



January 28, 2020

The Honorable Karen Bass, Chair
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations
Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jamie Raskin, Chair
Subcommittee on Civil Rights
and Civil Liberties
Committee on Oversight and Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Christopher Smith
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations
Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chip Roy
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Civil Rights
and Civil Liberties
Committee on Oversight and Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairs Bass and Raskin and Ranking Members Smith and Roy:

Thank you for convening today’s hearing on “Ending Global Religious Persecution.” We appreciate your subcommittees’ attention to this fundamental concern. We support H.Res. 512 and urge its passage.

On behalf of Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC), an 84-year-old agency serving 16 Baptist bodies on legal and policy matters relating to religious liberty and the separation of church and state, we appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony to be added to the record. Our mission is to defend and extend God-given religious liberty for all, bringing a uniquely Baptist witness to the principle that religion must be freely exercised, neither advanced nor inhibited by government. Our commitment stems from the historical experiences of early Baptists, who suffered the pain of persecution from religious fervor coupled with the coercive power of the state.

As Baptist Christians in the United States, it is safe to presume that we have not suffered under blasphemy laws in our context. That is not true of early Baptists in America nor of our Baptist brothers and sisters abroad. The founding mothers and fathers of our Christian denomination

suffered under laws similar to modern blasphemy laws. Under those laws, they were fined, whipped and imprisoned by their Christian neighbors for daring to follow God as they interpreted Scripture to demand. From these earliest days as a persecuted religious minority group, fighting for religious liberty for all people became part of the Baptist DNA. Marginalized Baptist pastors fought not only for their own religious freedom but consistently spoke of the need for Jewish, Muslim, atheist and all of our neighbors to be free to worship God, or not, as they feel led. It is this advocacy tradition that BJC continues today.

At their core, blasphemy and apostasy laws are a dangerous blending of the institutions of religion and state. Laws penalizing blasphemy stifle religious expression and undermine human rights. Most societies have had religious dissenters and other nonconformists, and history teaches us that state-enforced theological conformity simply does not work. Blasphemy laws are often used to silence religious minorities or political opponents and to foster religious intolerance, discrimination and violence within society.

Apostasy and blasphemy laws harm all of us — religious and nonreligious alike. They are used to justify vigilante violence against both religious and nontheistic dissenters. They harm practitioners of the protected religion by squelching dialogue and debate about their faith. Such engagement about faith keeps religion vital and vibrant. Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and others have been fined, imprisoned, tortured and executed for blasphemy offenses.

Currently, more than one-third of all countries has at least one blasphemy law on the books. Some countries vigorously enforce blasphemy laws against religious dissenters or political opponents while others mostly ignore them. Technology and the rise of social media make violations and perceived violations of blasphemy laws easier than ever.

International attention has brought light to several instances when blasphemy laws were enforced. Punishments range from monetary fines to the death penalty. We wish to highlight the following five vignettes to show the real-life impact of living under blasphemy laws.

In 2015, Abdul Shakoor received a three-year sentence for blasphemy in Pakistan. He was put on trial for the offense of selling books related to Ahmadiyya, a group who considers themselves Muslim but are not legally permitted to describe themselves as Muslims. According to research statistics collected by the Center for Social Justice in Pakistan, 84% of the people charged under the Pakistani blasphemy laws between 1987-2016 have been Muslim or Ahmadiyya.¹

¹ Religious Prisoners of Conscience, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom; <https://www.uscirf.gov/abdul-shakoor-released>. Kathy Gannon, “Pakistan under pressure to rein in blasphemy law,” AP, March 9, 2018;



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In 2017, Russian blogger Ruslan Sokolovsky received a suspended sentence of three and a half years and was banned from public events after posting a video of himself playing Pokémon Go inside a Russian cathedral.²

In 2012, Bishoy Kameel Kamel Garas, a Coptic Christian in Egypt, was convicted of blasphemy for posts shared on a fake Facebook page impersonating him. Despite alerting the authorities of the fake account, posting a disclaimer on his own account, and obtaining a recorded confession from the creator of the fake account, he was convicted of blasphemy, and his family regularly received death threats. He served more than three years in prison before finally being acquitted of this crime he didn't commit.³

In 2016, Albert Voss, a retired physics teacher and professed atheist, was convicted of blasphemy in Germany for painting anti-Christian slogans on his car. He was fined €500.⁴

In 2018, Aasiya Noreen, also known as Asia Bibi, was cleared of her blasphemy conviction in Pakistan and released from death row. Noreen is a Christian mother of five who was convicted in 2010 and sentenced to death by hanging. A mob nearly beat her to death in front of her 9-year-old daughter just before her arrest. Two of the Pakistani officials who came to her defense for the unjust conviction were assassinated for supporting her cause. She spent eight years on death row.⁵

Fortunately, some countries have started repealing these laws which violate our most basic human right — the right to believe and interact with the Divine in a way that has personal meaning. More than 10% of countries with blasphemy laws in 2015 have repealed them including Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Malta, New Zealand and Norway.⁶

<https://apnews.com/0495947b34ae44638ee37e608264b3a6/Pakistan-under-pressure-to-rein-in-blasphemy-law>.

² "The Case of Ruslan Sokolovsky," Global Freedom of Expression Columbia University; <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/case-ruslan-sokolovsky/>.

³ Sandra Elliot, "Following God's will, Egyptian Christian finds joy in prison for Christ," International Christian Concern; <https://www.persecution.org/2016/05/17/following-gods-will-egyptian-christian-finds-joy-in-prison-for-christ/>.

⁴ Justin Huggler, "Germany fines man for 'blasphemous' car bumper stickers," *The Telegraph*, February 26, 2016; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/12174806/Germany-fines-man-for-blasphemous-car-bumper-stickers.html>.

⁵ "Christian mother acquitted of blasphemy in Pakistan released from prison," Morning Star News, November 8, 2018; <https://morningstarnews.org/2018/11/christian-mother-acquitted-of-blasphemy-in-pakistan-released-from-prison/>.

⁶ <https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>.



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The American experiment of separating the institutions of religion from those of government has been good for church and state. H.Res. 512 gives the U.S. an opportunity to show leadership on the global stage. It sends a message to our global neighbors that religious freedom is a fundamental human right. It strengthens our voice at the United Nations (UN) in both opposing the creation of a model blasphemy law and supporting UN efforts to combat religious intolerance, discrimination or violence and to avoid restricting religious expression. It ensures that countries which enforce their blasphemy laws will be designated as “countries of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

UN member countries have promised in multiple documents that they would be protectors of religious liberty. The UN Charter protects religion several times, including in describing the UN’s purpose as “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”⁷ Article 18 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights may be the most famous international provision protecting religious liberty for all people: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”⁸

We support H.Res. 512 and are encouraged by the positive momentum of other countries looking to expand religious freedom for their citizens.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K. Hollyn Hollman".

K. Hollyn Hollman
General Counsel

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer L. Hawks".

Jennifer L. Hawks
Associate General Counsel

⁷ UN Charter, Article 1 Section 3, <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/>.

⁸ UN Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.