

**Becket Fund for Religious Liberty
Issues Brief**

“Defamation of Religions”
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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

<u>I.</u>	<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	2
<u>II.</u>	<u>HISTORY</u>	2
<u>III.</u>	<u>ANALYSIS</u>	3
<u>A.</u>	<u>Legal Analysis</u>	3
<u>B.</u>	<u>Analytical framework</u>	4
<u>C.</u>	<u>Domestic Implementation</u>	5
<u>D.</u>	<u>Correlation between “Defamation of Religions” and Upsurge in Intolerance</u> ...	5
<u>IV.</u>	<u>RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	6

I. INTRODUCTION

The “defamation of religions” issue is fundamentally inconsistent with the principles outlined in the United Nations’ founding and legal documents, but more importantly, it violates the very foundations of the human rights tradition by protecting ideas rather than the individuals who hold ideas. Further, “defamation of religions” laws force the state to determine which religious viewpoints may be expressed. The empowerment of the state (as opposed to protection of individuals against the state) through “defamation of religions” measures is thus unique in the human rights regime. “Defamation of religions” resolutions at the UN operate as international anti-blashphemy laws and provide international cover for domestic anti-blashphemy laws, which in practice empower ruling majorities against weak minorities and dissenters.

Major criticisms of the “defamation of religions” resolutions include: the narrow focus on Islam, the protection of a religion (essentially an ideology) instead of an individual, the conflation of race and religion, the erosion of freedom of expression as a fundamental freedom, overbroad and unclear language, including in the use of the term “defamation.”

According to OSCE commitments in the Helsinki Final Act, participating States “will recognize and respect the freedom of the individual to *profess* and practice, alone or in community with others, religion or belief acting in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience.”¹ In the Copenhagen 1990 document, participating States reaffirmed that the right to freedom of expression includes the “freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.”²

II. HISTORY

The “defamation of religions” issue was first introduced to the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1999 by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Conference under the agenda item on “racism.”³ In its original form, the draft resolution was introduced with the title “Defamation of Islam.”⁴

According to the statements made by Pakistan as it presented the draft resolution, it was intended to have the Commission stand up against what the OIC felt was a campaign to defame Islam, which they argued could incite already increasing manifestations of intolerance towards Muslims to a degree similar to anti-Semitic violence of the past.⁵ The impetus for a resolution combating the “defamation of religions” was reinvigorated after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.⁶ The murder of Dutch anti-immigration film director Theo van Gogh, the 2005 publishing of

¹ Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Helsinki, 1 August 1975, Questions Relating to Security in Europe: 1. (a) Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States – Principle VII. (emphasis added)

² Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, Copenhagen, 29 June 1990, Article 9.1

³ Pakistan currently enforces Pakistan Penal Code 295, which imposes capital punishment for blasphemy, including defamation of Islam. No. 295 of 1986; Pakistan Pen. Code (1860)

⁴ U.N. Econ. & Soc. Council [ESOSOC], Comm’n on Human Rights, Draft Res.: Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and all Forms of Discrimination, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1999/L.40 (April 20, 1999)

⁵ Comm’n on Human Rights Res., 62nd Meeting, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1999/SR.61, ¶¶1-9 (April 30, 1999)

⁶ Comm’n on Human Rights Res. 2003/4, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/2003/23 (January 2003) and the follow-up report Comm’n on Human Rights 2005/3, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/2005/18/Add.4 (December 2004)

twelve cartoons parodying the Prophet Mohammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, and more recently the production of the Dutch film *Fitna* have only intensified this debate.

Other delegates were of the opinion that this resolution was unbalanced in its sole focus on Islam. In response, the OIC agreed to make it more inclusive of all religions, although the text continued to focus on Islam specifically. The resolution continued to be raised in the Commission (now the Human Rights Council) under the racism agenda item each year since 1999.⁷ The resolution has also been introduced in the General Assembly since 2005.⁸ Furthermore, the OIC has indicated its desire for the adoption of a binding international covenant to protect religions from “defamation.”⁹

III. ANALYSIS

A. *Legal Analysis*

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 19(1) states, “Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.” ICCPR Article 19(2) states, “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.” Meanwhile, ICCPR Article 18 ensures the “right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” and freedom “to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.” Thus the primary ICCPR articles concerning freedom of religion particularly protect *expression* of thought, conscience, and religion, but do not protect the content of the thought, conscience, or religion.

Article 20 prohibits “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.” Notably, Article 20 focuses on discrimination against religious persons rather than defamation against religious ideas -- a “defamation of religion” resolution protects an ideology, while a religious discrimination resolution protects people themselves, who ascribe to a range of ideologies. Article 20 was drafted against the historical background of the horrors committed by the Nazi regime during the Second World War. Ms. Jahangir has noted that the “threshold of the acts that are referred to in Art. 20 is relatively high.... At the global level, any attempt to lower the threshold of Art. 20 of the Covenant would not only shrink the frontiers of free expression, but also limit freedom of religion or belief itself.”¹⁰ Defamation of religion measures, because they focus on the subjective sensibilities of the listener rather than the objective speech of the speaker, necessarily lower the bar for prohibited speech.

The right to disagree and to express dissent peacefully is a fundamental aspect of the freedom of thought. In his report in March 2008, Amyebi Ligabo, the UN Special Rapporteur on the protection of freedom of expression, stated that limitations of Article 19 of the ICCPR “are not

⁷ Resolutions on ‘Combating “defamation of religions”’ have been tabled and passed by the UN annually since 1999, see Comm’n on Human Rights Res. 2000/84, 2001/4, 2002/9, 2003/4, 2004/6, and 2005/3, U.N. Doc.A/HRC/4/L.12, A/HRC/7/L.15.

⁸ G.A. Res. 60/150, 61/164, 62/154, U.N. Doc. A/Res/60/150, A/Res/61/164, A/Res/62/154.

⁹ Statement of Mr. Ekmelledin Ihsanoglu, OIC Secretary General, UN Human Rights Council, 4th Sess. (March 12, 2007); First OIC Observatory Report on Islamophobia, May 2007-March 2008, Org. of the Islamic Conference, p.8 (March 2008)

¹⁰ Report to the Human Rights Council, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/2/3 (September 20, 2006)

intended to suppress the expression of critical views, controversial opinions or politically incorrect statements.”

Further, there is no basis in international or regulatory law for the concept of protection of religious ideas or collective rights of a sometimes disparate group of people within a larger faith tradition.¹¹ “Defamation of religions” as a concept undermines the very foundations of the human rights system, which is based on a concept of individual rights. The grounding of human rights in the protection of individuals instead of in the protection of ideas or of group identities is well established in treaty and custom, in general principles, and academia. Attempts to change this paradigm have met with extreme argument and dissent and thus do not have the force of established international law norms.

B. *Analytical framework*

Defamation laws are meant to protect individuals from public slander or libel that would negatively affect their livelihood, and is closely aligned with individual and personal, rather than group, rights. The traditional defense in a defamation lawsuit is the truth, as defamation laws are meant to inhibit someone from using mistruths to harm another.

“Defamation of religions” measures, however, are used to protect a set of beliefs, ideas, and philosophies. Yet religions make conflicting truth claims and indeed the diversity of truth claims is something that religious freedom as a concept is designed to protect. Thus, the traditional defense of truth in a defamation suit is subject in a “defamation of religions” case to what ideas, worldviews, or religious beliefs the judging authority believes to be true. The nature of the inquiry is factual.

However, “defamation of religions,” as opposed to the defamation of persons, forcibly requires the state to determine which *ideas* are acceptable, as opposed to which facts are true. A fundamental rule of law problem presents itself in the notion of “defamation of religion,” as belief cannot be empirically proven true.¹² “Defamation of religions” measures are thus distinct from traditional defamation laws because they do not protect persons, good faith speech, or dissent.

Enforcement of “defamation of religions” measures, including anti-blasphemy and anti-vilification laws, is typically left to the unbridled discretion of local officials who are free to act on their own prejudices.¹³ Ultimately, “defamation of religions” measures empower majorities against dissenters and the state against individuals.

¹¹ For example, Shi’a, Sunni, Alevi, Ahmadi, Sufi, Isma’ili, etc. are all groups whose reputations are concomitantly injured by someone criticizing “Islam,” and yet there are also conflicting truth claims regarding what Islam teaches among these groups.

¹² It was thus argued in a court case in Victoria, Australia, by Muslims attempting to enforce an “anti-vilification” law very similar to “defamation of religions” measures that “truth is not a defense” when the defendant, a Pakistani-Christian pastor, attempted to read from the Qur’an during his court testimony to show that his statements regarding Islam were Qur’anic. The “anti-vilification” law has already been used by local authorities to forbid the reading of the Qur’an in public because some Muslims deemed those passages to be defamatory of Islam. *See* <http://www.becketfund.org/index.php/case/101.html>.

¹³ “Defamation of religions” measures have allowed prosecution for “unreasonable” and “offensive” speech. These standards have been read to include giving charitable aid, criticizing a religious belief, or even telling someone that God would be happier if that person followed a different religion. There is no religious believer – including those who promote such laws – who does not value the ability to assert that his or her beliefs about religious truths are not only better, but true. Indeed, freedom of conscience and its

The conflation of race and religion diminishes the uniqueness of both race and religion. Unlike immutable race, religion involves the freedom to follow one's conscience. Treating racial and religious discrimination as the same thing confuses racist hate speech with discussion of (sometimes controversial) truth claims. Whereas one can easily identify and narrowly define racist hate speech, it is not nearly so simple to define what falls into the category of "defamation of religion," which as currently characterized can include any controversial truth claim about someone's religion. Race-based speech restrictions have never been used to cut off discussion about racial identity, whereas the "defamation of religion" measures by definition prohibit controversial discussion of religious belief.

C. Domestic Implementation

Pakistan, Iran, and Egypt have all expressed strong support for the "defamation of religions" resolutions. Pakistan Penal Code 295 states that defiling Islam or its prophets is deserving of the death penalty; defiling, damaging or desecrating the Qur'an will be punished with life imprisonment; and insulting another's religious feelings can be punished with 10 years of prison.¹⁴ Anti-blasphemy laws "are often used to intimidate reform-minded Muslims, sectarian opponents, and religious minorities, or to settle personal scores."¹⁵ In Iran, an academic and member of the pro-reform Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution, was sentenced to death for calling for the reformation of religion in which people should not "blindly follow" religious leaders.¹⁶ In Egypt, a professor at Cairo University was declared an apostate for teaching his students to read certain parts of the Qur'an metaphorically.¹⁷

Each of these instances required the state to mediate which religious viewpoints were acceptable and which were not. Further, in many instances, enforcement of "defamation of religion" measures requires a judgment based on the subjective sensibilities of the listener rather than the objectively ascertainable speech of the speaker. Under the standards promoted by the "defamation of religion" resolutions, when a Muslim states his belief that Jesus was a prophet, but not God incarnate, such statements could also be considered "defamation" against the Christian faith of many believers. But no OIC member state supporting defamation of religion laws would want to strip Muslims of their right to state this Qur'anic teaching. In such an environment, we effectively abolish the right to disagree over matters of truth, rendering "freedom of belief" a mere illusion.

D. Correlation between "Defamation of Religions" and Upsurge in Intolerance

General Assembly Resolution 62/154 of 18 December 2007 requests the Secretary-General to address the "possible correlation between defamation of religions and the upsurge in incitement, intolerance and hatred in many parts of the world;" however, the tone of the resolution seems to imply that the only upsurge in intolerance has been towards Muslims. In fact, religious discrimination and intolerance has been directed at religious minorities from a diversity of

expression is rooted in the *truth* of the inherent dignity of the human person, not in the fickle will of the state.

¹⁴ No. 295 of 1986; Pakistan Pen. Code (1860)

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2006, "Pakistan."

¹⁶ Amnesty International Annual Report 2003.

¹⁷ See *Writer's Block: Islam and Toleration*, *Economist*, Jan. 27, 1996. As an "apostate," he was forced to divorce his Muslim wife.

traditions around the world. Further, much of the persecution and discrimination has resulted not from “defamation of religions” but from state action against religious minorities and dissenters, who promote viewpoints that are often considered offensive to the majority religious populations in each of these countries.

In the past few months, anti-Christian violence has persisted in Orissa state in India following accusations against Christians of having persuaded Hindus to convert to Christianity; the violence has left dozens killed, buildings destroyed, and hundreds of Christians homeless. Pakistan has banned Ahmadis from praying with the Qur’an or professing to believe in the Muslim faith; Iran has banned Baha’is; China has banned Falun Gong followers. Religious believers of every stripe are tortured and sent to prison camps in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) because religion is itself viewed as offensive to the atheist ideology of the state. Conspicuous religious attire, including those of Sikhs and Muslims, in certain public areas has been banned in several European countries, including in France, the Netherlands, and Turkey.

“Defamation of religions” measures do not help these minorities. Such laws only benefit those who are in the majority and have the power to determine what acceptable speech is in the public square.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Religious freedom is best preserved through protection of religious exercise of people of all faiths, not through restricting the speech of people of some faiths. “Defamation of religion” laws claim to protect vulnerable religious communities and the civil dialogue.¹⁸ However, there are already laws against assault, false imprisonment, fraud, and even defamation of persons. “Defamation of religion” laws in practice act as a form of thought control and work solely to the advantage of religious majorities that have the power to sanction which ideas should be permitted in the public square.

Thus, the OSCE, the UN, and other regional and international bodies should take measures to reaffirm the right to freedom of religion or belief, including the right to profess and manifest that belief in the public square. A distinction should be made between peaceful critical speech and speech meant to incite religious violence. Finally, blasphemy laws and overbroad speech laws that criminalize peaceful speech should be repealed by member states, and reporting mechanisms for religious discrimination should be established at the national and international levels.

¹⁸ If respect between religions is the goal, recognition of differences as well as similarities is essential, and in order to recognize differences, conflicting truth claims must be allowed to exist.