious or non-religious.³⁹ Moreover, importantly, Lord Nicholls noted that ‘Freedom of religion protects the subjective belief of an individual’.⁴⁰ Lord Walker doubted whether it was right for courts, except in extreme cases, ‘to impose an evaluative filter’ at the stage of identifying whether there was a belief, ‘especially when religious beliefs are involved’.⁴¹

For Lord Nicholls, ‘a belief must satisfy some modest, objective minimum requirements’.⁴² He explained that to be protected under Article 9 beliefs ‘must be consistent with basic standards of human dignity or integrity’ and ‘must relate to matters more than merely trivial. It must possess an adequate degree of seriousness and importance’. Moreover: ‘The belief must also be coherent in the sense of being intelligible and capable of being understood’. These requirements applied to ‘a non-religious belief, as much as a religious belief’; furthermore, a non-religious belief ‘must relate to an aspect of human life or behaviour of comparable importance to that normally found with religious beliefs.’⁴³ This test was applied in *Whaley v. Lord Advocate*, concerning the hunting ban. For Lord Hope, the current jurisprudence did ‘not support the proposition that a person’s belief in his right to engage in an activity which he carries on for pleasure or recreation, however fervent or passionate, can be equated with beliefs of the kind that are protected by Article 9’ since that would make it difficult to ‘set any limits on the range of beliefs that would be opened up for protection’.⁴⁴

Generally, however, domestic courts have not relied upon the definition of belief as a filter in their interpretation of Article 9. This is shown by two cases concerning drug use: in *R v. Taylor*⁴⁵ and *R v. Andrews*,⁴⁶ cases concerning respectively the possession and importing of

³⁴ *Eweida and Others v. United Kingdom* (2013) 57 EHRR 8 at para. 81.

³⁵ *X v. Germany* (1981) 24 DR 137.

³⁶ *Pretty v. United Kingdom* (2002) 35 EHRR 1.

³⁷ *McFeely et al v. UK* (1980) 20 DR 44.

³⁸ [2005] UKHL 15, [2005] 2 AC 246.

³⁹ Paragraph 24.

⁴⁰ Paragraph 22.

⁴¹ Paragraph 57.

⁴² Paragraph 23.

⁴³ Paragraph 24. In respect of philosophical beliefs under the provisions of the Equality Act 2010, see *Grainger plc v Nicholson* [2010] ICR 360, which concerned belief in climate change.

⁴⁴ *Whaley v. Lord Advocate* [2007] UKHL 53 at para. 18.

⁴⁵ [2001] EWCA Crim 2263.

⁴⁶ [2004] EWCA Crim 947.

cannabis by Rastafarians, the Court of Appeal held that anti-drug laws could be justified under Article 9(2). It was assumed without comment that Rastafarianism was a religion, and that drug-taking was capable of being a manifestation of that religion under Article 9(1).

Humanists UK has been directly involved in court cases in this field, for example in *Fox et al. v Secretary of State for Education* [2015] EWHC 3404, when the association challenged the exclusion of non-religious worldviews from the school curriculum, and in *Smyth* [2018] NICA 25, which established legal recognition of humanist marriages in Northern Ireland.⁴⁷

PANEL III: ORGANISED NON-BELIEF. THE PROTECTION OF NON-BELIEF AS A COLLECTIVE RIGHT

(a) What are the non-denominational philosophical associations present on the national territory?

There is a wide range of non-religious belief organisations in the UK the titles of which indicate the belief stance to which they adhere and which they aim to promote. For the sake of convenience, these non-belief organisations may be presented in the following way:

As we have seen, Humanists UK is the largest humanist organisation in the UK. Affiliated to it, on a national or regional basis, are: Wales Humanists; Northern Ireland Humanists; Young Humanists; LGBT Humanists UK; Defence Humanists; and Humanist Students. There is also the organisation the Humanist Society Scotland: this is not linked with Humanists UK.

The National Secular Society – this organisation was founded in 1866 and, for example, promotes the separation of church and state; and Scotland has a Scottish Secular Society.

The Rationalist Association was originally styled the Rationalist Press Association. The organisation is the publisher of *New Humanist* and publishes literature that is anti-religious.

Camp Quest UK: this straddles the categories ‘secular’ and ‘humanist’ and is ‘a British secular humanist summer camp’ which promotes ‘critical thinking in children’ at the camp.

The Conway Hall Ethical Society claims to be ‘the oldest freethought community in the world’, and it advocates ‘secular humanism’. It is a member of Humanists International.

(b) How are the representations of the associative world of non-believers organized at national level?

Non-religious belief associations are organised in the political field in making representations to government, particularly over the individual rights of non-believers. One notable example is in relation to civil marriages. These occur in a register office or approved premises - no religious service may be used.⁴⁸ A building with a recent or continuing religious connection cannot be an approved premise.⁴⁹ Although a religious ceremony may follow,⁵⁰ it is the civil ceremony which is legally binding.⁵¹ In 2014 the government published its response to the

⁴⁷ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/freedom-of-religion-and-belief/>

⁴⁸ Marriage Act 1949, s. 45A(4).

⁴⁹ Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) Regulations 2005/3168, Sch. 1.

⁵⁰ Marriage Act 1949, s. 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, s. 45(2); s. 46.

consultation on ‘marriages by non-religious belief organisations’. The consultation sought views on whether the law should be changed to permit non-religious belief organisations (for example humanists) to conduct marriages in England and Wales. It also examined which organisations would be able to conduct such marriages if there was a change in the law and how such a change should be implemented. Most people who responded were in favour of changing the law to allow non-religious belief ceremonies, and for those ceremonies to take place in unrestricted locations (including out of doors).⁵² The matter is being considered further by the Law Commission, and scholarly debate on it includes ‘humanist marriages’.⁵³

In 2020, the High Court held that the failure of English law to recognise humanist weddings (see also below V(a)), whilst *prima facie* discriminatory, was justified by reference to a legitimate aim, namely the need to address differences in treatment as part of a wholesale reform of the law of marriage. Given the on-going review of all marriage law by the Law Commission, the Court was satisfied that the Secretary of State had established a fair balance that was struck between the claimants’ individual rights and wider community interests.⁵⁴

(c) What legal protection is provided for non-belief as a collective right? What legislative or judicial measures have been taken?

Non-belief associations have collective rights to manifest their beliefs under ECHR Art. 9, but one important area here under domestic law is their associational involvement with the Charity Commission under the Charities Act 2011. Originally, at common law, the ‘advancement of religion’, which still attracts charitable status, was defined as requiring ‘faith in a god and worship of that god’, thus excluding philosophical or other non-religious beliefs.⁵⁵ However, advancement of non-theistic beliefs may be held charitable under the Charities Act 2011, ‘religion’ includes ‘a religion which does not involve belief in a god’.⁵⁶ Non-belief organisations listed above in III(a) are registered charities under the 2011 Act.

The Charity Commission has determined from time to time that a particular association is not for the advancement of religion but for another form of belief. For example, in 2009 by the Gnostic Society applied to the Charity Commission for status as a charity for the advancement of religion.⁵⁷ The Charity Commission relied on its own guidance to state that there were ‘four characteristics of a religion for the purpose of charity law’: (1) belief in a god (or gods) or goddess (or goddesses), or supreme being, or divine or transcendental being or entity or spiritual principle, which is the object or focus of the religion (referred to ... as ‘supreme being or entity’); (2) a relationship between the believer and the supreme being or entity by showing worship of, reverence for or veneration of the supreme being or entity; (3) a degree of cogency, cohesion, seriousness and importance; (4) an identifiable positive,

⁵² Marriages by Non-Religious Belief Organisations: Summary of Written Responses to the Consultation and Government Response, Ministry of Justice, (18 December 2014).

⁵³ R. Sandberg, *Religion and Marriage Law: The Need for Reform* (Bristol University Press, 2021) 49-74, 74-5, 88-9, 98.

⁵⁴ *The Queen (on the application of Harrison and Others) v Secretary of State for Justice* [2020] EWHC 2096 (Admin).

⁵⁵ *Re South Place Ethical Society, Barralet v. AG* [1980] 1 WLR 1565 per Dillon J at 1572. This relied on the definition of ‘religious worship’ found in *R v. Registrar General, ex parte Segerdal* [1970] 2 QB 679, which has now been superseded by that in *R (on the Application of Hodkin) v. Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages* [2013] UKSC 77.

⁵⁶ Charity Act 2011, section 3(2)(a).

⁵⁷ Application for Registration of the Gnostic Centre (16 Dec. 2009). Paragraph 23.

beneficial, moral or ethical framework.⁵⁸ While the first two characteristics elaborate the common law definition of religion (which required belief in and worship of a god), the third characteristic brings charity law in line with the requirements found in human rights laws and discrimination laws – ie. beliefs which require ‘cogency, cohesion, seriousness and importance’.⁵⁹ The fourth characteristic incorporates the morality test at common law⁶⁰ but goes further to introduce a public benefit criterion into the Charity Commission’s definition of religion. The Commission held that the application was not for the advancement of religion because the fourth characteristic has not been met. Although the Gnostic Society prayed for humanity and followed Christian teachings such as love thy neighbour, ‘there was no evidence of consistent application of such codes on their website or in the literature’.⁶¹

By way of contrast to gnosticism, in 2010, the Druid Network for England and Wales was held to be a charity for the advancement of religion since there was belief in a ‘supreme being or entity’; moreover: ‘a relationship between the believer and the supreme being or entity by showing worship of, reverence for or veneration of the supreme being or entity’.⁶²

As with the other charitable purposes, there are a number of requirements that need to be met under the Charities Act 2011. The gift or institution must be for charitable purposes only,⁶³ and it must ‘be for the public benefit’.⁶⁴ The Act provides that ‘it is not to be presumed that a purpose of a particular description is for the public benefit’ (s. 4(2)); but the meaning of this provision remains a matter of debate: while it is commonly thought,⁶⁵ not least by the Charity Commission;⁶⁶ that there must be evidence that the activities are for the benefit of the public, doubts have been expressed about this interpretation.⁶⁷ For a non-belief association to acquire charitable status, it too must establish public benefit: see below.

(d) What national solutions are given to the relationship between religious denominations and non-denominational philosophical associations? Are there any

⁵⁸ Charity Commission, *Analysis of the law underpinning Public Benefit and the Advancement of Religion*, February 2008, Paragraph 23.

⁵⁹ See para. 68 above.

⁶⁰ See, *Thornton v. Howe* (1862) 31 Beavan 14 and *Re Watson* [1973] 1 WLR 1472 at 1483-84: A. Bradney, *Religions, Rights and Laws* 122 (Leicester University Press 1993).

⁶¹ Application for Registration of the Gnostic Centre (16 Dec. 2009). Paragraph 44.

⁶² Application for Registration of the Druid Network (21 Sep. 2010). Paragraph 20. In relation to the fourth characteristic, the Commission referred to the Network’s ‘principle of honourable relationships’, and the way in which the promotion of ethical codes, were integrated explicitly in its objects and through its website. The Commission therefore concluded that there was ‘evidence of an identifiable positive beneficial ethical framework promoted by the Druid Network that is capable of having a beneficial impact on the community at large’: paras 50, 51 and 53.

⁶³ Section 1(1).

⁶⁴ Section 2(1)(b). See, further, F Cranmer ‘Religion and Public Benefit in United Kingdom Charity Law’ in B Bussey (ed) *The Status of Religion and the Public Benefit in Charity Law* (2020, Anthem Press, London) pp 81-100.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., F. Quint & P. Hodkin, *The Development of Tolerance and Diversity in the Treatment of Religion in Charity Law*, 2 *Charity L. & Practice Rev.* 10, 1, 2 (2007); J. Warburton, ‘Charities and Public Benefit – From Confusion to Light?’ *Charity Law and Practice Review* 10, no. 3 (2008): 1; and M. Harding, ‘Trusts for Religious Purposes and the Question of Public Benefit’, *MLR* 71, no. 2 (2008): 159.

⁶⁶ See their current guidance available at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/358531/advancement-of-religion-for-the-public-benefit.pdf.

⁶⁷ See J. Hackney, ‘Charities and Public Benefit’, *LQR* 124 (2008): 347, P. Luxton, ‘Public Benefit in the Advancement of Religion after the Charities Act 2006: Another Charity Muddle?’ in *Law and Religion: New Horizons* 117 (N. Doe & R. Sandberg eds., Peeters 2010); and P. Luxton, *Making Law? Parliament v. The Charity Commission* (Politeia 2009).

national agreements between states and non-denominational philosophical associations at national level?

Whilst there would seem to be no formal national agreements between non-belief associations and the State, in the same way that there are no formal agreements between the State and religious organisations, there is obviously a level of agreement implicit in negotiations between such bodies and the State and its institutions when they seek particular legal benefits. For example, in applications to the Charity Commission to obtain charitable status, non-belief associations must establish that their activities would be of ‘public benefit’. The Charity Commission has developed its understanding of the idea of public benefit.⁶⁸

As to the Gnostic Society,⁶⁹ the Commission held that there were ‘two principles of public benefit’: ‘There must be an identifiable benefit or benefits’ and ‘Benefit must be to the public, or a section of the public’.⁷⁰ The second principle had not been demonstrated: although courses, seminars and workshops were open to all to attend, ‘the Chair of the Gnostic Society made the decision as to whether or not to allow someone to progress to the higher or second chamber’.⁷¹ In relation to the application by the Druid Network,⁷² the Commission returned to the two principles laid out in its decision on the Gnostic Society but now explained that these principles further broke down into sub-principles. The first principle requiring an identifiable benefit broke down into three sub-principles: principle 1a that ‘It must be clear what the benefits are’; principle 1b that ‘The benefits must be related to the aims’ and principle 1c that ‘Benefits must be balanced against any detriment or harm’.⁷³ The second principle requiring that the benefit must be to the public broke down into four sub-principles: principle 2a that ‘The beneficiaries must be appropriate to the aims’; principle 2b that ‘the opportunity to benefit must not be unreasonably restricted by geographical or other restrictions’; principle 2c that ‘People in poverty must not be excluded from the opportunity to benefit’; and principle 2d that ‘Any private benefits must be incidental’.⁷⁴ The Commission held these requirements had been met. The Commission also accepted, unlike in the Gnostic Society application, it was common within religions for there to ‘be occasions when people need to have reached a certain level of attainment to participate in events’.⁷⁵

(e) Do non-confessional philosophical associations play a social role at national level? In what forms and with what results?

Non-belief associations often assert their own social contribution to national life in their mission statements and other such documents. For instance, Humanists UK, seeks: to ensure that ‘humanism is understood as an ethical and fulfilling non-religious approach to life involving a naturalistic view of the universe’; to support ‘people with humanist beliefs and values...in identifying themselves as humanists and in expressing those beliefs and values in their lives’; and to work so that ‘the UK is a secular state guaranteeing human rights, with no privilege or discrimination on grounds of religion or belief’ in which ‘public debate and policy are shaped by humanist perspectives’. As such: ‘we are [a] financially healthy and

⁶⁸ For criticism of this see P. Luxton and N. Evans, *Cogent and Cohesive? Two Recent Charity Commission Decisions on the Advancement of Religion*, Conveyancer & Prop. Law. 144 [2011].

⁶⁹ Application for Registration of the Gnostic Centre (16 Dec. 2009). Paragraph 23.

⁷⁰ Paragraph 58.

⁷¹ Paragraph 60.

⁷² Application for Registration of the Druid Network (21 Sep. 2010).

⁷³ Paragraphs 59–67.

⁷⁴ Application for Registration of the Druid Network (21 Sep. 2010) paras 68–79.

⁷⁵ Paragraph 71.

sustainable organisation with high standards of governance and management’; and: ‘we are respected as an organisation for our expertise and professionalism and recognised as the national voice of Humanism and a leading [voice] for the non-religious and for secularism’.⁷⁶

More particularly, in relation to its direct contribution to the lives of people in society, Humanists UK has 500 ‘celebrants’ who ‘create, write, and conduct a range of ceremonies to mark the big moments in life’, such as naming ceremonies, marriages and funerals. These celebrants are ‘thoroughly trained and quality-assured’, and they are ‘accredited by’ by Humanists UK to ‘work across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands’.⁷⁷ Further examples of how such bodies contribute to national life are given in the next section.

PANEL IV: PRACTICAL PROBLEMS OF FREEDOM FROM RELIGION

(a) What forms do non-denominational philosophical organizations take to propagandize at national level?

Many non-belief organisations dialogue with or else lobby the State on particular issues.⁷⁸ Moreover, as we have seen, one object of Humanists UK is to work so that ‘the UK is a secular state guaranteeing human rights, with no privilege or discrimination on grounds of religion or belief’ in which ‘public debate and policy are shaped by humanist perspectives’.⁷⁹

In turn, therefore, Humanists UK seeks to ‘devote much of [its] time to campaigning and lobbying on behalf of the non-religious as well as for freedom of religion, belief, speech, thought, and expression more generally’; and ‘for a rational approach to public ethical issues in order to contribute to a public life where decisions are made on evidence rather than on the basis of irrational beliefs or religious doctrines’. The association classifies its ‘public affairs work’ in: schools and education (see below); human rights and equality; secularism (such as constitutional reform including the disestablishment of the Church of England); and public ethical issues (e.g. assisted dying, abortion, other reproductive rights, and organ donation).⁸⁰

For example, Humanists UK has been involved in debate about the presence of twenty-six bishops of the Church of England in the House of Lords. Humanists UK state that ‘this is an extremely unusual and anti-democratic set-up, which has a negative influence on the quality and character of British politics’.⁸¹ Humanists UK are actively campaigning against this. They argue that it is an ‘example of discrimination, religious privilege, and undemocratic politics’. In 2011, they created the ‘Holy Redundant’ campaign which called for bishops to lose their automatic seats; in 2017, MPs from the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group voiced concern; again, in December 2017, peers in the House of Lords spoke in favour of removing bishops; in 2018, Humanists UK ‘condemned a proposal from the Government’s then Minister for Faith to expand the House of Lords to include (potentially up to 85) clerics of multiple faiths’; again, in 2018, the Humanists UK responded to the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House’s inquiry and saw the presence of Church of England

⁷⁶ <https://humanists.uk/about/>

⁷⁷ <https://humanists.uk/ceremonies/>

⁷⁸ M. Hill, R. Sandberg, N. Doe, C. Grout, *Religion and Law in the United Kingdom: Great Britain* (Wolters Kluwer, 4th edition, 2021) 109 (par. 235).

⁷⁹ <https://humanists.uk/about/>

⁸⁰ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/>

⁸¹ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/secularism/constitutional-reform/bishops-in-the-lords/>

bishops in the House of Lords as ‘unfair, unjustified, and unpopular’; moreover, Humanists UK has also ‘conducted extensive research and produced detail briefings on this matter’.⁸²

(b) The phenomenon of non-belief in education: what space is reserved at national level for non-faith-based beliefs in state schools?

There have been several recent developments in favour of non-believers with regard to education. For example, the current law governing religion in schools in England and Wales is to be found in the Education Act 1996 and the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. In England, in 2018 the Commission on Religious Education recommended that the subject be renamed Religion and Worldviews and that a non-statutory programme of study be developed at a national level at a similar level of detail as for History and Geography in the national curriculum.⁸³ However, in Wales, the new Welsh curriculum due to be introduced from September 2022 will radically depart from the status quo. The subject is to be renamed Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) - it will be a mandatory curriculum requirement and it will fall under the Humanities area of learning. It is proposed that the right to parental opt out from classes in this subject will be removed and that, importantly, RVE will also ‘reflect the fact that a range of non-religious philosophical convictions are held in Great Britain’.⁸⁴ Once again, Humanists UK has been active here on the basis that ‘all pupils in all types of schools should have the ability to consider philosophical and fundamental questions, and that in an open society we should learn about each other’s beliefs, including humanism’.⁸⁵

(c) Is the right to spiritual assistance for non-believers provided for in national legislation or not?

Recent years have seen several developments in the provision of non-belief support in prisons, hospitals, and the armed forces, as a result of various initiatives. For example, Humanists UK is committed ‘to ensuring that all people have equal access to pastoral support in prisons, hospitals, and the armed forces’. Its focus is ‘on the needs of non-religious people, as religious people have access to such support through chaplaincy’. It is, therefore, ‘committed to removing the legal and societal barriers both for those seeking support and those delivering it’. As a result, the association founded the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network to train and accredit non-religious pastoral carers to provide that support. There are now 250 such pastoral carers across a range of institutional settings throughout the UK, operating through Humanist Care. In 2014, the Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service recognised that humanists in prison have ‘the legal right to a humanist pastoral support visitor’. In 2015 the NHS similarly obliged NHS bodies in England to provide pastoral support to non-religious people. Today, over 40% of NHS Trusts and almost 20% of prisons have a non-religious pastoral carer in their team, most of them volunteers but including ten paid posts. In 2018, Lindsay van Dijk became the first humanist to head an NHS Trust’s chaplaincy and pastoral support team. In 2019, Defence Humanists sought to provide non-

⁸² See, for example: ‘Religious Representatives in the House of Lords: Briefing from the British Humanist Association’ <<https://humanists.uk/wp-content/uploads/1bha-briefing-bishops-in-the-lords-2011-final.pdf>> June 2011.

⁸³ Commission on Religious Education, *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A National Plan for RE.* (RE Council, 2018). See M Chater (ed) *Reforming RE: Power and Knowledge in a Worldviews Curriculum* (John Catt 2020).

⁸⁴ Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021; see Hill, Sandberg, Doe, and Grout, op cit., par. 447.

⁸⁵ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/school-curriculum/religious-education/>

religious pastoral support services to the armed forces, in a submission to the Government's Integrated Review of foreign policy, defence, security and international development.⁸⁶

(d) Do religious denominations recognize or do they not recognize the change of denominational affiliation in religious registers?

Religious organisations recognise either explicitly or implicitly the change of denominational affiliation in religious registers. The norms of religious organisations applicable to the registers, rolls, or other lists of members or similar status of belonging deal primarily with qualifications for entry on the register. Needless to say, norms require adherence or other form of loyalty to the faith professed by that organisation. These norms generally provide that entry on the register must be with the consent of the person registered. The norms also provide for the removal of names from such registers, typically when requested by the person in question, or as a result of a process, which might be disciplinary in nature, when the name may be removed without the consent of the person concerned. The norms of religious organisations also deal with the termination of membership, on grounds e.g., of apostasy.⁸⁷

(e) Is there criminal protection for non-religious beliefs?

The general applicability of the criminal law means that those who profess non-religious beliefs would be protected by the criminal law in terms of their person and property. One example of criminal law which applies specifically to non-believers is the Racial and Religion Hatred Act 2006. This, *inter alia*, forbids words, behaviour, written material, recordings or programmes which are threatening and intended to stir up religious hatred – that is, ‘hatred against a group of persons defined by reference to religious belief or lack of religious belief’; the definition of ‘religious belief or lack of religious belief’ is broad.⁸⁸

Moreover, Humanists UK has been an active lobbying in the field of criminal law. For instance, Humanists UK was instrumental in securing strong protections on free expression as part of the bill which led to the abolition of the offence of blasphemy in 2008. In Scotland, the Humanist Society Scotland successfully campaigned against the common law offence of blasphemy, which was abolished under the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021. The association is also campaigning to repeal Northern Ireland blasphemy law.⁸⁹

(f) What are the main bioethical issues on which non-confessional philosophical associations have taken an official position? What are the practical consequences at national level?

Non-belief associations are actively involved in bioethical and related issues. For instance, Humanists UK is engaged in debate about ‘the often-conflicting ideas and unpredictable consequences arising from, for example, new developments in medical science, using reason, evidence and compassion and putting human wellbeing and the wellbeing of other sentient animals at the centre of their thinking’. The association bases its responses ‘on the humanist principle that individuals should have the right to live by their own personal values and the

⁸⁶ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/chaplaincy-and-pastoral-support/>

⁸⁷ N. Doe, *Comparative Religious Law: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (Cambridge, 2018) 82-87.

⁸⁸ See Hill, Sandberg, Doe, and Grout, *Law and Religion in the UK*, op cit., pp. 171-172; see also *ibid.*, pp.172-173 for similar provisions in relation to ‘religiously aggravated offences’.

⁸⁹ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/freedom-of-speech-and-expression/repealing-northern-irelands-blasphemy-laws/>

freedom to make decisions about their own lives, as long as these do not result in harm to others or to the general aim of minimising suffering and advancing human happiness'. In all this, the association recognises that humanists do not share the attitudes to 'interfering with nature' or 'playing God' or 'the same definitions of personhood held by some religious believers'. However: 'We respect the right not to participate in some procedures of those holding religious beliefs about the sanctity of life and the limits of medical intervention. Equally, we deny them the right to impose their beliefs directly or indirectly on others'.⁹⁰

As a result, Humanists UK welcomes, for instance, 'in-vitro fertilisation treatments' and 'the use of embryonic stem cells to cure diseases' and asserts that 'scientists' efforts are often impeded by the campaigning of religious activists' who oppose such developments. The association believes that 'the decision as to whether to permit any such research should be based entirely on principled ethical considerations, not religious points'. In 2015 Humanists UK opposed the Church of England campaign against government proposals to amend the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 to legalise mitochondrial replacement therapy; this enables women who carry diseases in their mitochondrial genes to give birth to a child without such diseases by using a third party donor's disease-free egg (combined with non-mitochondrial genetic material of the mother's egg). The Church of England campaign was unsuccessful and the therapy was legalised in line with the position of Humanists UK.⁹¹

Other examples of work in related fields over recent include the following. Humanists UK co-founded the UK's first ever national Assisted Dying Coalition, bringing together organisations, campaigners, and medical professionals to advocate for a change in the law to help those who are terminally ill or incurably suffering; and it supported abortion reform in Northern Ireland. It also lobbied for the new 'opt-out system' of organ donation in Wales and England, and it was a founding member of the Anti-Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Network, a 'coalition' of UK-based organisations that are working to end FGM and other harmful 'traditional' practices that undermine 'the bodily integrity or mental well-being of women and girls'. Humanists UK also campaigned to end National Health Service (NHS) funding for homeopathy – in turn, in 2017, NHS England recommended that homeopathic treatments should be added to the 'blacklist' of therapies not provided by the NHS and, in 2018, all NHS Trusts in England ceased to provide routine funding for homeopathy.⁹²

PANEL V: DIALOGUE BETWEEN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND NON-BELIEVERS

(a) What is the national attitude of traditional religious denominations towards individual and organized atheism?

The attitudes of traditional religious denominations towards individual and organized atheism, needless to say, vary as between the traditions within each of the major faiths represented in the UK. However, as we have seen, religious organisations make provision for the termination of membership on the basis of for example their members' engagement in apostasy. Nevertheless, as we shall see, there are Jewish and Muslim bodies who work with Humanists UK in relation to a wide range of common concerns. What follows is an example

⁹⁰ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/public-ethical-issues/>

⁹¹ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/public-ethical-issues/>

⁹² <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/public-ethical-issues/>. For medical ethics and religion, see Hill, Sandberg, Doe, and Grout, *Religion and Law in the UK*, op cit., pp. 141-144.

of a Christian denomination – namely the established Church of England - and its response in 2015 to proposals of Humanists UK in relation to the conducting of humanist marriages.

Section 14 of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 required the Ministry of Justice to consult on ‘whether the law should be changed to allow Humanists and any other nonreligious belief organisations to conduct legally valid marriage ceremonies’. This consultation was launched in June 2014 and the Archbishops’ Council of the Church of England submitted a response on behalf of the Church in September 2014. First, the Church of England is ‘well aware from its own experience that a marriage ceremony where the officiant shares openly the beliefs of the couple can be a source of strength in a marriage and would not wish to deny that opportunity to couples who profess humanist beliefs’. Second: in this respect, ‘humanism (in the sense of secular humanism) supports a positive view of ethics in society and of the importance of marriage’. Third, therefore: ‘the church is sympathetic to the case for allowing an organisation like the British Humanist Association [Humanists UK] to provide officiants at weddings’. Fourth, however: ‘couples who wish to include humanist materials, or materials from other non-religious belief systems, are able to do so within a civil ceremony, whereas no religious material is permitted in civil marriage ceremonies’. Fifth, as a result: ‘There is thus an existing imbalance which should not be exacerbated by giving further freedoms to non-religious belief organisations which are not permitted to religious groups’. Moreover, there is a further imbalance in that religious weddings must ordinarily be conducted in places of worship, whereas civil weddings may take place in a wider range of approved premises. Accordingly: ‘If humanists were to be permitted to officiate at weddings, the current premises-based system would imply that humanists should acquire and use their own premises for marriage ceremonies’. To allow humanist weddings to take place in any location, ‘would introduce a new inequality in the comparative treatment of religious and non-religious belief organisations to the disadvantage of people seeking religious wedding ceremony’. The church concluded that any change to the current system under which marriages must take place in specific legally recognised buildings, involved ‘extremely difficult questions’.⁹³ The matter continues to be debated.

(b) What are examples of dialogue between religious denominations and non-denominational philosophical associations at the national level?

Examples of dialogue between religious denominations and non-belief associations include the following. The ‘Inter faith Network’ promotes dialogue between different faiths as well as with those of no belief.⁹⁴ Humanists UK promotes ‘exploring common ground’ to build a ‘tolerant society’.⁹⁵ In 2006, Humanists UK ‘worked in close collaboration with Jewish groups and others to campaign for new anti-discrimination laws in employment and service provision’, in the process leading to the Equality Act 2010, and in supporting the process leading to the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 on racially and religiously motivated hate crimes, ‘of which Jewish people are disproportionately victims’. In 2020, Humanists UK issued ‘a statement on social media condemning modern-day Holocaust deniers’ and its Dialogue Officer met with the Interfaith and Social Action Officer at the Board of Deputies for British Jews, to discuss the challenges facing Jewish communities in Britain. In 2021, its Chief Executive was part of the official René Cassin and Christian Solidarity Worldwide

⁹³ Church of England: Marriages by Non-Religious Belief Organisations (2015):

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/marriages%20by%20non%20religious%20belief%20groups%20text%20for%20publication.pdf>

⁹⁴ <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/dialogue-between-people-of-different-faiths-and-beliefs>

⁹⁵ <https://humanists.uk/community/dialogue-with-others/>

event ‘Together for Uighurs’, working alongside Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, Senior Rabbi of Masorti Judaism; and it made a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council with Jewish human rights charity René Cassin to prevent genocide against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar’s Rakhine State and Muslims in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.⁹⁶

c) Are there forms of agreements between religious denominations and non-denominational philosophical associations at national level? If there are points of convergence, what are they?

Non-belief associations and religious groups have also found agreement in other areas. For example, in 2006 Humanists UK worked with Muslim groups in the processes leading to the enactment of both the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 and the Equality Act 2010. Also, Humanists UK in 2016 made a joint intervention with British Muslims for Secular Democracy to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), speaking out against rising hate crime in the UK following the EU referendum. In 2019, the association published a statement in solidarity with the victims of the Christchurch terrorist attack in New Zealand and condemning nationalism and attacks on minority religious groups. And in 2021, it used its position at the UNHRC to call for greater international action to tackle anti-Muslim hatred, responding to the UN Special Rapporteur’s report on this subject. Humanists UK is also engaged currently in a ‘coalition’ to defend the Human Rights Act 1998, working with Belfast Islamic Centre, British Muslims for Secular Democracy, and Muslim Engagement and Development. The association is also: a founding member of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales; a stakeholder of the APPG on International Freedom of Religion or Belief, and a member of the UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum, where it is represented on the Genocide Working Group; and it has joined various other ‘coalitions and government stakeholder groups’ actively involved in the work of the Faith and Belief Forum, which promotes dialogue between those of different beliefs. Its Chief Executive also served as a Commissioner of the Commission on Religion or Belief in British Public Life.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/freedom-of-religion-and-belief/>

⁹⁷ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/freedom-of-religion-and-belief/>