



# AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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January 27, 2020

The Honorable Rep. Karen Bass, Chair  
The Honorable Rep. Chris Smith, Ranking Member  
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa,  
Global Health, Global Human Rights, and  
International Organizations  
2170 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rep. Jamie Raskin, Chair  
The Honorable Rep. Chip Roy, Ranking Member  
House Oversight Subcommittee  
Civil Rights and Civil Liberties  
2157 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

**Re: SUPPORT for H.Res. 512, Testimony from American Atheists in support for a resolution to end blasphemy laws internationally**

Dear Chairperson Raskin, Ranking Member Roy, and Members of the House Oversight Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties; and Chairperson Bass, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations:

American Atheists, on behalf of its constituents nationwide, writes in support of H.Res. 512, a resolution calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws. This federal resolution protects the right to freedom of thought and religion for individuals worldwide, as stated in the International Declaration of Human Rights. We thank the Committee for holding a hearing on this important resolution promoting a global end to the well-documented punishment for the expression of, criticism of, or doubt regarding religion. We urge you to swiftly pass this resolution.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that religious freedom and equality are fundamental principles essential to the flourishing of a free and prosperous society, and we condemn every form of religious coercion.

As of 2020, at least 83 countries have been found to have blasphemy laws in which individuals’ expressions deemed by the government as blasphemous or defamatory of religion are met by punishment ranging from fines and imprisonment to capital punishment and beheadings. These criminal laws affect those without religious affiliation, atheists, and secularists, but they also impact the lives of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and other religious minorities for committing what are deemed to be blasphemous offenses.

Pakistan currently stands out from the more than 83 countries enforcing blasphemy laws with approximately 40 individuals on death row or serving life sentences as of 2018. Individuals like Asia Bibi have been held in prison for nearly a decade after being sentenced to death for blasphemy. Fortunately, Bibi was released in 2018 after the Supreme Court of Pakistan overturned her conviction – 8 years after her initial imprisonment. However, dozens of individuals are still facing death row for their convictions. Other individuals have been specifically targeted as members of minority religious groups, such as the Ahmadis, which has led to people like Abdul Shakoor, an 82-year old bookseller, serving four years in prison on blasphemy charges.

These are just the stories of two individuals in one country. There are still countless individuals in 83 countries whose lives have been affected by blasphemy laws and whose stories have not been told.

Several countries have taken steps toward repeal these blasphemy laws, including Greece, Ireland, and Canada, but more needs to be done on the international scale. Thankfully, Congress has the ability to promote international religious freedom and encourage other governments to follow the protection of freedom of thought, conscience, expression, and religious exercise.

H.Res. 512 calls on the President and the Secretary of State to make the repeal of blasphemy laws and the release of prisoners accused or convicted of such blasphemy offenses become priorities in bilateral relationships with all countries and, therefore, to support an international opposition to blasphemy laws. Furthermore, the President and the Secretary of State are encouraged to designate countries that enforce blasphemy laws to be considered as “countries of particular concern for religious freedom” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Finally, the resolution urges the President and the Secretary of State to oppose the United Nations and other international fora if support for blasphemy laws or the expansion of an anti-blasphemy norm is to occur.

With co-sponsorship Representative Raskin and Representative Meadows, the 9 Republican and 9 Democrat cosponsors in the House, the co-sponsorship of Senator Lankford and Senator Coons of the Senate version of the resolution, and along with 50 religious and nontheistic advocacy organizations, we strongly support this resolution’s passage should it come to the floor.

Sadly, we must also note that the United States does not have a perfect record when it comes to anti-blasphemy laws. State anti-blasphemy laws were long ago ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. The *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson* decision held that “[i]t is not the business of government in our nation to suppress real or imagined attacks upon a particular religious doctrine, whether they appear in publications, speeches, or motion pictures.”<sup>1</sup> However, states such as Massachusetts, Michigan, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Wyoming continue to have inactive anti-blasphemy provisions within their state law.<sup>2</sup> Just as the U.S. condemns blasphemy laws overseas, Congress should encourage states to repeal these outdated statutes.

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<sup>1</sup> *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, 343 U.S. 495 (1952).

<sup>2</sup> Gill, A.M. (2020). *2019 State of the Secular States*. Cranford, NJ: American Atheists. Available at <https://states.atheists.org/>.

If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists' support for H.Res. 512, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x309 or by email at [agill@atheists.org](mailto:agill@atheists.org).

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AG', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Alison Gill, Esq.

Vice President, Legal & Policy

cc: All Members of the House Oversight Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties and House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations.