

UN Faith Expert: End Blasphemy Laws Targeting Religious Minorities

Countries should repeal all laws punishing **blasphemy** and people who leave a faith, the United Nations' top expert on **freedom of religion** said on Wednesday, thrusting himself into a debate between many in the Muslim world and the West.

Legislation outlawing apostasy—the act of changing religious affiliation—and insults against religious figures could be used to violate the rights of minorities, Heiner Bielefeld said in a report to the U.N. Human Rights Council.

The comments from the United Nations' special rapporteur on **freedom of religion** or belief came amid heightened focus on faith-based laws in countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, where blasphemy carries the death penalty.

“States should repeal any criminal law provisions that penalize **apostasy**, blasphemy and proselytism, as they may prevent persons belonging to religious or belief minorities from fully enjoying their freedom of religion or belief,” he said in the report.

Rights campaigners say the **blasphemy law** in Pakistan is widely used against religious minorities, including Christians, Ahmadis and more recently Shiah Muslims, usually on flimsy pretexts.

The posting of an amateurish video mocking the Prophet Mohammad, and the publication of caricatures of him in France last year led to violent protests and renewed calls from the Muslim world for a global law against blasphemy.

Speaking on the fringes of the rights council on Wednesday,

Bielefeld said criminalizing concepts like blasphemy was dangerous for free speech because there could be no common definition of what it was.

Although a handful of Western countries have blasphemy laws, originally introduced to bar attacks on Christianity, they have largely fallen into disuse. Some Muslim groups in Europe call for their reactivation.

In once strongly Catholic Ireland, where blasphemy is banned under the 1937 constitution, new legislation introduced in 2010 – partly in response to appeals from the small Muslim community – set a hefty fine for offending religious belief.

But Irish officials say that law, now being reconsidered by a special commission, seems likely to be withdrawn as an obstruction to free speech.

Bielefeld does not speak for the U.N. but was taken on as an independent official to report regularly on how freedom of religion was respected across the world.