

United Nations Human Rights Council, 40th Session (25 February-22 March 2019)
Item 3: General Debate
Speaker Humanists UK representative, Rachel Taggart-Ryan

Mr President,

In 2011, the UN Human Rights Council issued General Comment 34 on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stating that ‘prohibitions of displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief system, including blasphemy laws, are incompatible with the Covenant.’¹

In the last four years, seven countries have abolished their blasphemy laws, including New Zealand last week.² The people of the Republic of Ireland voted in a referendum in October to do the same,³ and the Government of Spain⁴ has also committed to this.

Despite this progress, 13 countries maintain the death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy, and it remains an imprisonable offense in over 40 more.⁵ As the recent high-profile acquittal of Asia Bibi in Pakistan demonstrates, blasphemy laws are used in many countries as a means of persecuting minority groups, including the non-religious, and give legitimacy to intercommunal and mob violence.

We therefore call upon member states to immediately release those accused of blasphemy, and to guarantee the right to express religious dissent as a central tenet of freedom of expression.

Thank you.

¹ UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, General Comment 34, July 2011.

<https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf>

² Humanists UK, *New Zealand Scraps its Blasphemy Law*, 5 March 2019

<https://humanism.org.uk/2019/03/05/new-zealand-scraps-its-blasphemy-law/>

³ Humanists UK, October 2018. *Irish blasphemy result a resounding success for free speech.*

<https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/2018/12/canada-repeals-blasphemy-law/>

⁴ Humanists UK, October 2018. *Spanish Parliament resolves to end blasphemy law*

<https://humanism.org.uk/2018/10/24/spanish-congress-takes-first-vote-in-favour-of-repealing-blasphemy-laws/>

⁵ End Blasphemy Laws campaign. <https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>