

BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

RESPONSE TO BBC TRUST'S CONSULTATION ON PURPOSE REMITS

Our response is confined to the Public Purpose related to "Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities" and specifically to item 4 within that Purpose:

*4. Reflect the different religious and other beliefs in the UK.
The BBC should give people opportunities to understand the beliefs of others,
and to examine their own beliefs critically.*

We frame our response as answers to your questions, but the substance of our submission is within our extended answer to the first question.

Question 1

How well do you think the BBC is currently delivering the Purpose Remit priorities? Are there any priorities that the BBC could deliver better (and if so, why) and are there any priorities which you think are being delivered well (and if so, why)?

We are glad to have this opportunity to make a case to the Trustees, many of whom we know are new to the BBC or to responsibility for its governance, for a small but highly significant and long overdue reform.

The consultation paper claims "You can rely on the BBC to reflect the many communities that exist in the UK." This is untrue: the BBC almost totally fails to reflect the community of people with non-religious beliefs such as Humanism.

The BBC has hitherto consistently refused to acknowledge that non-religious beliefs are worthy of attention in their own right. As a consequence it fails to "reflect" back to the nation the belief of Humanism in an adequate and fair manner and so fails to give humanists the opportunity to "examine their own beliefs critically" and to give others the opportunity "to understand the beliefs" of a significant section of the population.

We see signs in this paper of a change of heart and hope that we are not mistaken¹.

The BBC therefore needs to change direction if it is to meet the undertaking in the Agreement with the Secretary of State to

have regard . . . to . . . the importance of reflecting different religious and other beliefs.

Our case has been made at length elsewhere² and we shall not repeat it in full here. We ask for no more than is required by the Communications Act and by the Agreement, and that in turn is no more than we are entitled to under the Human Rights Act.

The essence of the BBC's failure is (it seems) a blindness to the significance of the word

¹ Sadly experience warns us not to be optimistic: the conclusion of the BBC Governors' 2005 seminar "Taking Belief Seriously" ("Commitment to better coverage of belief covers a spectrum much wider than established religions, and should include secular and atheistic beliefs") has borne no fruit in almost two years.

² See, for example, our written and oral evidence to the House of Lords Committee on the renewal of the BBC's Charter [see their Second Report, which is available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbbsc/128/128ii.pdf>, particularly our memorandum at p.23 sqq.,] as well as much correspondence with recent Chairs of the Governors and Directors-General.

'beliefs'. Unaccountably BBC managers and Governors appear to have taken the view that those who lack religion have nothing to put in its place. The BBC attitude has repeatedly been to treat Humanism, for example, as a mere absence of religious belief.

BBC managers and governors have maintained this refusal to acknowledge that non-religious beliefs have the same standing in law and the same significance for those who hold them as religious beliefs in the face of:

- (a) the Human Rights Act and the duty under section 6 of public authorities, obviously including the BBC, not to discriminate on grounds of religion or belief, where legal interpretations of the word 'belief' include beyond any doubt non-religious beliefs such as Humanism³;
- (b) subsections 264(6) (f) and (g) and 264(13) of the Communications Act 2003, which make it clear that public service broadcasting should include:

a suitable quantity and range of programmes dealing with . . . religion and other beliefs,

where

'belief' means a collective belief in, or other adherence to, a systemised set of ethical or philosophical principles . . .⁴
- (c) the words of the minister, Lord McIntosh of Haringey, in introducing these provisions into the Bill when he explicitly referred to Humanism, saying that the point was "to add a reference to other beliefs, which would include ethical systems or philosophies such as humanism or secularism" - Lords Hansard, 1 July 2003 : Column 784;
- (d) the Green Paper of March 2005 which said:

It should also provide a range of programming reflecting different religions and other beliefs that is appropriate to multifaith Britain. Such programming in prominent positions in both TV and radio schedules, reflecting diversity within, as well as between faiths and beliefs. Such programming should include coverage of acts of worship and key events in the religious calendar as well as drama and current affairs programming that explores religious issues and other belief systems in different ways, for different audiences;
- (e) the House of Lords Select Committee call for evidence including the question "Do different faiths (including no faith beliefs) figure sufficiently in BBC programmes and services?"
- (f) the House of Lords Select Committee recommendation in its report of March 2006 "that the BBC should review its programme output to ensure that it complies with the Communications Act 2003 by providing services of a suitable quality and range dealing with religion and other beliefs";
- (g) the White Paper of March 2006 which repeated the formula that the BBC should "provide a range of programming reflecting different religions and other beliefs that is

³ This has been clearly established in several legal cases in the European Court of Human Rights and builds on long-established interpretations of other human rights treaties - see Annex I.

⁴ This innovatory statutory provision, plainly at odds with previous BBC practice, resulted, so a Freedom of Information inquiry by the BHA has shown, in the production of not a single piece of paper within the BBC other than a letter to us claiming that the BBC was satisfied it met the Act's requirements.

- appropriate to multi-faith Britain”;
- (h) the draft Royal Charter of March 2006 which said that “the Trust must have regard amongst other things to . . . the importance of reflecting different religious and other beliefs”;
 - (i) the Agreement with the Secretary of State published in July 2006 which again referred to the need for the Trust to “have regard amongst other things to . . . the importance of reflecting different religious and other beliefs”;
 - (j) the background of growing statutory provision outlawing discrimination on grounds of “religion or belief” in employment and the provision of goods and services, including the Equality Act in which the phrase “religion or belief” occurs no less than 71 times and the key words are defined:


44 Religion and belief

In this Part—

- (a) “religion” means any religion,
- (b) “belief” means any religious or philosophical belief,
- (c) a reference to religion includes a reference to lack of religion, and
- (d) a reference to belief includes a reference to lack of belief.

Throughout this period, BBC publications have continued to refer to ‘religion’ or ‘religions’ without the least acknowledgement of the possibility of non-religious beliefs, let alone their value and the respect in which they are widely held.

The BBC’s response to our request for programmes of an explicitly humanist nature has at different times variously included five elements:

- (a) that (to quote a previous head of religious broadcasting) “secular voices dominate the airwaves”  “the 30% who don’t believe in God and ‘lead effectively humanist lives’ (whatever that means) have acres of TV and Radio time devoted to secular concerns”;⁵
- (b) that humanists often appear in a variety of programmes;
- (c) that humanists sometimes appear in religious magazine programmes;
- (d) that programmes critical of religion are broadcast, such as Jonathan Miller’s short series on atheism or critical examinations of some aspect of religion or the conduct of the churches; and
- (e) that Humanism lacks substance and has too insignificant a following to merit attention in its own right.

We attach no weight whatever to (a) which insultingly suggests that the non-religious cannot raise their sights above soaps, sport and cookery and demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of non-religious beliefs such as Humanism, nor to (b) which refers to people who happen to be humanists but appear not as such but as experts in some specialism or as personalities in their own right and certainly are given no chance to talk about Humanism.

Nor do we attach much weight to (c), where humanists’ role is as a foil to the religious message, not to present Humanism but to criticise some aspect of religion. They are generally given little time and are often patronised.

We see (d) as fundamentally irrelevant to our case. While we acknowledge that the BBC has been producing more programmes covering rejection of faith and critical of faith positions

⁵ in correspondence with the BHA and with a BHA member.

and we welcome the change, such programmes are about religion, not about non-religious beliefs, and are certainly not about Humanism.

We suspect that (e) is fundamental to BBC thinking, but we contend that it is wrong.

Firstly, the BBC seems to devalue Humanism as a lifescape for its lack of rituals and doctrine, founding figures and authoritative source books comparable to the sacred books of a religion. Such criticism betrays thinking cramped entirely within a religious frame. It is of the essence of Humanism that it is a lifescape based on personal responsibility for one's life, not on reliance on authority. It is defined by its approach to moral problems, not by specific doctrines. It is based on a consistent philosophy that can be traced as a (broken but always resumed) line throughout human history, and the humanist tradition includes many of the key figures of civilisation. This is not the place for an exposition of Humanism but information is readily available.⁶

Secondly, as to the strength of its following, the BBC's case presumably includes elements such as the 2001 census's findings that the nation is 70% Christian and the small membership of the British Humanist Association.

These arguments are easily answered: in brief, the Census is seriously unreliable⁷ and at odds with all other surveys and polls on the subject (see footnote 13 below); and there is no need for people living their lives as humanists to join a humanist organisation - nor much benefit from doing so, although in fact the BHA's membership is rising rapidly⁸ and there are many other indications of support for Humanism and of the influence of humanist thought.

The following points are relevant both to the declining importance of religion and the growing recognition of non-religious alternatives such as Humanism:-

(a) Disaffection from religion is growing (a likely stimulus for recent panicky and ill-grounded attacks on 'aggressive secularists' by bishops and archbishops). Church attendance continues to decline inexorably. The great majority of the population is opposed to "faith schools". The consultation on House of Lords reform showed an overwhelming majority against bishops having seats as of right. Religious morality has almost entirely shed those elements that are not based on humanist values⁹. There is growing resistance to religious claims¹⁰ to a public monopoly of ethical thinking and to the right to opt out of anti-

⁶ See (for example) books such as Richard Norman *On Humanism* (Routledge, 2004) and Jeaneane Fowler *Humanism* (Sussex Academic Press, 1999) and the BHA website at <http://www.humanism.org.uk>.

⁷ To summarise, the question was leading ('what is your religion?') and asked in a context of ethnicity, thus maximising the 'cultural Christian' response; and the Census is addressed to heads of household, who are typically older than average and therefore much more likely to be believers than average.

⁸ It has nearly doubled over the past 2 years.

⁹ For example, Bible teachings that do not conform with the prevailing implicitly humanist morality are regarded as embarrassing and rarely referred to. Even in Jesus's own teachings in the New Testament we find: "whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery" (*Matthew 5.32*); "whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire." (*Matthew 5.22*); "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it" (*Matthew 19:12*); "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (*Luke 14:26*) (quoted from the New King James Version, Nelson, 1982).

¹⁰ Even the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, has admitted: "The claim of the Christian Church to make its voice heard in matters of politics and economics is very widely resented"

discrimination law¹¹. Likewise, the Government's 'faith agenda' is attracting growing disquiet (see for example the wide support given to the Brussels Declaration¹² and the recent rapid growth of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, which now has over 100 members).

(b) Increasingly disaffection from religion is becoming outright defection. Even in the flawed Census, the second largest group by "religion or belief" was those with no religious belief. At 15.5% they were two-and-a-half times as numerous as all the non-Christian religions put together. Other surveys consistently report very much higher proportions of people without religious belief¹³ and at Manchester University Dr David Voas has shown that there is a long-term well established trend whereby (to simplify slightly) only around half the children of religious parents become religious whereas non-religious parents reliably pass on their non-religious beliefs¹⁴.

(c) While by no means all non-religious people are humanists, our consistent experience is that most people without religious beliefs, when they hear about Humanism, say that they have unknowingly long been humanists themselves. This impression has recently been confirmed by an Ipsos MORI poll which found that 36% of the population chose definitively humanist statements in three forced choice questions where the alternative included (in two cases) the possibility of a religious contribution to morality and to understanding the universe and (in the third) alternative views of morality that were authoritarian or subjective¹⁵.

(d) The importance of Humanism has been recognised in the QCA's National Framework for Religious Education. It is anomalous that the BBC should refuse to devote any attention to a lifestance which teachers are expected to teach and children to learn about. Humanist thinking has in fact been highly significant in the modern development of religious education, as has been warmly acknowledged by (among others) the Religious Education Council.

(e) Similarly the value of the humanist contribution has been recognised by the

(<http://www.dioceseofyork.org.uk/cgi/news/news.cgi?t=template&a=947> - speech in November 2006)

¹¹ Most notably over the recent attempt by the Roman Catholic hierarchy to retain the right to discriminate against gay couples by threatening to close their adoption agencies.

¹² This very recent reassertion of liberal values and defence of the secular state has attracted huge support within a very short time from across a wide spectrum of opinion and belief, including Christian, Muslim and Jewish organisations and individuals eminent in politics, the law, science, philosophy and numerous academic disciplines: see www.vision4europe.org for the text, background and a full list of signatories.

¹³ Having quoted many polls and surveys in previous submissions, we give here only a sample, including some very recent ones: a YouGov poll for the Daily Telegraph in December 2004 (35% do not believe in God and 21% do not know); a MORI poll for *The Tablet* in May 2005 (24% are atheist or agnostic, including 36% of 18-34-year-olds); a CommunicateResearch poll for the Theos Christian think-tank in October 2006 (42% agree that "Faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate"); DfES research report RR564 in 2004 (65% of 12-19-year-olds do not regard themselves as belonging to a religion); a survey of 13,000 14-16-year-olds by Revd Professor Leslie Francis and Revd Dr William Kay (*Teenage Religion and Values*, Gracewing, 1995) (61% described themselves as atheist or agnostic); and a Harris poll for the *Financial Times* in December 2006 (52% agnostics and atheists; 70% favour separation of church and state).

¹⁴ Voas, D. and Crockett, A. (2005) 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging': *Sociology* 39(1): 11-28

¹⁵ The detailed results of this poll, in October 2006, can be found at <http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/newsarticleview.asp?article=2288>

Government in the appointment of the BHA's chief executive as a member of the small steering group for the new Commission on Equality and Human Rights, and also to the reference group for the Equalities Review and Discrimination Law Review.

The BBC's failure to provide programmes that explicitly deal with Humanism denies actual and potential humanists the most obvious means of "examin[ing] their own beliefs critically", learning how to articulate them and gaining the confidence to express them. It denies non-humanists the possibility of understanding the beliefs of a large proportion of their fellow-citizens. In fact, it suggests that the BBC's view is that non-religious people such as humanists lack any philosophy of life worth examining, that they are in denial of the religious root of all values, living (in the cant phrase) on Christian capital.

Only such an attitude on the part of the BBC can explain why Radio 4 (the most obvious outlet for any initial programmes on Humanism) currently devotes well over three hours every week to Christians talking about Christianity to Christians (this excludes magazine programmes like *Sunday* and extended coverage at religious festivals) but never a single minute to Humanists talking about Humanism to anyone.

BBC programmes are the most significant forum for public discussion of matters of belief and morality. The BBC's denial of this forum for exposition, discussion and criticism of the leading alternative to a religious lifestance is a serious dereliction of duty. As we wrote in our evidence to the House of Lords committee on renewal of the BBC's charter:-

At a time when religion is in decline, it should not be the role of a public service broadcaster in an open society artificially to sustain religious belief, whether by providing religion with a disproportionate amount of air time or by excluding rival beliefs from the principal medium whereby groups in society can make themselves heard. Rather than provide a platform only for those who lament the alleged rootlessness and immorality of the present generation, or indeed the increasing secularisation of society, the BBC should also be helping those with constructive and coherent alternative life-stances and non-religious answers to 'ultimate questions' to test them on the public. If society is suffering from moral confusion and spiritual anomie as is often alleged then it is vital that alternatives to the failing tradition of supernatural religion be explored, not suppressed.

The BBC's failure to provide the means for people to learn about non-religious beliefs, in particular Humanism, robs them of the possibility of learning about the lifestance that is most likely to appeal to them as religious belief declines. Its persistence in allowing Christianity to have a monopoly of almost all airtime devoted to the uninterrupted exposition of any philosophy or belief system, insidiously suggests that there is no other valid basis for living.

The BBC thereby does serious disservice both to individuals - particularly the young - and to society at large.

Providing a platform for the articulation of constructive alternatives to religious belief is now even more vital, yet the BBC completely fails to give any attention to positive non-religious beliefs such as Humanism¹⁶. The result is that listeners and viewers pick up the constant drip-drip message that religion is the sole reliable basis for morality and that secularists and unbelievers are at best living on Christian capital if not deliberately trying to undermine civilised values. If the results were not so serious this grotesque distortion would be laughable.

¹⁶ The only exceptions are two talks on *Morals without Religion* by Margaret Knight in 1954 and six quarter-hour interviews with humanists by Kenneth Harris on the Home Service in 1966.

But it is extremely serious. Young people - who (as the surveys quoted in footnote 13 show) are predominantly lacking in any religious belief - are given no help in forming moral attitudes by such broadcasting still less in arriving at general principles for moral thinking - exactly what Humanism can help them with, and not in the typically prescriptive way of religion but by developing in each individual the power of moral reasoning.

Instead, people who lose their religious beliefs, or (increasingly) never develop any, are given by the BBC the impression that there is no other coherent and articulated basis for morality.¹⁷ Most will develop acceptable moral attitudes willy-nilly, but few will be able to give them intelligent expression: it takes an exceptional person to do so without being taught (typically by example) the language of moral thinking. But many will flounder: they may - perhaps reluctantly - see 'morality' as merely an imposition by those with power. They may adopt perverse, superstitious and socially damaging attitudes.

These are serious charges against the BBC. We sincerely hope that the BBC Trust will bring a fresh eye to them and not automatically adopt the standard line that the Governors and BBC management have apparently unthinkingly dispensed in the past.

Question 2

Do the priorities need amending in any way? If so, how?

The proposals in the consultation paper are welcome, especially its explicit acknowledgement of "those subscribing to non-religious belief systems". However, its wording could be improved. It says:-

(iv) Reflect the different religious and other beliefs in the UK.

In the UK's increasingly diverse society **faith** is a key aspect of personal identity for some people. As a public service broadcaster, the BBC has an important role to play in enabling people of different faiths, as well as those subscribing to non-religious belief systems, to understand each other and also to examine their own beliefs critically. This is particularly important at a time when **faith** is playing a critical role in shaping world events.

The word 'faith' is often used as if it embraced all beliefs, whereas it in fact excludes Humanists and others with non-religious beliefs. Our beliefs are "a key aspect of personal identity" for us as Humanists. The best wording - unless a word such as 'lifeforce' is adopted - is "religion and non-religious beliefs" (or "religion or non-religious beliefs" depending on the context).¹⁸

Question 3

Are there any important priorities that have been missed?

No comment.

¹⁷ It is not just the absence of positive attention to Humanism that has this effect: speakers, especially on *Thought for the Day*, are constantly allowed to insult unbelievers and disparage their views, blaming (explicitly or implicitly) the reduction in religious beliefs for the ills of society in a way that would be totally unacceptable if applied to other religions – and all without any right of reply.

¹⁸ Human rights instruments and the Human Rights Act use the phrase "religion or belief" where, as shown in Annex I, "belief" includes non-religious beliefs. Unsurprisingly, the phrase causes confusion in that beliefs are often thought of in this context as exclusively religious. Hence our proposal that in policy documents and service licences etc the BBC use the unambiguous wording "religion and non-religious beliefs".

Question 4

Do the Purpose Remits present the BBC with enough challenge in promoting the Public Purposes? If not, how might they be improved?

No comment.

Question 5

In addition to the measures included in Annex I to each Purpose Remit, are there any other performance measures which the Trust should use to monitor the Purpose Remits?

The Trust should measure the amount of time devoted to different religions and beliefs on each channel and require a steady correction of the imbalance so as better to reflect the make-up of the population of the UK. We have to emphasise again that what we are looking for is programmes exploring non-religious belief systems such as Humanism - not critical responses to religion (which should be counted as 'programmes about religion') and decidedly not general 'secular' output.

Question 6

Do the priorities adequately reflect the requirements of the Charter and Agreement?

Given that the BBC already provides disproportionate time for Christianity and a moderate amount of time for other religions, we consider that the wording of item 4:

The BBC should give people opportunities to understand the beliefs of others, and to examine their own beliefs critically.

should indicate where change is necessary by a wording such as

The BBC should give people opportunities to understand the beliefs (including non-religious beliefs) of others, and to examine their own beliefs critically.

**British Humanist Association
April 2007**

“RELIGION OR BELIEF”

The equivalence in law of religious and non-religious beliefs is founded in Articles 9 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which drew on earlier human rights instruments, and the duty of public authorities not to discriminate between religion and non-religious beliefs is laid down in the Human Rights Act, section 6:

6. - (1) It is unlawful for a public authority to act in a way which is incompatible with a Convention right. . .

(3) In this section "public authority" includes-

(a) a court or tribunal, and

(b) any person certain of whose functions are functions of a public nature . . .

(6) "An act" includes a failure to act . . .

Article 9 - Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

Article 14 - Prohibition of Discrimination

The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.

Both court cases and relevant commentary have established that ‘belief’ includes non-religious beliefs. For example:

Court Cases on “Religion or Belief”

“As enshrined in Article 9, freedom of thought conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a ‘democratic society’ within the meaning of the Convention. It is, in its religious dimension, one of the most vital elements that go to make up the identity of believers and their conception of life, but it is also a precious asset for atheists, sceptics and the unconcerned.” - *Kokkinakis v Greece: (1994) 17 EHRR 397, para 31*

“The right to freedom of religion as guaranteed under the Convention excludes any discretion on the part of the State to determine whether religious beliefs or the means used to express such beliefs are legitimate.” - *Manoussakis v Greece: (1996), EHRR 387, para 47*

Belief means “more than just ‘mere opinions or deeply held feelings’; there must be a holding of spiritual or philosophical convictions which have an identifiable formal content.” - *McFeekly v UK: (1981), 3 EHRR 161*

“The term ‘beliefs’ . . . denotes a certain level of cogency seriousness cohesion and importance” - *Campbell and Cosans v. UK: (1982), 4 EHRR 293 para 36* – (this case related to Article 2 - right to education).

“[T]he difficult question of the criteria to be applied in deciding whether a belief is to be characterised as religious . . . will seldom, if ever, arise under the European Convention. . . it does not matter whether the . . . beliefs . . . are categorised as religious. Article 9 embraces freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The atheist, the agnostic, and the sceptic are as much entitled to freedom to hold and manifest their beliefs as the theist. These beliefs are placed on an equal footing for the purpose of this guaranteed freedom. Thus, if its manifestation is to attract protection under article 9 a non-religious belief, as much as a religious belief, must satisfy the modest threshold requirements implicit in this article. In particular, for its manifestation to be protected by article 9 a non-religious belief must relate to an aspect of human life or behaviour of comparable importance to that normally found with religious beliefs. . . . Article 9 embraces freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The atheist, the agnostic, and the sceptic are as much entitled to freedom to hold and manifest their beliefs as the theist. These beliefs are placed on an equal footing for the purpose of this guaranteed freedom. Thus, if its manifestation is to attract protection under article 9 a non-religious belief, as much as a religious belief, must satisfy the modest threshold requirements implicit in this article. In particular, for its manifestation to be protected by article 9 a non-religious belief must relate to an aspect of human life or behaviour of comparable importance to that normally found with religious beliefs.” - *R v Secretary of State for Education ex parte Williamson* [2005] UKHL 15 Per Lord Nicholls at paragraph 24

Lord Walker added that it was “unnecessary for the House to grapple with the definition of religion” because “article 9 protects, not just the *forum internum* of religious belief, but ‘freedom of thought, conscience and religion’. . . Plainly these expressions cover a wider field than even the most expansive notion of religion. Pacifism, vegetarianism and total abstinence from alcohol are uncontroversial examples of beliefs which would fall within article 9.” - *R v Secretary of State for Education ex parte Williamson* [2005] UKHL 15 Per Lord Walker at paragraph 55.

In *re Crawley Green Road Cemetery, Luton* - St Alban’s Consistory Court: Dec. 2000 - it was taken held without argument that Humanism was a belief within the meaning of the Human Rights Act.

Commentary

from the UN Human Rights Committee on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (*which is essentially similar to Article 9 of the European Convention*):

“Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms belief and religion are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions.” - *Human Rights Committee, 1993 (General Comment no 22(48) (Art. 18) adopted on July 20th 1993, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, September 27th 1993, p1.)*

The “belief” aspect typically pertains to deeply held conscientious beliefs that are fundamental about the human condition and the world. Thus, atheism and agnosticism, for example, are generally held to be entitled to the same protection as religious beliefs. - OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights: *Guidelines for Review to Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief* (2004) Section A, Paragraph 3