Understanding Humanism

THE FREEDOM OF THOUGHT REPORT

How free are non-religious people around the world?

In some countries, you could go to prison, or even be sentenced to death, for saying you don't believe in a god. So, in which countries is it safe to be non-religious?

WHAT IS IT?

The Freedom of Thought Report looks at every country in the world. It asks one big question: how does the government treat people who are not religious? That includes humanists, atheists, agnostics, and anyone who doesn't follow a religion.

The report mostly looks at laws and at how governments behave. Where it can, it also records violence and prejudice towards the non-religious from other people.

WHO MAKES IT?

The report is written by Humanists International. Humanists International was founded in 1952 as the International Humanist and Ethical Union, and today it brings together humanist organisations from every continent. Humanists UK is one of its members.

Researchers work with humanist groups in different countries to collect information. The first Freedom of Thought Report came out in 2012.

WHY DOES IT EXIST?

The report is based on human rights. In 1948, the United Nations agreed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 says:

> **'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief…'**
>
> UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS, Article 18 (1948)

This right protects people who follow a religion. It also protects people who leave a religion, or who never had one. The report also looks at the freedom to say what you think (Article 19) and the freedom to meet and form groups (Article 20).

The report points out that laws which harm non-religious people often harm religious minorities too. Protecting freedom of thought protects everyone.

> **'When thought is a crime, no other freedom can survive for very long.'**
>
> FREEDOM OF THOUGHT REPORT

WHY MIGHT HUMANISTS CARE?

Humanists believe we should think for ourselves and make up our own minds about what we believe. They argue that evidence and reason are the best tools we have for finding answers.

They believe people should be free to live the life they choose, as long as they don't harm others. That's why many humanists support human rights for everyone, whatever they believe.

Humanists will typically be secularists. They believe the state should be separate from religion, should treat all religions and beliefs fairly, and should not take sides. Many religious people are secularists too.

KEY WORDS

Freedom of religion or belief: the right to have, change, or have no religion, and to live by your beliefs.

Secularism: the idea that the state should be separate from religion and treat everyone equally.

Established church or state religion: a church or religion recognised in a state's laws or constitution that often receives financial support and performs official state functions.

Religious privilege: when the state gives one religion, or religion in general, special advantages.

Blasphemy: insulting or criticising a religion or its holy figures. Some countries make this a crime.

Apostasy: leaving a religion. Some countries make this a crime.



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HOW ARE COUNTRIES RATED?

Researchers check each country against a list of statements, called 'boundary conditions'. One example is: 'There is an established church or state religion.' The statements are sorted into four areas on which each country is assessed.

Constitution and government
E.g. Does the state treat all beliefs equally? Can non-religious people hold public office?

Education and children's rights
E.g. Are children taught fairly about a range of beliefs? Do they have to take part in worship?

Family, community, and society
E.g. Can humanist groups meet and register? Are non-religious people safe from violence?

Freedom of expression
E.g. Can people say what they think about religion? Can they speak up for human rights?

FIVE LEVELS

Each area is graded on a scale.

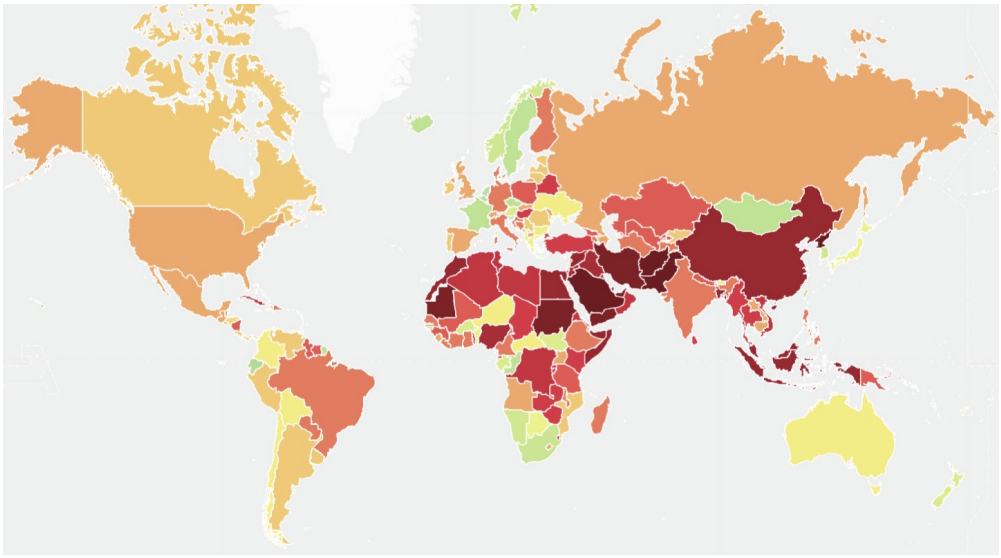
- **Free and equal:** No discrimination found.
- **Mostly satisfactory:** Small problems, often symbolic.
- **Systemic discrimination:** Religion is given real advantages that are built into the system.
- **Severe discrimination:** Serious unfair treatment, such as prison for blasphemy.
- **Grave violations:** The worst abuses, such as the death penalty for apostasy.
- **Grey:** no rating.

WHAT HELPS AND WHAT HARMS?

	HELPS	HARMS
Government	The state is secular and treats all beliefs equally.	Religious leaders run the state. Non-religious people can't hold public office.
Education	Schools don't discriminate on the basis of belief.	Religious instruction in schools is compulsory, with no alternative.
Society	Humanist and secular groups can meet and work freely.	It is illegal to set up a humanist group. People who attack non-religious people go unpunished.
Expression	People can say what they think about religion.	Apostasy or blasphemy can be punished by death. It is illegal to say you are an atheist.

THE MAP

Each country is coloured by its average score across the four areas. Green is the most free and dark red is the least.



- Free and equal
- Mostly satisfactory
- Systemic discrimination
- Severe discrimination
- Grave violations
- No rating

IMPORTANT TO KNOW

Information is based on each country's most recent assessment. Conditions are always changing.

The report can't catch everything. Some governments keep their courts and media secret. The report mostly measures a country's laws, not everyday prejudice, which is harder to measure.

Map: Freedom of Thought Report 2025, Humanists International, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

EIGHT COUNTRIES UP CLOSE

The four dots next to each country show its rating in each area: government, education, society, and expression.

Free and equal · Mostly satisfactory · Systemic · Severe · Grave violations

BELGIUM

Belgium is one of only a few countries rated 'free and equal' in all four areas. The state doesn't favour any religion or belief. It officially recognises and supports non-religious organisations as well as religious ones. In state schools, students can choose between religion classes and non-religious ethics classes. Over 40% of people in Belgium are thought to have no religion.

NORWAY

Norway had an official state church until 2017. The Church of Norway is still given a special place in the constitution, so the report still has some concerns about government. The state gives money to religious and non-religious belief groups alike, including the Norwegian Humanist Association, which has around 150,000 members. There are no serious concerns about free speech or how non-religious people are treated in society.

UNITED KINGDOM

The Church of England is the established church, and 26 of its bishops sit in the House of Lords automatically. Many state-funded schools are faith schools, and some can choose pupils based on their religion. Schools in England must hold a daily act of collective worship. Humanist weddings are legal in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but not in England and Wales. Northern Ireland still has a blasphemy law.

USA

The US Constitution says the government must not set up an official religion, and it protects free speech. Because of this, the USA has usually been rated well. The 2025 report raises new concerns. Religious influence over government and education is on the rise. Court decisions have made it easier for businesses and religious groups to opt out of equality laws on religious grounds.

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia's laws are largely based on religious law. Non-religious people can't hold government jobs, and the report says religious teaching in schools is 'utterly pervasive'. Apostasy can be punished by death. A very broad anti-terror law is used against critics, and people have been prosecuted for promoting atheism. Some have faced long prison sentences and possible death sentences.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan has the death penalty for blasphemy, and the bar for what counts can be very low. Over a thousand people have been prosecuted since 1988. Accusations of blasphemy are sometimes used to settle personal arguments or to target minorities, including humanists. Just being accused can put your life at risk. In 2024, at least four people accused of blasphemy were killed in attacks.

NIGERIA

Nigeria's constitution protects freedom of religion. But in parts of the north, religious laws and Sharia (Islamic) courts are in force, and people accused of blasphemy have been attacked and killed. Humanists campaigned for over ten years before the Humanist Association of Nigeria was officially recognised in 2017. Its former president, Mubarak Bala, was jailed for his social media posts.

NORTH KOREA

North Korea is different from the others here, because the main threat to freedom of belief isn't religion. The report describes 'complete tyranny': the state controls what people are allowed to think. Everyone must show loyalty to the ruling family, and state ideas are pushed in every school. Religious and non-religious people alike have no real freedom of thought. North Korea demonstrates that any all-powerful ideology can threaten freedom of thought.

Ratings from the Freedom of Thought Report online edition and 2025 Key Countries Edition, Humanists International.

FACTS AND FIGURES

89
countries have blasphemy laws. Together they are home to 57% of the world's people.

12
countries can punish blasphemy or apostasy with death, including Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

1,000+
people have been prosecuted for blasphemy in Pakistan since 1988.

67
countries severely, or even brutally, restrict people from expressing core humanist principles on democracy, freedom, or human rights.

The 2025 report warns that freedom around the world has now declined for 19 years in a row.

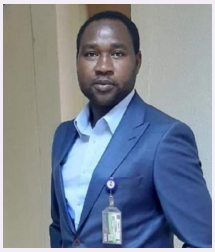
MUBARAK BALA'S STORY

Mubarak Bala was president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. In April 2020, two police officers arrived at his home in northern Nigeria. He was accused of posting 'blasphemous' messages on social media.

He was held for more than a year without being charged. He was kept alone in a cell and denied proper medical care. In 2022, he was sentenced to 24 years in prison.

Humanist groups around the world, led by Humanists International, launched the #FreeMubarakBala campaign and raised money for his appeal. In 2024, his sentence was cut to five years, and he was later released.

Because of death threats, he now lives in Germany. He hopes to return home one day.



'My family and friends had not given up on me. As I was in prison being forced to undertake religious practices I didn't believe in, a global campaign was underway to secure my release.'

MUBARAK BALA, humanist, writing in the Freedom of Thought Report 2025

QUESTIONS

1. What is the Freedom of Thought Report, and why does Humanists International produce it?
2. Why might a humanist think freedom of thought matters for religious and non-religious people alike?
3. Look at the eight countries on page 3. Did any of the ratings surprise you, and why?
4. 'Everyone should be allowed to express their religious or non-religious beliefs.' Do you agree?
5. Do you think it is OK if a country gives a religion only symbolic privileges, such as allowing displays of religious symbols or images in official buildings?

FIND OUT MORE

Explore the full report, with a page for every country, at fot.humanists.international.
Why not investigate a country of interest to you?

Sources: Humanists International, Freedom of Thought Report 2025: Key Countries Edition (February 2026) and online edition, fot.humanists.international. Blasphemy laws figure: Humanists International, launch of the 2025 report, 25 February 2026.