

Push government on caste discrimination, NSS tells UN rapporteur

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The National Secular Society has urged the UN special rapporteur on minority issues to push the UK government to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of 'caste'.

The NSS also urged the rapporteur, Fernand de Varennes (*pictured*), to ensure non-religious victims of persecution worldwide are afforded equal protection to those from religious communities.

The rapporteur has [called for evidence](#) as he prepares a report to the upcoming 75th session of the UN general assembly, on the significance and scope of minorities' rights in the UN system.

Caste discrimination

Ministers have repeatedly refused to amend the 2010 Equality Act to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of caste, preferring instead to rely on the potential evolution of case law.

The NSS's submission urged the rapporteur to "strongly encourage" the government to amend the act. The UN has previously given a [formal recommendation](#) that the government do this to comply with its treaty obligations.

The NSS said attempts to deal with the problem through an evolution in case law were unlikely to be effective, particularly as victims are unlikely to be able to launch legal challenges.

Protection of non-religious

The NSS also called on the rapporteur to ensure non-religious people who face human rights abuses around the world are given equal protection to religious minorities.

The society said human rights violations experienced by the non-religious are often sidelined or ignored, because:

- Non-religious people are often from strict religious backgrounds and so face pressure to hide their lack of religious belief.
- Non-religious people tend to be less likely to form large communities based around their religious identities than religious groups.
- Non-religious people often do not regard their personal views as a significant part of their personal identity in the way some religious groups do.

The NSS also said the term 'religious minority' should be replaced with a term which is more inclusive of non-religious victims of persecution, such as "religion or belief minority".

NSS comment

NSS head of policy and research Megan Manson said: "Caste discrimination is a serious violation of human rights, but the UK government's deeply inadequate approach to the issue fails to honour its international treaty obligations. We hope the UN special rapporteur

will bring pressure to bear on ministers to change this.

"The rapporteur should also take the opportunity to tackle the persecution of non-religious people. That requires an acknowledgement of the limitations of a communal approach to dealing with persecution and a reaffirmation of the universal right to freedom of religion or belief."

Caste discrimination in the UK

- [Research](#) published on the gov.uk website has estimated that at least 50,000 (and perhaps in excess of 200,000) people who live in the UK are at risk of caste discrimination.
- In 2018 the Equality and Human Rights Commission [criticised](#) the government's position on caste discrimination.

Global persecution of the non-religious

- The 2019 edition of the Freedom of Thought Report, published by Humanists International, [found](#) that people could effectively be put to death for expressing atheism in 13 countries.

Image [via Twitter](#).

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The Secular Charter outlines 10 principles that guide us as we campaign for a secular democracy which safeguards all citizens' rights to freedom of and from religion.

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