



**United Nations Human Rights Council: 31st Session (29 February – 24 March 2016)
Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
Wednesday 9 March 2016
Speaker: BHA representative, Cordelia Tucker O'Sullivan**

Thank you, Mr President.

We welcome the report from the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief¹, in particular the reiteration that blasphemy laws are incompatible with fundamental human rights.²

Mr Bielefeldt, as you highlighted in your report,³ Human Rights Committee general comment 34 states that 'prohibitions of displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief system, including blasphemy laws, are incompatible with the Covenant...'⁴

Yet, blasphemy laws persist which is completely unacceptable. According to the International Humanist and Ethical Union Freedom of Thought Report 2015, 55 states outlaw blasphemy; it is punishable by imprisonment in 39 of these countries, and by death in 6.⁵ To add insult to injury, 15 of the states which outlaw blasphemy are current members of this council,⁶ a hypocrisy we must not tolerate.

In Russia, a law was passed as recently as 2013 which punishes 'public actions... committed in order to insult the religious feelings of believers'⁷ with fines of up to \$15,000 US dollars, and imprisonment for up to three years. This followed the arrest of the punk art group Pussy Riot for a protest performance in Moscow's main cathedral.⁸ Therefore, the law can arguably be regarded as a tool for the wider silencing of political dissent and human rights advocacy. As recently as last week, Viktor Krasnov appeared in court charged under the law; his lawyer insists his client is 'simply an atheist'.⁹

The Rabat Plan of Action provides an excellent framework for States to use in defending and promoting freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. We encourage all States to adhere to its advice, as well as that contained in the Special Rapporteur's most recent report, and would welcome monitoring of its implementation.

Thank you.

¹ A/HRC/31/18

² A/HRC/31/18, para. 59-61

³ A/HRC/31/18, paragraph 59

⁴ Paragraph 48, available here: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf>. Article 20 (2) of the ICCPR permits freedom of expression limitations just when they are necessary to prevent incitement to violence, discrimination, or hostility.

⁵ p15, available for download here: <http://freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report/>

⁶ These being Ethiopia, Nigeria, El Salvador, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Algeria, Morocco, Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Germany, Russia, and the Alsace and Lorraine regions of France. See the End Blasphemy Laws Campaign: <http://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>

⁷ Article 148 of the Russian Penal Code, see: <http://rg.ru/2013/06/30/zashita-site-dok.html>

⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/mar/06/russian-punks-pussy-riot-putin-protest>

⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/03/russian-atheist-faces-year-in-jail-for-denying-existence-of-god-during-webchat>