

IHEU chief executive, Gary McLelland, told the conference that the remaining ‘blasphemy’ laws in Europe set a terrible precedent on the international scene, with several countries around the world frequently and harshly punishing accused ‘blasphemers’ with lengthy prison terms, or even death.



IHEU Chief Executive, Gary McLelland, giving the opening address Citizens of the Republic of Ireland will vote in two referendums on 26 October 2018 (to coincide with the presidential election). It is proposed that references to women and “their duties in the home” is removed, as well as deleting a clause on blasphemy under Article 40, which reads: “The publication or utterance of blasphemous, seditious, or indecent matter is an offence which shall be punishable in accordance with law.”

It is generally considered that the vote on removing the lines on ‘the role of women in the home’ is a sure win.

McLelland urged voters to stand “on the side of humanism, and in solidarity with those who are actively persecuted under similar laws around the world”, by voting to scrap the ‘blasphemy’ law in October. He also insisted that while the polls looked good, it was important not to be complacent about the result.

An extract from the speech follows below.

Thank you. Good afternoon everyone. It’s a pleasure to be speaking here at the All-Ireland Summer School. ...

So I’m going to have to focus on one specific area of our policy agenda and our work, which is relevant to all parts of Ireland. And that is the issue of so-called ‘blasphemy’ laws – and how they

intersect with the *perception* of non-theistic standpoints and even the *human rights* of non-religious people.

Let's start with that public and political perception on non-theistic people. Often, when we have the chance to speak to international delegates, members of parliaments, and so on, the impression we get at IHEU is that there's somehow a controversy, or an anxiety about recognising the rights of atheists and humanists. While the rights of religious people, minorities and majority religious believers, is considered completely within the confines of human rights discourse, when it comes to the issue of atheists, apostates, even liberal religious reformers, there's somehow an anxiety, or a taboo. The very existence of non-religious people, let alone the promotion of positive humanist values, is sometimes seen as an affront to religious institutions, or to the 'traditional culture' of a society. Sometimes non-religious standpoints are dismissed as marginal, as fringe, or even as necessarily confrontational, as if non-theistic people are necessarily out to cause trouble, out to disrupt society. For all these reasons, the demand to uphold the rights and freedoms of the non-religious is – quite wrongly of course – sometimes seen as a distraction, or worse still as an actual obstacle to '*religious freedom*' or social harmony.

I am sure this is a response, or a perception, that many of you here in this room today have faced at some point.

This taboo, or anxiety, about non-religious views, is not just a 'fact of life' that we should accept. It's a response against our humanism and our often deeply-held convictions about how the world works, and it cuts across all other work we might want to do. It means we may not be taken seriously, it means that even well-meaning international institutions and officials only think about non-religious individuals and non-religious rights as a kind of afterthought – we come in brackets at the end of the sentence! It means that whether we want to talk about the liberal perspective, as a humanist, or as a secularist, on issues from abortion to FGM, blasphemy or apostasy, secular democracy or freedom of religion or belief, it can all be subtly undermined by the mere fact that we are talking from 'a non-religious perspective'.

That's why, directly or indirectly, the IHEU has been working for many years to address this 'taboo'. Every chance we get we're insisting that:

- 1 the non-religious are protected under the human right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- 2 people's atheism, or humanism, or advocacy of secularism, are serious, often deeply-held convictions
- 3 the non-religious need to be treated as a distinct group for these purposes, just as we do for any specifically *religious* minority
- 4 and we are explaining how the failure to recognise this, results in individuals being ostracised, persecuted, and in many countries facing the outright threat of violence – and sometimes that threat is realised and people are attacked and killed

I mentioned that our Freedom of Thought Report which is one of the major planks of this strategy. This report is referenced by UN delegations and lawmakers around the world, and I believe it has had a real impact on the discourse at the international level on non-religious individuals, especially on the development of the set of laws and policies which fall under the broad umbrella of 'freedom of religion or belief', or FoRB as it's often referred to. Our report provides both a theoretical framework – the language that is needed to include the non-religious. And it provides the details: the analysis of the rights situation for the non-religious for every country in the world, as well as case studies of individual people who've faced persecution or discrimination.

The most recent, 2017 edition of the Report highlighted seven countries in particular which we identified as showing clear signs of *active persecution* that year. Those countries were Pakistan, India, The Maldives, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Mauritania.

Various these signals of active persecution included the murder of people identifying as humanist or atheist in Pakistan, India and the Maldives, and of course those are not isolated events: in all those countries there has been a hardening of rhetoric against 'blasphemy', against religious minorities and specifically against atheists or apostates in the past few years. That's an important point which I'll come back to, by the way: how the legal framework and political rhetoric create the conditions in which people think that *murder* is an acceptable outlet for their disagreement.

The Freedom of Thought Report rates every country in the world, looking at various measure (which we call "boundary conditions") at different levels of severity. The 2017 edition found that 30 countries met at least one (usually more) boundary condition at the very highest level of severity. Here we're talking about countries

which have laws against “apostasy” which are punishable by death for example, or where “Religious instruction in [nearly all the schools...] is of a coercive fundamentalist or extremist variety”, or where humanists have been murdered by non-state actors with impunity, or where there’s basically outright theocracy for example! So, the thirty countries with at least some form of persecution at this extreme include for example Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan. There were another 55 countries which meet the next highest level of severity, which we call “Severe Discrimination”. Here we consider boundary conditions such as when there is “Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters”, or “‘Blasphemy’ is outlawed or criticism of religion is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence”. Due to this last boundary condition, by the way, several western states such as Germany, Greece and New Zealand which do retain imprisonable offences for “blasphemy” or similar, make it onto this list of countries with “Severe” problems, because they do have ‘blasphemy’ laws punishable with a prison term. We’re not aware of prosecutions in New Zealand, but certainly in Germany and even more so in Greece there are still active prosecutions and occasional prison terms. Ireland has only escaped falling into that category in our report because the maximum sentence for “blasphemous libel” is a fine.

By the way, that number of 55 countries with “severe” problems has declined slightly over the past few years, mainly because of various countries which have scrapped their imprisonable ‘blasphemy’ laws, including Norway, Malta, Iceland, and most recently Denmark, which has now brought that number down to 54.

So, if you take those 30 countries with the most extreme forms of discrimination, and the now-54 countries with still “severe” forms of discrimination, then there are 84 countries in total which the report this year (as things stand) will categorise as having ‘severe’ or worse discrimination against the non-religious.

The report also looks at less severe but still very significant forms of discrimination around the world (i.e. discrimination that is not a threat to life and liberty but still impact on people’s lives), such as funding of ‘faith’ schools, compulsory worship, prayers before

parliament, reserved legislative spaces for exclusively religious people, and so on.

As I said above, all these various issues that we face – from troubling symbolic deference to religion on the one hand, to the most extreme forms of persecution and violence on the other – are impacted by that taboo I was talking about, that reservation about recognising the non-religious as individual rights-holders.

In fact, in many countries, especially those with the worst ratings in the Freedom of Thought Report, the non-religious are caught in a kind of dilemma. If they choose to remain invisible, maybe pretending to be religious, going to mosque or church and paying lip-service, this can be a way of avoiding trouble and staying safe. If that seems like cowardice, I'd urge you to recognise that in countries like Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan or Pakistan, there is not even a pretence that "apostates" are welcome in the country. Humanist ideas are vilified to the point that children will be thrown out of families for disbelieving, or worse, they'll be hunted down and killed.

On the other hand, if you so much as say "I don't believe in religion" in such a country, then let alone advocate for explicitly humanist ideas, then you will be accused of trying to "proselytize" for atheism, or of causing "hurt sentiments" or "offence" to religious believers. It is an all-or-nothing scenario: choose silence, or choose vilification. No wonder that so many people in countries dominated by high-control religions (they are mostly though not exclusively Islamic) fear to speak out.

But there is a second sense in which the non-religious are often invisible, and it has been much less talked about. Even when non-religious people do speak out to advocate humanist values, liberalism, secularism, and so on, they are not reported as doing so on the basis of a humanist standpoint. If, for example, a Christian peace campaigner is targeted and killed, almost certainly the coverage would assert: this was a *Christian* peace campaigner. But we've seen colleagues who have been killed – people who were humanist or atheist, whose convictions compelled them to stand up – whose values and motivations have simply been rendered invisible afterward, not just by media but even by major human rights groups. They are not presented as a humanist, or an atheist... they become merely "a liberal", or "an activist", or "a reformist". This happens again and again.

I'm not suggesting by the way that we want to play the game of "identity politics" – but I am suggesting that that taboo about non-religion means there's an imbalance and an inconsistency which make humanism less visible. To disregard humanist convictions is to give the non-religious a second coat of invisibility paint, and perhaps makes it harder for the world to understand them and the threat that they face.

One of the ways that this taboo, this reservation about recognising non-religiousness, is upheld is through the assumption that to say anything in contradiction with religion is somehow a transgression. It is the age-old cry of 'blasphemy' – and of course, as I probably don't have to tell anyone in this room, that charge is still upheld in law.

There are around 10 countries in the European Union which still have blasphemy laws? I already mentioned Greece and Germany, with their imprisonable offences. Scotland and Northern Ireland in fact still have their own extant 'blasphemy' laws, very old laws, and essentially out of use, and I know there are those calling or working very hard for these laws to be finally repealed.

And of course that brings us on to Ireland, which in effect has a new 'blasphemy' law, or an old law revamped to be more "inclusive", in that since 2009 it now applies to all religions, not just Christianity, which is a rather ironic consequence of trying to uphold a principle of "equality", actually extending a bad law! I think probably as humanists we will all recognise that there is not as grave a situation facing atheists and humanists in Europe, and in Ireland specifically, as there is in those worst-offending countries that I mentioned.

Yet we know that the existence of these laws in European or western countries has been actively utilized as a justification for retaining those far worse laws, and those laws which are far more frequently and harmfully applied, in countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

And it also lends credence to that taboo I've been talking about. Because this taboo against recognising non-religious rights is not just an idea out there in the culture, it is anchored by the notion of 'blasphemy' and made concrete by the existence of 'blasphemy' laws. Wherever there are 'blasphemy' laws, the state is fundamentally saying that there is something wrong, disruptive, offensive, about the critical discussion of religion.

Now, I doubt that anyone in this room *doesn't* want to see the 'blasphemy' scrapped in your fast-approaching referendum. But let me tell you this: it's not just a nice-to-have. It's not just a little administrative matter that needs clearing up. No, it is essential that we stand with atheists and humanists around the world who are being censored, who are being jailed, who are being murdered even, over accusations of 'blasphemy'.

It would be easy to let the existence of far worse laws elsewhere make you downplay the importance of abolition here; to think "Well, our law isn't really used and no one's going to jail, it's not important...". But on the contrary: it's precisely because there are far worse laws, more proactively and grotesquely enforced elsewhere, that makes it so vital that this referendum goes the right way!

I believe the opinion polls suggest that Ireland will fall on the side of freedom of thought and expression and will scrap the law. But remember that poll leads can disappear, especially if there are powerful lobbies pushing in the other direction, confusing the issue with 'hate speech' laws or implying that somehow 'religious freedom' requires a 'blasphemy' law – when in fact it's the other way around! I urge you not to be complacent, to see this referendum – as with the recent abortion referendum – as a chance to show where Ireland stands: in this case on the side of humanism, and in solidarity with those who are actively persecuted under similar laws around the world.

Let me say loud and clear, a future decision of the Irish people to repeal the supposed crime of blasphemy would have profound and significant positive effects around the world. In my view would continue the good work of Justin Keating and others. I also pledge my, and the IHEU's help to you and all humanist colleagues and allies in Ireland.

Thank you, and I wish you all a stimulating and enjoyable summer school.