

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 43rd Session (24 February to 20 March 2020)**

**Item 3: General Debate**

**Speaker: British Humanist Association Representative, Tallulah Gordon<sup>1</sup>**

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.'<sup>2</sup>

We welcome the recent decisions made by several countries to decriminalise blasphemy. This January, blasphemy ceased to be a criminal offence in the Republic of Ireland, making it the eighth country to abolish its blasphemy laws in the last five years.<sup>3</sup> Greece also removed blasphemy from its criminal code in July 2019.<sup>4</sup> And in 2018, the Spanish Parliament passed an initial vote to remove blasphemy from the Spanish civil code.<sup>5</sup> We hope that Spain will follow through on this vote and decriminalise blasphemy in due course.

Despite this progress, blasphemy and apostasy continue to be punishable by death in 14 countries worldwide. In Brunei, the death penalty for blasphemy was reintroduced only last year following the implementation of a new Sharia penal code.<sup>6</sup> These discriminatory laws persist despite the OHCHR's Rabat Plan of Action stating that the inter-religious dialogue, debate, and criticism censored by blasphemy laws is 'constructive, healthy and needed'.<sup>7</sup> It also observes that blasphemy laws are often used as a means of persecuting religious and non-religious minorities.<sup>8</sup>

We call on all member states to recognise that blasphemy laws inhibit the universal human right to freedom of expression, and freedom of religion or belief, to repeal these laws and immediately release those who have been convicted or detained under them.

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<sup>1</sup> Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

<sup>2</sup> UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, General Comment 34, July 2011.

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

<sup>3</sup> Humanists UK, 'Ireland becomes eighth country to abolish blasphemy laws since 2015' 21 January 2020.

<https://humanism.org.uk/2020/01/21/ireland-becomes-eighth-country-to-abolish-blasphemy-laws-since-2015/>

<sup>4</sup> Humanists UK, 'Blasphemy law to be abolished in Greece under new criminal code', 17 June 2019.

<https://humanism.org.uk/2019/06/17/blasphemy-to-be-abolished-in-greece-under-new-criminal-code/>

<sup>5</sup> Humanists UK, 'Spanish Parliament resolves to end blasphemy law', 24th October 2018.

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

<sup>6</sup> Humanists UK, 'Brunei's death penalty for blasphemy is 'serious human rights breach', 18 September

2019. <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/09/18/bruneis-death-penalty-for-blasphemy-is-serious-human-rights-breach/>

<sup>7</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the expert workshops on the prohibition of incitement to national, racial or religious hatred*, 11 January 2013.

[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat\\_draft\\_outcome.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.