

AMERICAN ATHEISTS, INC.

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ATHEISTS WARN PROPOSED U.N. BAN ON "DEFAMING" RELIGION THREAT TO FREE SPEECH, CHURCH-STATE SEPARATION

"This proposal amounts to an international 'blasphemy' statute, and punishes those exercising a right to question and criticize religious superstition..." -- Ellen Johnson, President, American Atheists

An Atheist civil rights group condemned Friday's passage at the United Nations of a proposal for a global ban on "defaming" religion.

The measure, passed 24 -14 (nine abstentions) by the U.N. Human Rights Council called upon governments to "take resolute action to prohibit the dissemination including through political institutions and organizations of racist and xenophobic ideas and material aimed at any religion..." States are also asked to encourage "tolerance and respect" for religion, and report on acts of violence or discrimination against religious populations.

"One of the problems here is that religion and religious believers are being singled out for 'special treatment,' " said Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists. "Atheists aren't mentioned, and we have plenty of cases where inappropriate and aggressive religious proselytizing, even physical coercion, is being allowed in schools, the workplace and in government."

Johnson also warned that the resolution was vague and overly-broad, and that criticizing or even questioning religious creeds is seen by many as a form of "defamation."

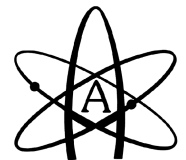
"This amounts to an 'anti-blasphemy' statute that can punish anyone exercising free speech," said Johnson.

The measure was supported primarily by Islamic countries. Dave Silverman, Communications Director for American Atheists," noted that the measure only mentioned Islam and Muslim minorities.

"Many of these countries have shabby records when it comes to human rights and freedom of expression," said Mr. Silverman. "Even if all religions were included in this dangerous proposal, however, we would still oppose any attempt to punish people for expressing an honest opinion about religion and what many of us argue is a superstitious and un-enlightened point of view."

Silverman added that all concerned with freedom of speech, including religious groups, should oppose the measure.

AMERICAN ATHEISTS is a nationwide movement that defends civil rights for Atheists; works for the total separation of church and state; and addresses issues of First Amendment public policy.



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