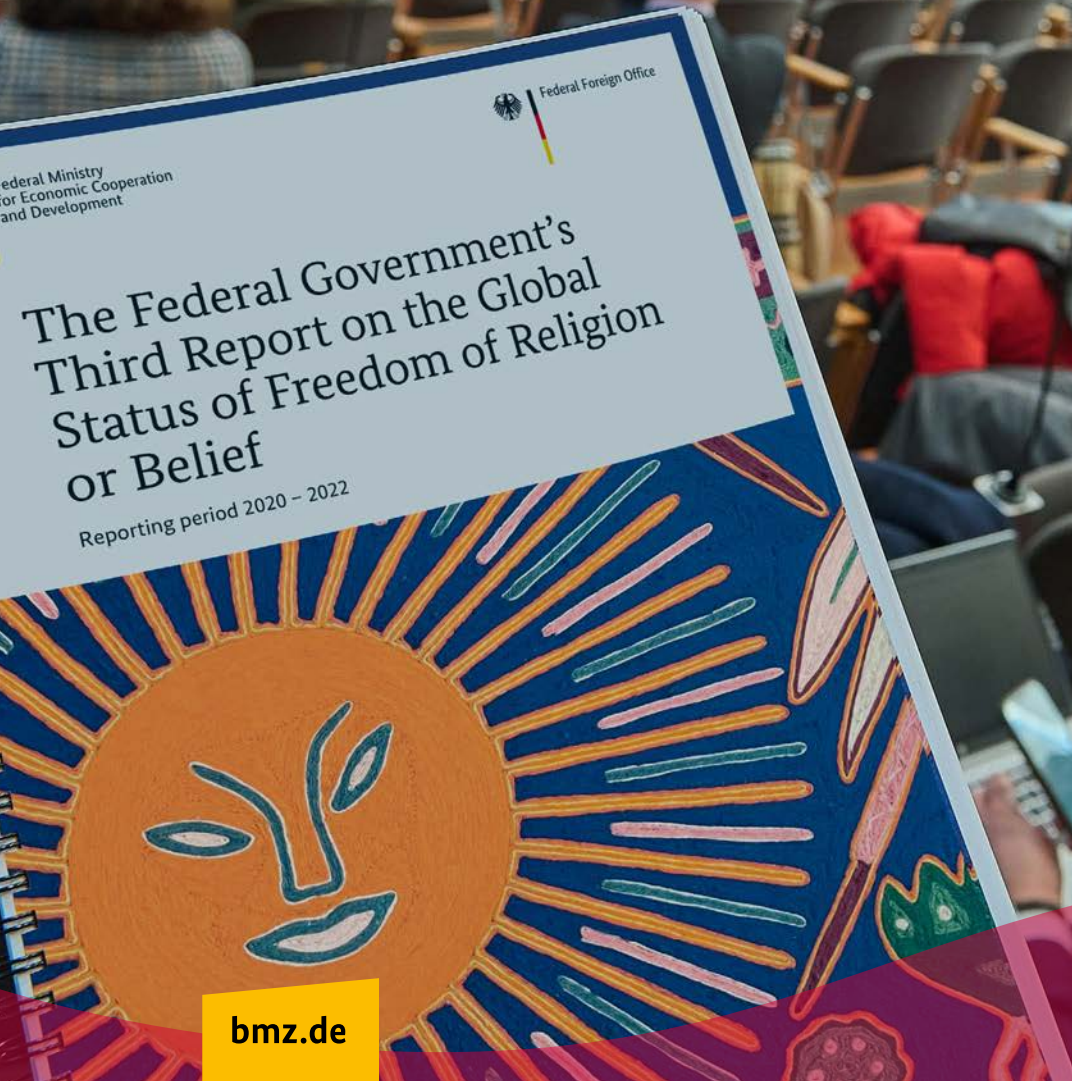




Federal Ministry  
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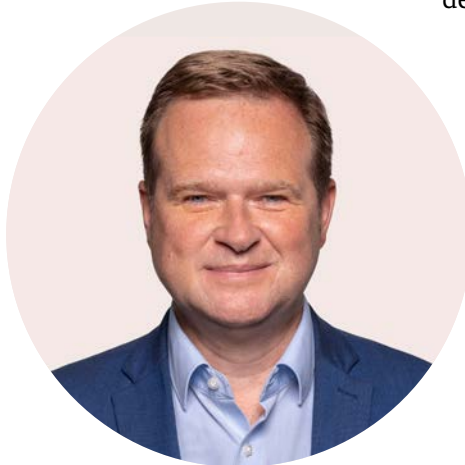
# Strengthening freedom of belief worldwide



Dear readers,

As Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief, I want to take seriously all the various aspects of that office. One aspect is the freedom of those who profess a religion and wish to live their life in accordance with its teachings. But the other, equally important aspect is the freedom of those who hold non-religious beliefs or who have made a conscious decision not to practise any religion.

What's at stake here, in both cases, is freedom of conscience and of thought. It's about what people feel to be important and what principles they choose to live by, all while respecting human rights.



Persecution and discrimination affect not only religious people across the world but also atheists and humanists. In this short brochure, I want to give you an insight into this aspect of my work defending human rights.

I would be delighted if you could join me in saying: freedom of religion or belief for all is a cause worth championing.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank Schwabe".

*Frank Schwabe, Member of  
the German Parliament, Federal  
Government Commissioner for Freedom  
of Religion or Belief*

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*Banner showing mock road sign: “leaving religion, entering humanism”*

# 1. Freedom of belief – a human right

Most, perhaps all, people hold some kind of belief. Long before the United Nations enshrined the right to freedom of religion or belief in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, that truth had been formulated by Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher, a theologian and co-founder of Berlin’s Humboldt University, who wrote that “it is the worldview of each individual that takes the totality of all impressions and thinks them through to the highest point, forming them into a complete and comprehensive consciousness”.

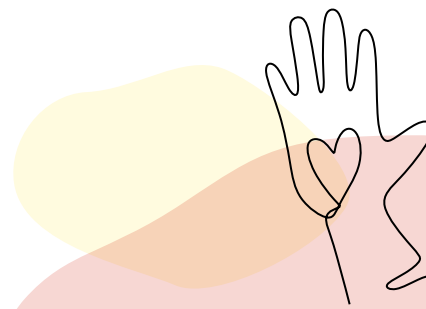
Today, we would more likely put it like this: beliefs are what provide individuals, groups or societies with their basic sense of direction. People have convictions or a

moral code that guides them. They may take them in different, possibly even opposite, directions. There are humanist belief systems, agnostic, nihilist or religious beliefs, and belief systems that are critical of religion. Beliefs tell us how people see and interpret the world, what they regard as right and important in the world and how that determines their actions. It is inherent in the human condition for people to form such beliefs that then guide their lives, either individually or as part of a community. And it is because these guiding beliefs can be either religious or non-religious that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights expressly recognises positive and negative freedom of religion and positive and negative freedom of belief. “Positive”

freedom is the freedom to have a guiding system of belief and to live one's life accordingly. "Negative" freedom is the freedom to have no such system dictating one's actions.

So a belief system is a system of human values and ways of interpreting the world, other people and society. Moral questions or the question of the meaning of life generally play a key role.

The human right to freedom of belief can be defined as the right of each and every person to choose, develop and, if they wish, change their own convictions regarding religion, atheism or belief. It also covers the practical consequences for people's lives that arise from holding these basic convictions. That right is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in Article 18 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in regional agreements on human rights and is thus legally binding. In Germany, it is enshrined in Article 4, paragraphs 1 and 2 of the Basic Law, Germany's constitution. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states very clearly that it is not just a matter of religion but of all the knowledge that guides our actions as humans. It is about our thoughts, our conscience, our convictions, our view of the world and also, therefore, about religion. Those four freedoms are expressly named: freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief. When we think about this issue as it affects the world, we generally think of those who are persecuted for their religious beliefs. Little attention has thus far been focused on the freedom of belief, which is always implicit in this basic human right. That is why I would like in this brochure to focus specifically on the freedom of belief. Wherever people are being persecuted for their religion, we can be fairly sure that people are also being discriminated against for their beliefs.



**The United Nations enshrined the right to freedom of thought, conscience, belief and religion in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.**

One of the most well-known non-religious belief systems is humanism. As the word itself suggests, humanism is about the things intrinsic to all humans. Many people hold humanist principles without actually placing them within an overarching humanist belief system. And there are many religious people who are keen to emphasise their high regard for humanism. Other people view their humanist beliefs as the expression of a modern worldview that has, so to speak, taken the place of traditional religious ideas of the world. This could be called a humanist worldview. Humanist organisations are engaged worldwide in supporting education, science and human rights. They are also engaged in strengthening the freedom of belief and protecting atheists from persecution. The Amsterdam Declaration 2002<sup>1</sup> is a document aiming to define the rights and guiding principles of atheists, humanists and non-religious people across the world. It emphasises the importance of freedom of opinion and the right of all people to freely practise their religion or belief. The Declaration states that humanists reject all forms of racism and are committed to respecting and protecting human rights. Humanists emphasise human beings' responsibility to respect not only each other but also the natural world. So for the people concerned, freedom of belief, just like freedom of religion, basically touches on all possible aspects of life.

1 cf. <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>



*“Godless and happy with it”*

## 2. Abuse of the freedom of belief – some examples

Despite these clear international human rights standards, abuses occur across the world not only of the freedom of religion but also the freedom of belief. The German government’s Third Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion of Belief<sup>2</sup> documents abuses in 41 countries. It is not just religious people but also atheists and humanists that are victim to persecution and discrimination because of their beliefs or their active commitment to human rights and humanist principles. Freedom of the press, freedom of religion,

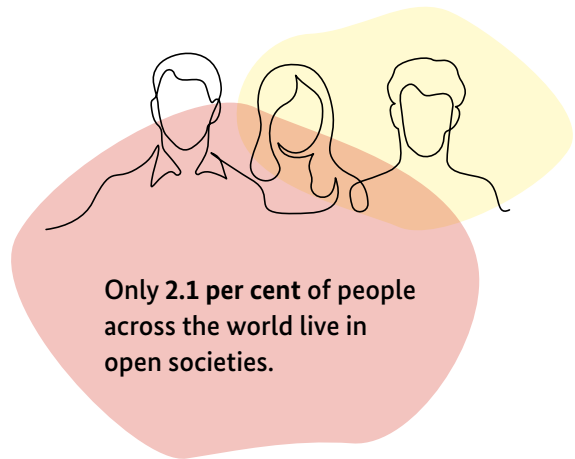
freedom of belief, freedom of thought, freedom of assembly – time and again, we see all those freedoms being abused simultaneously.

For anyone wishing to find out more, the CIVICUS Monitor<sup>3</sup> regularly publishes detailed facts and figures on the state of freedom of belief across the world. It documents instances of persecution, discrimination and shrinking civic space in different countries. The report shows that only 2.1 per cent of people across the

<sup>2</sup> cf. <https://religionsfreiheit.bmz.de/resource/blob/195886/en-forb-report-2023-summary.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> cf. <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

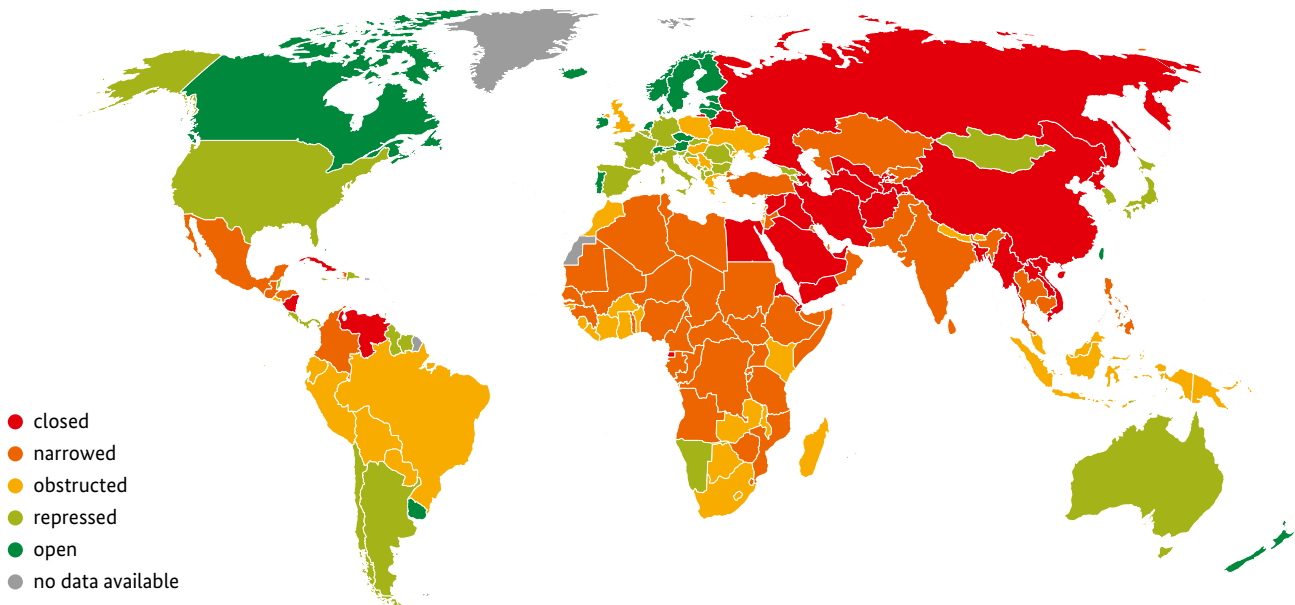
world live in open societies. There are only 37 countries in which the Atlas attests “the state both enables and safeguards the enjoyment of civic space for all people. Citizens are free to form associations, demonstrate in public places and receive and impart information without restrictions in law or practice”. One key message to emerge from the report is that, where one human freedom is under threat, all other freedoms are also at risk. Freedom of opinion or of assembly, the freedom to choose a profession, freedom of travel, freedom of religion, thought or belief – those rights do not exist in isolation but are instead closely inter-linked. In other words, a threat to *one* human freedom almost always means that others are under threat too. The reverse is also true: if we work to strengthen one human right, *all* other human rights will benefit.



The *Freedom of Thought Report*<sup>4</sup> is published regularly by the non-governmental organisation *Humanist International*. It is an umbrella organisation of humanist, atheist and secular organisations. Whilst some criticism has justifiably been voiced in the past regarding its methodology, it sees itself as the global voice of non-religious people. In December 2023, the report found

**Where one human right is being abused, others are generally being abused also. These maps show different institutions’ assessment of the situation.**

*Map of the world taken from CIVICUS Monitor*  
Civic space is shrinking across the world.



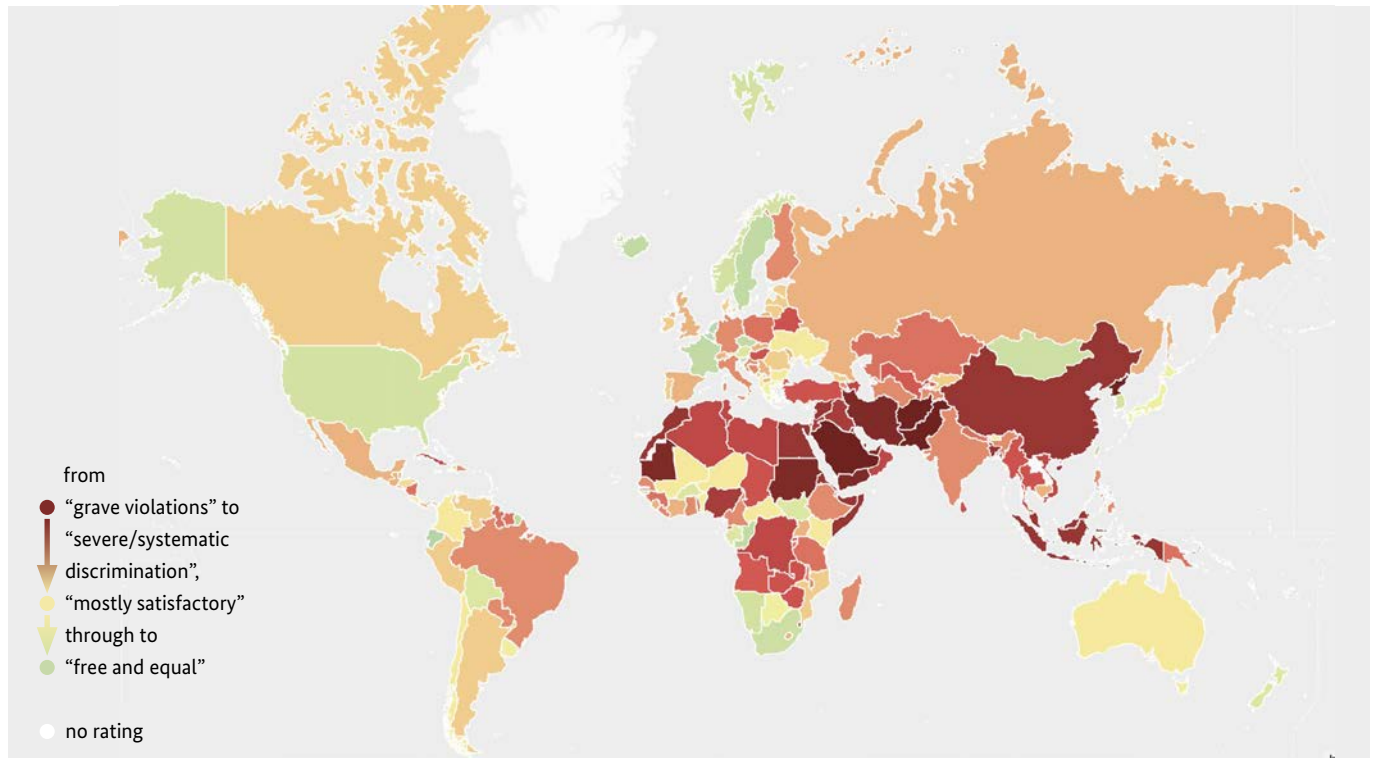
Country ratings are based on figures and observations from 2023.

© CIVICUS Monitor

4 cf. <https://fot.humanists.international>

## Freedom of thought: summary of evaluation in 2024

### Rights, legal status and discrimination of humanists, atheists and the non-religious



Map from the Freedom of Thought Report published by Humanists International

© <https://fot.humanists.international>

that humanists and non-religious people were experiencing discrimination in 186 countries across the world.

The report identifies many forms of discrimination:

- government figures or state agencies openly marginalise or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious;
- it is illegal or unrecognised (by state or society) to identify as an atheist or as non-religious;
- the state gives preferential treatment to a religion or religion in general;
- the non-religious are barred from some government offices;
- state legislation is largely or entirely derived from religious law;
- blasphemy is outlawed;
- religious courts make rulings on some family or moral matters that the state may then enforce;

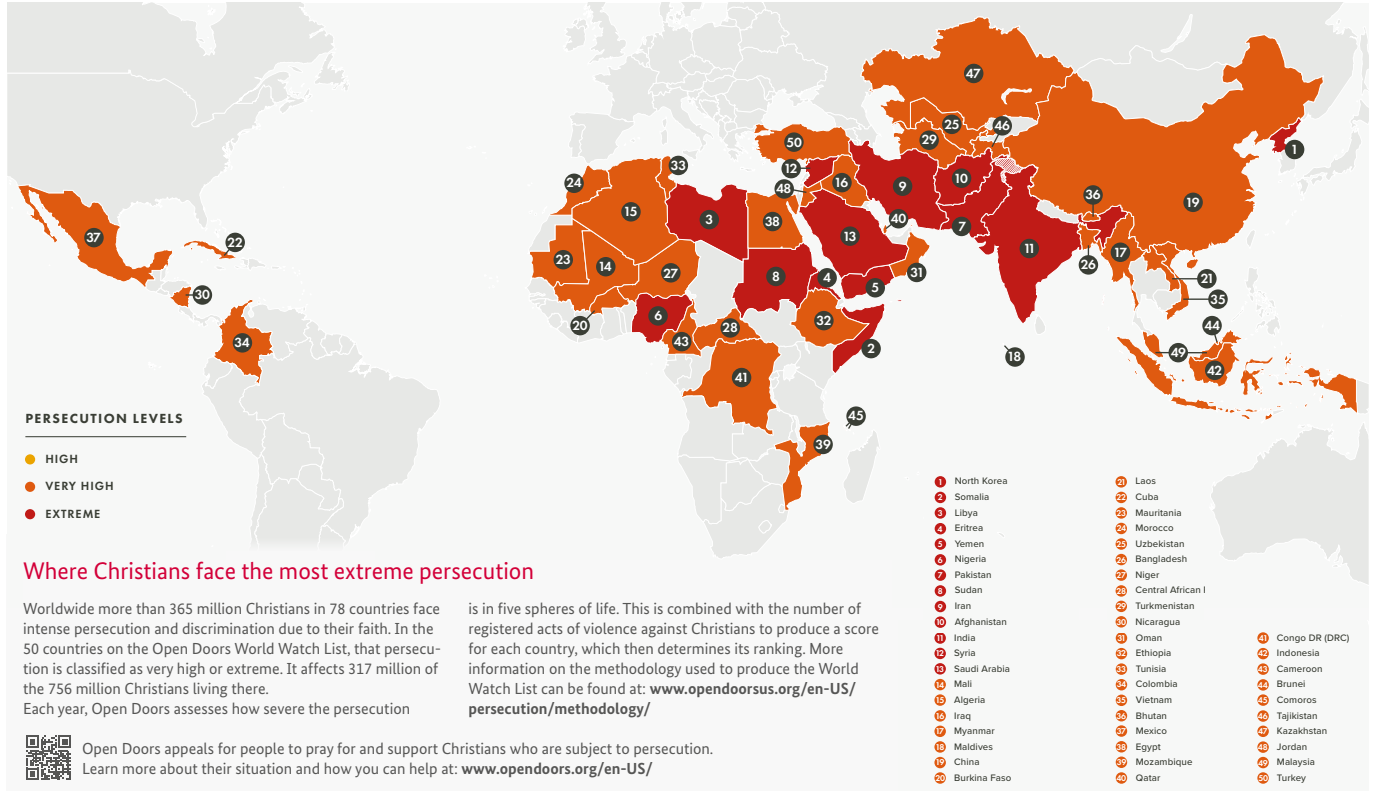
- it is difficult or illegal to publicly operate as a humanist organisation;
- religious instruction is mandatory in state-funded schools, with no secular or humanist alternative.

People who openly profess to atheism face discrimination in many Islamic countries in particular. In Germany, threats have been made towards asylum-seekers who do not believe in God. People who have fled discrimination and persecution in their own countries for their atheist convictions are not generally perceived as a group with distinctive concerns and interests. It is vital to protect these people when they are threatened or intimidated in refugee centres or when their words are mistranslated because interpreters do not accept their rejection of Islam.



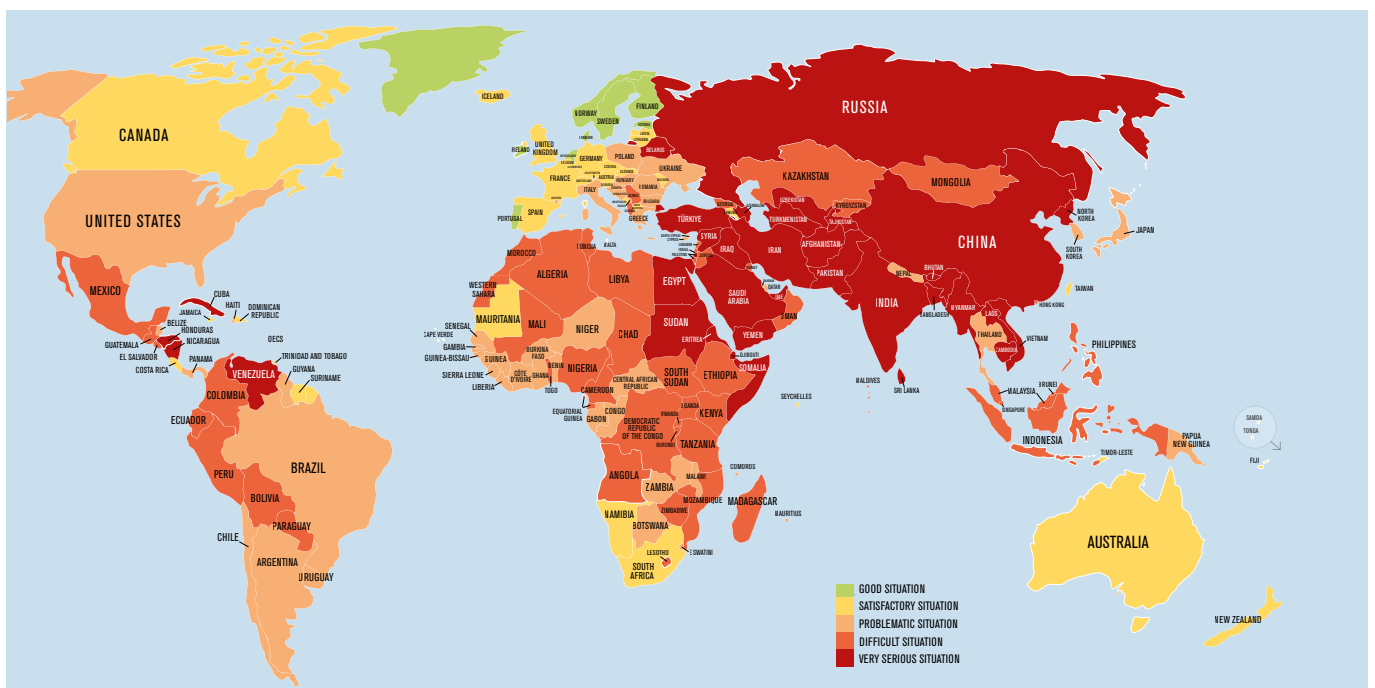
### World Watch List of countries where Christians face persecution in 2024

The 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution – persecution has increased in intensity since last year.



### World Press Freedom map 2024

Last year, 36 countries received the worst possible classification. That is the highest number in over ten years.



I would like to use some personal stories to illustrate how people are being threatened for their atheist or humanist convictions and how the human right to freedom of belief is being massively abused. They are just a few examples of the many people who campaign for negative freedom of religion and positive freedom of belief.

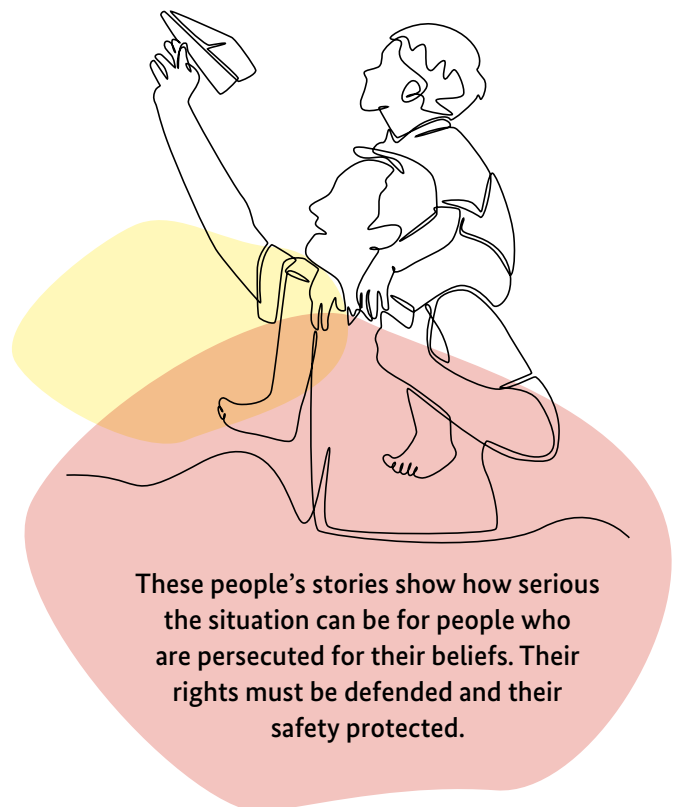
**Rana Ahmad** is a pseudonym used by a women's rights activist from Saudi Arabia who was persecuted for her atheist beliefs and her advocacy of women's rights in her country. She was forced to flee the country and is now living in exile. In Saudi Arabia she was under threat, having being accused of blasphemy and rejection of Islam. Since 2017 she has sat on the board of the association she helped to found, Atheist Refugee Relief.

**Mubarak Bala** is a Nigerian atheist and president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. He has faced death threats because of his atheist beliefs and his criticism of Islam in Nigeria. His family drugged him and had him forcibly committed to a psychiatric facility. He was later arrested. His case drew international attention to the persecution of atheists in Nigeria. When I visited Nigeria in 2022, one of my aims was to campaign for the release of Mubarak Bala, who had been imprisoned for expressing criticism of religion on social media platforms.

**Leo Igbe** is a former pastor from Nigeria. He converted to atheism and is now actively engaged as a humanist. His community and his family shunned and threatened him, feeling he had betrayed his religion by turning to atheism. He is fighting for non-religious beliefs to be recognised and respected in Nigeria and served as Humanists International's representative for Western and Southern Africa. He advocates scientific investigation of paranormal powers and conducts research into the belief in witchcraft. He campaigns against the abandonment, torture and killing of children accused of being witches. At the Atheist Alliance International congress in 2005, he was awarded the Stars of Freethought Convention Freidenker's Award for his role as the coordinator of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and his work on strengthening atheism worldwide.

**Worood Zuhair** is an Iraqi atheist and biologist who was persecuted in her country for her atheist beliefs. She was forced to flee for her life when threats were made against her for blasphemy and rejection of Islam. She now lives in Germany, where she has recognised refugee status. She speaks openly about her ordeal and supports other women who have experienced gender-based violence. She supports the work of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, a women's rights organisation, and also works with the German Zentralrat der Ex-Muslime (central council of ex-Muslims).

Those are just four examples out of many. They show the need for us to be more keenly aware of the human rights abuses people experience worldwide, including in Germany, because they have no religion. These people's stories show how serious the situation can be for people who are persecuted for their beliefs. Their rights must be defended and their safety protected.



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*Art campaign sponsored by the Gordano Bruno Stiftung at the annual conventions of the Protestant and Catholic churches. The inscription reads "11th commandment – Thou shalt pay for thy church convention thyself".*

### 3. My commitment to strengthening the freedom of belief

As Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief, I want to make a special point of strengthening the freedom of belief. As a basic principle it can be stated that there is not only "positive" but also "negative" freedom of religion. That means the right to have no religious affiliation or belief. That right is closely connected to the right to positive and negative freedom of belief. And that means that atheists and agnostics, for example, must be protected against discrimination.

Freedom of belief is a fundamental human right. States must respect, protect and fulfil it in order to create space for a diversity of beliefs and ensure that the beliefs of each individual are respected. Persecution of atheists and non-religious people is a human rights violation and must be confronted in the interests of creating a just, free and pluralistic society.

“Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a democratic society. (...) The pluralism indissociable from a democratic society (...) depends on it.” Ruling on a question of principle, the European Court of Human Rights clearly thus stated in 1993 that freedom of religion or belief was one of the foundations of a democratic society.<sup>5</sup> It is clear what that means for believers of various religions. But the Court goes on to emphasise that “it is also a precious asset for atheists, agnostics, sceptics and the unconcerned”. The pertinent passage of the judgment closes with a clear affirmation of the relevance of freedom of religion or belief in establishing pluralism of religion or belief in a modern society. The pluralism that is “indissociable from democracy [and] which has been dearly won over the centuries” depends at least in part on our commitment to freedom of religion or belief.

Under the German constitution, the state is required to take a neutral stance towards religion and belief. There is therefore no state religion or belief. Yet neutrality of belief does not mean that the state is value neutral. “Neutral” quite explicitly does not mean that the state rejects or is indifferent towards beliefs and religions. That would be incompatible with the state’s role as a guarantor of freedom of religion or belief. Germany’s Federal Constitutional Court has therefore rightly spoken of the state giving space to religion and belief or adopting a stance of supportive neutrality. Religious groups and groups representing certain beliefs are important for the state; they conduct debates on moral values and contribute to social cohesion. Many non-religious groups, like the Humanistischer Verband (humanist association) or the Zentralrat der Konfessionsfreien (central secular council), are active in campaigning against intolerance, xenophobia and fundamentalism.

In short, democratic states need freedom of religion or belief. That is the background to my international activities as the German government’s Commissioner on these issues. Those defending the freedom of belief may contact me if they believe changes should be made to the chapters dealing with specific countries in the German government’s Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Also on my agenda is the issue of people being forced to flee their homes or countries because of their atheism. In my regular meetings with the Federal Office for Migration and

Refugees, (BAMF) I lobby for freedom of religion or belief and point out that people who face prosecution and persecution for renouncing their religion (known as apostasy) have a right to asylum within the context of human rights. In Germany, we need to have a discussion within politics and society about how our country can develop a public culture of remembering, commemorating and grieving that reflects the plurality of religions and beliefs and gives space to the concerns and also the grief of non-religious people. Representation of secular organisations in ethics councils, broadcasting councils and other state institutions tasked with issuing assessments on specific issues is an expression of the right to freedom of belief.

Secular, atheist and humanist associations voice a wide range of political demands. We should listen to them, appreciate the nuances and join together in a debate.

The most commonly expressed issues of concern are:

- rigorous observance of the state’s neutrality of religion and belief;
- the separation of religion and the state;
- religion as a private matter;
- the introduction of an international humanist public holiday;
- provision of humanist pastoral care in the German armed forces;
- putting non-religious organisations on equal footing with the major Christian churches with regard to state support;
- standardisation of labour law;
- the ending of public subsidies for the major Christian churches;
- representation on ethics councils, broadcasting councils and state institutions tasked with issuing assessments on specific issues;
- equal treatment in public service broadcasting;
- greater acknowledgement of atheism or criticism of religion as grounds for people to flee their homes.

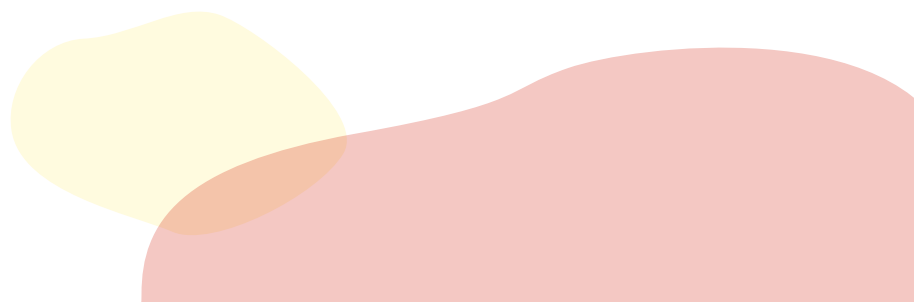
By this stage, you will probably have realised that I share some of those demands and don’t share others. Some of them even seem contradictory. But all those demands deserve to be discussed seriously within society and by policymakers and decided on. It strikes me that strict separation of church and state is not, in itself, any guarantee that the freedom of religion

<sup>5</sup> cf. [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-57827%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-57827%22]}) paragraph 31

or belief for which I am fighting will be observed. It depends much more on whether states actually fulfil their obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. China has shown that, without respect for human rights, the formal separation of state and religion guarantees neither freedom of belief nor freedom of religion. By the same token, the close links between church and state in England and some Scandinavian countries are no obstacle to freedom of religion or belief. Rather, it is having a state based on liberal principles and allowing people to live and to shape society in accordance with their religious or other beliefs that is the key criterion, whether there is separation or cooperation between state and religion. It is good that we are having a critical, cooperative and constructive debate in Germany on church labour law (distinct laws applying to all those employed by the church, including in its social and educational institutions) and the ending of public subsidies for the churches. Germany's constitution requires the state to pay the two major Christian churches subsidies as appropriate compensation for the wrongs perpetrated against them in the past, when their property was confiscated by the state. The frequently voiced demand that religion be declared a private matter is not, however, the same as the public manifestation of the freedom of religion or belief that is described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights and that is so important for society. Were the state to force religion or belief into the private sphere, it would mark the end of a liberal society.

I am convinced that our efforts to strengthen the right to freedom of belief also benefit freedom of religion and human rights in general. A values-based development and foreign policy that fails to take account of beliefs and religions will miss its mark. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, very wisely, does not regard religion and belief as being in opposition to each other. It is vital that we promote freedom of belief and recognition of non-religious worldviews. Debates on moral values are the hallmark of our society. And human rights are, ultimately, an expression of the very highest human values as enshrined in law over the course of history. I am a champion of freedom of religion *and also* of the rights of atheists and non-religious people. In my work I support all measures aimed at strengthening freedom of religion *and* freedom of belief. We must work together to support the plurality of beliefs that exist within societies, as upheld by human rights. Any example of discrimination or persecution on the grounds of belief should be challenged. I firmly believe that, working together, societies and states, religions and beliefs can change this divided world for the better. Great things lie ahead.



# JUGEND- WEIHE

'83  
83

20. März

Anmeldungen  
zum erforderlichen  
Vorbereitungsunterricht  
bis zum 15. Oktober '82



Geschäftszeiten:  
Montag bis Freitag 8 - 13 Uhr

Deutscher Freidenker - Verband - Landesverband Berlin e. V.  
Hobrechtstr. 8-9, 1000 Berlin 44 (Neukölln) - Telefon 623 70 34

*The "Jugendweihe" is a celebration that has existed since the 19th century marking the transition from youth to adulthood. It is an atheist alternative to religious coming-of-age celebrations. From the 1950s onwards in East Germany it became a political instrument used by the state for "forming the socialist character". Humanists continue to celebrate secular coming-of-age ceremonies.*



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