

Blasphemy Laws Fading Away in Europe

Laws criminalizing **blasphemy** are set to be struck down soon in the Netherlands and may disappear in Ireland, but rising tensions in economically battered Greece seem to be reviving pressure to prosecute offences against God.

Blasphemy appears more frequently in headlines from the Muslim world, where countries such as Pakistan or Saudi Arabia readily punish perceived critics of Islam, but a lesser known trend is a general movement in Europe away from such laws.

Cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed and works of art seen as offensive to Islam have angered many Muslims in Europe and beyond in recent years, sometimes sparking violent protests. Yet attacks on religion no longer seem to shock most Europeans.

In the Netherlands, scrapping a 1932 blasphemy law became an issue last year after a court undermined it by acquitting far-right leader Geert Wilders on charges of inciting hatred against Muslims.

Ireland opens a constitutional convention on Saturday to consider a major reform of the political system, including removal of a blasphemy law only passed in 2009.

Greece is a major exception. The producer, director and actors in a play depicting Jesus and his Apostles as gay were charged this month with blasphemy after protests by priests and right-wingers, including deputies from the ultra-nationalist Golden Dawn party

The Dutch and Irish cases fit into a trend of abolishing blasphemy laws as antiquated leftovers in today's Europe, said historian David Nash of Oxford Brookes University in Britain.

“There is a gradual leeching away of out-and-out blasphemy laws and an increase in those against defamation of religion,” said Nash, an expert on the history of blasphemy.

The increasing multiculturalism of European societies “works against maintaining a blasphemy law,” he said. “You then get a harmonisation that says all attacks on religion are a form of hate speech and we want to legislate against that.”

Blasphemy Laws Rare in Europe

Political parties in the Dutch parliament announced this week they had a majority to abolish the law following the formation of a new government on Nov. 5 by center-right Liberals and the Labour Party.

The liberal VVD party in the new Dutch government said it was favourable to scrapping the blasphemy law earlier this year, but it was in a minority government at the time that depended on votes from a conservative Christian party opposed to the reform.

According to a Pew Forum study released last week, eight out of 45 European countries have blasphemy laws on their books while 35 of them have laws against the defamation of religion in general or hate speech against members of a faith.

The eight countries with blasphemy laws are Denmark, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands and Poland. A blasphemy law in England and Wales was scrapped in 2008.

The study said blasphemy laws were more common in the Muslim world, where 13 of 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa had them as well as nine Asian states that are mostly Muslim or, in the case of India, have a large Muslim minority.

Some 20 countries, all majority Muslim states in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, also outlaw apostasy or conversion to another religion, the Pew study said.

Ireland Eyes Referendum

The shift in Ireland also resulted from an election last year won by a coalition of the Fine Gael and Labour parties that favoured a reform of the 1937 constitution which explicitly states blasphemy is a crime.

Changing that will require a referendum, which can only be held after the constitutional convention completes its work, which should take at least a year if not more.

Ireland passed a new **blasphemy law** in 2009 after its previous one, a remnant of pre-independence English law there, was ruled illegal because it violated the constitutional guarantee of religious equality.

Muslim countries seeking a United Nations ban on blasphemy subsequently cited that law as an example of western support for the concept. Western states have consistently rejected the Muslim proposal as a violation of free speech.

Pakistan, whose strict blasphemy law has reaped world-wide criticism for cases of misuse against religious minorities, threw out a case against a Christian girl last week after a wave of international condemnation.

Rimsha Masih, believed to be no older than 14, was charged with burning pages of the Koran in August but was granted bail in September after a Muslim cleric was detained on suspicion of planting evidence to stir up resentment against Christians.

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