

114 groups, thought leaders say to UN: “Nobody should be killed for their choice or expression of religion or belief”

A UN Resolution calling for the protection from persecution under blasphemy laws supported by diverse religious groups including the Church of Scientology.

WASHINGTON, DC, USA, September 15, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Individuals and organizations who represent diverse religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds united in supporting and promoting freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and expression for everyone in working with the UN.

Currently at least 21 countries criminalize apostasy, including 12 countries which have the death penalty for apostasy or blasphemy.



Professor Junaid Hafeez sentenced to death in Pakistan for blasphemy. He is still in jail and is listed by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom as a prisoner of conscience. Photo credit: Al-Jazeera

Apostasy is the abandonment of a religious belief. In some countries, leaving the majority religion or converting to another religion is illegal with significant criminal penalties. Blasphemy is speaking sacrilegiously about God or religious things. This also carries criminal penalties in some parts of the world, including death sentences.

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Letter to the UN

Unfortunately, the laws are general and can be used to attack individuals who are not liked in the community or used to gain control of the property of the alleged blasphemer.

In a [letter to the UN](#), a coalition of advocates from diverse religious backgrounds expressed their

firm opposition to laws that restrict an individual's right to choose a faith, practice that faith, or change their religion, or to not have a religion at all. They argue that people should be free to express that belief and share it with others. "Nobody should be killed for their choice or expression of religion or belief" said the letter.

The group said, "Restricting the freedom to choose one's religion, to change it or to question religion or belief doctrines is an assault on the very core of human nature."

These laws have been used to arrest and detain believers, and in some countries, execute them. In Pakistan, for instance, Professor Junaid Hafeez, has been in jail since 2013 on charges of blasphemy on Facebook. He was recently sentenced to death and is in jail awaiting appeals with international pressure helping to prevent his execution.

Many victims of these laws have presented testimony at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and the International Religious Freedom Summit (IRF). Most of those survivors have been released due to international pressure on their cases and support from non-profit groups urging the US and other countries to help victims of religious persecution.

Another danger, cited by the [UN Special Rapporteur](#) on freedom of religion or belief who said that where domestic laws provide for the death penalty for apostasy or blasphemy, "It is more likely that the existence of such laws will encourage vigilante mobs or zealots to murder those alleged to have violated those laws."



A flyer outside Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs in Islamabad explains that the punishment for blasphemy is beheading. Photo credit: Creative Commons



Rev. Susan Taylor, Church of Scientology National Affairs Office, was one of the signers of the letter

The letter addressing these laws called on the UN General Assembly to demand the removal of the death penalty for apostasy or blasphemy and to call on UN member countries to release individuals currently on death row or imprisoned for those offenses.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has urged the US State Department to name countries of particular concern (CPCs) (<https://www.uscifr.gov/>) that continue to have blasphemy laws. For instance, Egypt has had some improvements but blasphemy laws exist which are used to arrest and persecute religious minorities there. The website, USCIRF.gov has information on the religious freedom challenges in various countries.



A meeting of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable discussing issues internationally where individuals are being persecuted solely due to their religious beliefs or practices.



The Church of Scientology National Affairs Office was one of the signatories on the letter to the UN. Rev. Susan Taylor, Public Affairs Director for the Church of Scientology's National Affairs Office noted that, "All faiths are a minority someplace in the world and are experiencing some kind of persecution. Civil society and government leaders need to work together to create laws that protect religious minorities and create a more stable society."

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR](#)), passed in 1948, includes freedom of religion in Article 18, "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 teaching, practice, worship and observance." Although the UDHR is one of the foundational documents of the United Nations, the concept of freedom of religion is still not broadly recognized. Information on the UDHR is available from United for Human Rights at www.humanrights.com.

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