

United Nations Human Rights Council: 35th Session (6th – 23rd June 2017)

Item 4: General Debate

15th June 2017

Speaker: Humanists UK representative, Chris Ward

Thank you, Mr President.

I give this statement on behalf of Humanists UK¹ and LGBT Humanists UK.

Article 19 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantee the right to freedom of expression. The Rabat Plan of Action says that ‘blasphemy laws are counterproductive, since they may result in de facto censure of all inter-religious or belief and intra-religious or belief dialogue, debate and criticism, most of which could be constructive, healthy and needed.’²

The ability and right to criticise is a key cornerstone of democracy. Whilst no-one has a duty to offend, nobody has the right not to be offended.

Blasphemy laws restricting the freedom of individuals to criticise or mock religion are a direct contravention of the right to freedom of expression. In some cases, such accusations come to nothing, with a well-publicised criminal investigation recently dropped in the Republic of Ireland following a report by a member of the public against an interview by Stephen Fry.³

But in vast swathes of the world, blasphemy is punishable by death, imprisonment or fines.⁴

They are used as a tool to restrict criticism of governments. Nearly five years ago to the day, Saudi activist Raif Badawi was arrested for ‘insulting Islam through electronic channels’.⁵ He has been imprisoned and flogged⁶ for the crime of, in Amnesty International’s words, ‘peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression’.⁷ His continued detention by the Saudi government remains an international disgrace and we call for his immediate release.

However, there is some progress. We welcome Denmark’s recent vote to abolish its own blasphemy laws. Norway, Iceland, Malta and the Alsace Moselle region of France have also abolished their

¹ Humanists UK has recently renamed from the British Humanist Association (BHA). Humanists UK has changed its trading name but its legal name remains the British Humanist Association.

² http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf

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<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/may/07/stephen-fry-investigated-by-irish-police-for-alleged-blasphemy>

⁴ <http://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/12/22/saudi-arabia-website-editor-facing-death-penalty>

⁶ Protections against which are stated in Article 7, Article 10 and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil And Political Rights; Additionally in Article 5, Article 18 and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/news/saudi-arabia-uses-capital-offence-apostasy-stifle-debate-2012-12-24>

blasphemy laws in recent years.⁸ We understand that New Zealand,⁹ Canada,¹⁰ and indeed the Republic of Ireland¹¹ are all considering doing likewise.

We call upon all states who have laws criminalising blasphemy to rescind those laws from the statute books, particularly those who impose the death penalty. No religion, concept, idea, or strand of thought should ever be exempt from criticism or question.

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<https://humanism.org.uk/2017/06/02/denmark-becomes-fifth-european-country-to-abolish-blasphemy-laws-since-2015/>

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<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/92922057/blasphemy-law-remains-in-new-zealand-after-national-and-maori-party-vote-down-repeal>

¹⁰ <http://globalnews.ca/news/3512946/commentary-at-long-last-canadas-blasphemy-law-is-dead/>

¹¹ <http://www.newstalk.com/Harris:-Blasphemy-law-is-silly-and-needs-to-be-changed>

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