



INTRODUCTION TO FORB

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Who needs protection from insult? God or you and me? Ideologies and doctrines, or human beings? This question is of deadly importance, in the light of the global rise in the use of blasphemy laws. These laws, intended to protect the divine from defamation and believers' feelings from being insulted, often result in human rights abuses.

Over 45 countries in the world have blasphemy laws. They are found on all continents, including Western Europe and the Americas, even if they are not actively used there. Countries as varying as Iran, India, Indonesia and Greece use their blasphemy laws actively to varying degrees. Russia recently enacted a blasphemy law and Tunisia's new constitution had a blasphemy provision added.

In Egypt, the number of blasphemy cases has risen four times since the Arab Spring. In Pakistan 19 people are currently in jail with life sentences and 17 have been sentenced to death.

Some would argue that the use of these laws are in line with freedom of religion or belief. I would argue that this is a misconception. Rather blasphemy laws collide with freedom of religion or belief, as these laws try to protect deities or beliefs at the expense of individuals and their rights. Freedom of religion or belief, often abbreviated by saying religious freedom, is not intended to protect God from ridicule, doctrines from critique or protect the monopoly of the majority in defining the correct theology. The intention of all human rights is to protect human beings, the weak and the vulnerable, from violations. In the case of religious freedom, the one holding a belief - not the ideas and doctrines itself.

But what does actually religious freedom mean, a right considered by many as one of the most important and fundamental human rights? Before we listen to Dr. Jahangir's videorecorded speech about blasphemy laws and how they restrict religious freedom, let us take a brief look at why religious freedom is important, what it is and what the global situation looks like.

For an overwhelming majority of people in the world, religion matters. According to PEW Research Centre 84% identify themselves with a religious belief of one kind or another. From worship to prayer, births to funerals, weddings to holy days, diet to clothing, religion remains essential for the sense of identity as well as the quality and meaning of life for billions of people. Therefore, it is fundamental for the social wellbeing of people, that they are able to think as they please, believe or not believe as their conscience leads, and live out their beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear.

Religious freedom applies to the holders of all religious beliefs, but is equally important for non-believers as well, since it also protects the right to renounce religion and have no belief at all and express these non-religious worldviews.

Where religious freedom is denied human development and flourishing is impaired. Religious freedom is also important in many other ways. The respect of religious freedom is a litmus test of the respect of human rights in general in a society. Politically, religious freedom abuses are linked with the absence of democracy and the presence of abuses of other human rights, such as freedom of expression, the freedom of association and assembly, the right to life and a fair trial and minority rights. Economically, research shows correlations between lack of religious freedom and lower socio-economic

development. Unlawful restrictions on religion in addition reduce citizens' ability to come together and become agents for peaceful change. Countries with high restrictions experience more instability and violence. Often the already vulnerable are especially at risk of religious freedom violations: women, refugees, and minorities.

The universal right of religious freedom, a right endorsed by a majority of countries, is enshrined in article 18 in UDHR and ICCPR, as well as in a number of other international documents and treaties. Briefly, one can say religious freedom protects three things:

- The right to have a religion or belief of your own choice
- The right to maintain and change your religion or belief if you want to
- The right to express and manifest your religion or belief through various acts, such as worship, practice and teaching.

Unfortunately, religious freedom is increasingly restricted across the globe. 43% of the countries of the world have high or very high restrictions. Since many of them are very populous countries this constitutes 76% of the world's population, that means that 5,3 billion people are living in countries with high or very high restrictions!! These numbers were presented by PEW in January this year, based on data from 2012.

Restrictions can be divided in two major types:

- On the horizontal axe you find governmental restrictions – such as laws, policies or actions by authorities that restrict religious freedom in various ways, as discriminatory registration demands, bans on conversion or certain groups, censorship, surveillance, police harassment, raids, detentions, imprisonment.
- On the other axe you have social restrictions and hostilities – aggressive behaviour, that negatively affects religious freedom, by individuals, organisations, religious extremists, radical nationalists, or other social actors. It can take the forms of threats, violence, pressure to conformity, attacks on houses of worship, property etc.

Countries like China and Iran are found at the far end of the axe with governmental restrictions. Whilst Pakistan, India, Nigeria and Egypt have very high levels of social hostilities and are found high up on the other axe.

Blasphemy laws, while obviously a form of governmental restriction, are also then quite often involved in severe forms of social hostilities. We clearly see how these laws, when they are actively used, encourage extremists to impose their notions of truth on others. They exacerbate intolerance, discrimination and social violence.

As this graph shows, there has been a steady, but unfortunate trend, of a rising number of countries with high or very high restrictions the last few years. Especially social hostilities has risen – i.e. abuses of minorities for acts perceived as offensive or threatening to the majority. This is occurring in 47% of the countries of the world as of 2012. There has also been a great increase in countries where violence, or the threat of violence, is used to force people to follow certain religious norms, as well as a rise in religious motivated mob violence.

We do not have global data for the situation today. It has been two years since the last data was gathered, but we have several distressing indicators of the situation. The ravaging of IS in Iraq against



minorities and all those not embracing their version of Islam; the attacks of Boko Haram against Christians and liberal Muslims; the shrinking human rights space in Russia affecting religious communities; rising Hindu nationalism in India; the increased violence against Muslims in Myanmar and aggressions against atheists in a number of countries. All these things indicate a deterioration of the religious freedom situation.

It is time for the international community to realize the importance of religious freedom and take active part in promoting it. The battle against unfair blasphemy laws is one important part of that struggle. I am very much looking forward to hear what Mrs. Asma Jahangir, the winner of the Stefanus Prize this year, wants to share with us today on this topic. The word is hers!