

IHEU reminds UN that Freedom of Expression must be protected

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The main representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union to the UN in Geneva, Roy Brown (right), spoke this week in reply to the report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, reminding the UN Human Rights Council of the need to protect the right to freedom of expression while taking steps to combat "hate speech".

He applauded the efforts made by the High Commissioner's office to negotiate a way through this political minefield; an effort that resulted in the "Rabat Plan of Action" which has been widely welcomed by defenders of freedom of expression. Here is the text of Roy's speech:

The Rabat Plan of Action

Madam High Commissioner, Mr President

We welcome the report by the High Commissioner and applaud her deep commitment to the protection of human rights worldwide. We were particularly encouraged by her comments on the Expert Workshops on combating incitement to hatred and violence while protecting the right to freedom of expression, and by the outcome document: The Rabat Plan of Action.

May we bring to the Council's attention a paragraph from the Plan of Action which quotes the Human Rights Committee General Comment no 34 (2011).

Prohibitions of displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief system, including blasphemy laws, are incompatible with the Convention [the ICCPR], except in specific circumstances ... Thus, for instance, it would be impermissible for any such laws to discriminate in favour of or against one or certain religions or belief systems ... or religious believers over non-believers. Nor would it be permissible for such prohibitions to be used to prevent or punish criticism of religious leaders, or commentary on religious doctrine and tenets of faith" (para. 48)." If only, Madam High Commissioner.

In our written statement we referred to the IHEU report *Freedom of Thought 2012* which documents world-wide discrimination against non-believers, a phenomenon that has until now been largely ignored – including by this Council. We shall be referring to this issue again during this Council session under agenda item 4 when a victim of abuse will be recounting his personal experiences.

We urge all States, and in particular those pushing for further restrictions on freedom of expression, to accept and implement the Rabat Plan of Action. It would go a very long way to diffusing tensions between those who feel obliged to protect religions and those of us who are more concerned with the protection of human rights

Read [Freedom of Thought 2012: A Global Report on Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists and the Non-religious](#) (pdf)

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