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BELGIUM still among best countries for atheists or freethinkers

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By Lauren Walker

The Brussels Times (09.12.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3PkUfLN> – Belgium, alongside the Netherlands, remains the best country to live in as an atheist or freethinker, according to the 11th annual Freedom of Thought Report by Humanists International, the international umbrella of humanist associations.

Ahead of International Human Rights Day on 10 December, the organisation published a rating of countries based on the legal and human rights situation for humanists, atheists and non-religious people. The report takes a deeper look at the link between the level of state secularism and discrimination faced by non-religious people.

“The data for Belgium has not been updated in this edition (for the last time in 2020, ed), but the fact that our country continues to score very well remains unchanged,” said Bert Goossens, spokesperson for deMens.nu, the Belgian umbrella of liberal humanists.

According to the report, some 40% of Belgium’s population identify as non-believers/agnostics (no religious affiliation) or atheists, however, the country does not keep official statistics listing religious affiliation.

Belgium, along with Norway and Iceland, is one of the only countries to have a system that recognises philosophies of life, implements separation of church and state and yet actively supports pluralism with a system of funding.

How does the ranking work?

The score that is given ranges from 1, representing a completely “free and equal” situation (one only awarded to Belgium and the Netherlands), to 5. The rating is determined based on the situation in the country in question regarding four key areas: constitution and government education and children’s rights, society and community and freedom of expression and humanist values.

This results in many Western democracies being rated with a score of 1.5, while authoritarian countries such as China receive scores around 4.5. The worst rating is a score of 5, referring to “serious violations” in all areas, which was given to Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Korea.

The report showed just 4% of the world's population lives in societies that can be called truly secular, meaning the main principles are adhered to, including that state secularism guarantees freedom for all, including believers; freedom of thought and expression is guaranteed, and secularism is inclusive.

“This year's report provides evidence of clear and systematic discrimination against humanists and non-religious people, and this discrimination is most prevalent in countries with less state secularism,” said Andrew Copson, president of Humanists International, adding that state secularism “seems to be a prerequisite for the full enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief.”

The situation in just ten countries was updated for the 2022 report. **Iran's score was not updated** despite the state's repression against protests.

Photo: A march against hate and for freedom of speech and tolerance in Brussels. Credit: Belga/ Laurie Dieffembacq

[Further reading about FORB in Belgium on HRWF website](#)

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