In most countries around the world, freedom of conscience and religion is considered to be a fundamental human right and it is entrenched and respected constitutionally, as well as in regional and international treaties. Being ostracized, punished, or even killed for changing your religious views, seems to be a thing of the past in the 'Western World'.

Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights states that:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief"

Despite that Declaration being signed by all of 193 member states of the United Nations, not all states respect the Declaration equally and certain parts of it, such as Article 18, are continuously disrespected and breached around the world.

According to research by Pew Research Center, about 1 in 10 countries around the world, have a law or policy which criminalizes apostasy and considers it a punishable offense, by imprisonment or even death.

According to the same research, most of the countries in which leaving one's religion is a punishable offense are in the Middle East-North Africa region. Few countries have laws criminalizing apostasy in sub-Saharan Africa, and no country in Europe or in the Americas considers apostasy a criminal offense.

Laws or policies criminalizing apostasy all have some underlying assumptions in common. They assume that there is a 'right way to live' and that the 'right way to live' is only to be found in one's own community, through religious faith and religious practices. Such an assumption is guided through the mistaken view that religious faith is inherently tied with morality, and that one cannot be moral if they are not religious or have no belief in a god or gods.

People have the capacity to devise their own moral code which embraces humanity, respects other human beings as well as their human rights and individuality. Religious faith is not required for one to abide to and follow a humanistic moral code.

In fact, data and statistics show that the opposite is the case. The more religious a country is, the more violent it is. The less equal it is in terms of aspects such as gender or class, the worse it does in terms of respecting and protecting the human rights of its citizens.

Laws or policies criminalizing apostasy are also based on the mistaken view that religions are free from criticism or rejection. However, no idea, ideology, or belief system, whether it be religious, political, or other, should be considered immune from criticism. Being allowed to criticize even our and society's most deeply held beliefs can only be a way to progress.

If a human being wishes to leave their religion and follow another religion or no religion, they must be absolutely free to do so. This is not only because this is a right that is protected by the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights, but a fundamental natural right which one has simply in virtue of being a human being.

No matter where on Earth we are located, and even if we are lucky enough to not be affected by apostasy laws in our lives, we must be aware that other fellow human beings suffer, on an everyday basis, from apostasy laws, and we must do our best to support them by bringing unfair laws and policies into the light and criticizing them for their inhumanity.

Angelos Sofocleous
Editor
Since September 2019, Atheist Alliance International has been engaged in the Right to be Secular Campaign. Thousands of people have signed the petition that we will be presenting to the United Nations Human Rights Council, where we hold consultative privileges—the only atheist organization to do so. Signers of the petition come from over 60 countries around the world, with more people signing every week.

The United Nations stands at the forefront of non-discrimination. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines many standards of human behavior that are regularly protected in municipal and international law. They are commonly understood as inalienable, fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being and which are inherent in all human beings regardless of their age, ethnic origin, location, language, religion, ethnicity, or any other status. They are applicable everywhere and at every time in the sense of being universal, and they are egalitarian in the sense of being the same for everyone.

In protecting freedom of religion and belief, it must also urgently and courageously defend those who chose not to be religious. We are asking the United Nations to reconsider the extent to which freedom from religion is protected alongside freedom of religion.

Why is this petition so important? Because in some parts of the world atheism is considered to be synonymous with terrorism, and in many other parts, any expression of non-belief is open to condemned as blasphemy or apostasy and may receive harsh punishments, even the death penalty.

The petition asks that the non-secular be granted reasonable rights to be free from having to adopt a religion, dress according to religious demands, belong to any form of religious community, be registered in official documents as a member of a religion, or adopt religious ceremonies associated to life events such as births and deaths.

Our petition does not seek to diminish the existing rights of the religious in any way—we staunchly defend these rights. Nor do we aim to create ‘special’ rights to benefit non-believers uniquely. We seek equality of rights for the religious and the secular.

To help promote this important campaign, I have made a video which can be seen here:

https://youtu.be/PzRKrGN7acs

I’m asking you to sign the petition and share it as far and wide as possible. The more signatures, the louder our voice will sound in Geneva. How much will it cost you? Absolutely nothing. Just go to the link at the bottom of this page, shift control click on it and sign up.

Isn’t it about time that we atheists stood up for our rights?

Howard Burman
President, Atheist Alliance International
president@atheistalliance.org

https://www.gopetition.com/petitions/the-right-to-be-secular.html
Apostasy
The freedom to follow the path of your own choosing

Apostate: noun "após-tat\"
- someone whose beliefs have changed and who no longer belongs to a religious or political group;
- one who commits apostasy

I recently came across, at least as far as I am aware, my first convert. To protect her privacy I will call her Ann. She and I met through at a get-together for people from her remote, mountain village in the Philippines. Needless to say, most were devout Catholics, but I proceeded to expand the worldview of at least one receptive mind, as no others were so open-minded.

Pulling out some of my favourite verses, ones useful for just such an occasion, I proceeded to explain the original context from which these passages were meant to be understood, and the Christian misinterpretations that have come to be assigned to them; especially given the overwhelming biblical ignorance of the vast majority of the faithful who don’t have the slightest clue what their “Good Book” says. One such verse is Daniel 12:1-2, which is particularly good for deconstructing Christian beliefs:

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

While it does not explicitly state it here (see Dan 7:13–14 for the earlier reference), this is the passage which declares the Son of Man to be the archangel Michael. This would be the same Son of Man whom Jesus refers to in the Gospels, and not to himself, as some passages have been re-written to make it seem (compare Matt 25:31 with Matt 16:13). This passage in Daniel 12 is also the first and only instance in the Hebrew Bible referring to a resurrection and an afterlife in heaven. One should take special note that the Book of Daniel was written less than two hundred years before Jesus came along to make use of these new theological ideas; ideas that were late-comers to Jewish beliefs.

About one year later, I spoke with Ann and she told me about her conversion from Christian to non-believer, and that it was specifically the verses I brought up that caused her to reflect on the legitimacy of these passages, the Bible, and her faith in Christianity. She had begun the critical thinking process that led to her decision to give up her dogmatic beliefs.

Ann mentioned that she had also experimented with the Baptists, Mormons, and evangelical churches in her search for something that made sense of life. Yet, one problem kept showing up within each denomination: the believers she met didn’t walk the talk. She became disillusioned and turned off by the hypocrisy she saw all around her from supposedly devout Christians; Christians who did not demonstrate, in their daily lives, what they claimed to believe.

Ultimately, she came to the conclusion that she “can have a meaningful life without God.” When I asked her if she had told her family about becoming an atheist, she replied that she had told them she is fed up with the hypocrisy, but she had not fully admitted her atheism. When I pressed her on why she hadn’t told them the full truth about herself yet, she claimed it is not that she is afraid, but that she just isn’t ready yet.

I can understand her reluctance to inform her family, as I am sure a good many others can as well. Especially those living in heavily religious communities, like the American Bible Belt states, or those with extremely devout family members.

Continued on page 5
Continued from page 4

I am familiar with the repercussions that can ensue from someone declaring themselves to be an atheist to their families, as I heart-breakingly learned through an acquaintance, Michael, in my local atheist community. Michael was a senior member within the Jehovah’s Witnesses, one of those cults so obsessed with hiding the truth from their members that the organization forces its members to shun anyone who dares to think for oneself.

Knowing full well what his decision would mean, nevertheless he could no longer delude himself with the teachings of his cult, he made the difficult choice anyway. For him, apostasy meant losing his entire family: kids, parents, everyone in his support community, and a “spiritual disassociation” from his wife. Yet, he had the fortitude of his new-found convictions and the intellectual courage to declare that he could not live a lie, even though it cost him his family.

Sadly, such familial ostracisms are not uncommon for apostasy in the Christian West, which are not even in the same league as the barbaric death threats for the same, so-called, crime in mostly Muslim countries. We can only hope, that as those with no spiritual attachments continue to grow in demographic strength, that this unfortunate state of affairs and the beliefs they are tied to will eventually be a relic of the past.

When I wrote and interviewed for the now-defunct Conatus News, I was interviewing some secular and ex-religious leaders. One went by the pen name ‘Ayaz Nizami’. Our interview was scheduled for late March of 2017.

The interview never took place because, although our last communication was March 21 of 2017, he was detained by Pakistani authorities on March 24 of 2017. The alleged charge was blasphemy.

A social media campaign went online for #FreeAyazNizami. Meanwhile, another of those campaigns against individuals seen as offending the Prophet, or simply offending religious sentiments, also arose: #HangAyazNizami.

In 2017, the authorities arrested Abdul Waheed, on the assumption that he was Nizami. The charge was “uploading offensive content on social media,” and he was formally charged with the death penalty much later, in early January, 2021.

He was claimed to have specialized in Islamic law and the Arabic language. He translated some written work critical of Islam from English to Urdu too. These texts became a potent mix to challenge the theocratic authorities, which would seem to explain his imprisonment for over 1,400 days followed by a death sentence.

The Pakistani political author, Aylan Khan, is claimed to have exposed Nizami as Abdul Waheed. Khan must have known of the likely consequences for ‘Nizami’, being exposed in Pakistan. So, the real criminal is Aylan.

It’s important to note, that in Pakistan, being an active challenger of Islam is a dangerous position and this is an admirable side commentary on the noble work of Fauzia Ilyas (pictured). Fauzia Ilyas is a former Director of AAI who has campaigned for Nizami’s release.

Alongside his imprisonment, we know two others were imprisoned. This was a direct move by the Pakistani government to censor and crack down on content that it deems blasphemous.

Currently, Abdul Waheed is imprisoned in Central Jail Rawalpindi under a death sentence although it seems impossible to prove that he penned the ‘offensive texts’.

Jason Sylvester
Diogenese of Mayberry

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
The Virtue of Apostasy

It was a long time before I became comfortable calling myself an “atheist.” It wasn’t because I found compelling reasons to remain an Evangelical Christian, as I had been raised to be. Nor was it because the arguments in favor of any kind of personal god were particularly persuasive. I think part of it was that I just didn’t want to entirely give up on the religious identity and assumptions about what was true or not, as well as my understanding of how the spiritual world worked, and how then I should live, that had surrounded and sustained me all my life. But if I’m being brutally honest, it’s also because an idea had been drilled into my subconscious, a pernicious concept that sucked at my mind like a tick and whispered incessantly that leaving Christianity entirely, actually becoming an apostate, was an action not merely of theological mistake, but was indeed a road to wickedness and immorality, a path toward perversion and shame.

The theologian Francis Schaeffer was an American Evangelical pastor in the 20th century who led a personality cult based out of Switzerland that attempted to oppose the influence of modernism in Christianity and Western culture with a kind of pseudo-philosophical intellectualism that presaged the modern apologetics community. He was a particular favorite of my parents’ and his writings helped lay the foundations of our particular form of fundamentalism. Schaeffer wrote that apostasy was akin to adultery, though infinitely worse in the eyes of the Christian god. Apostasy was a sin of infidelity, a corruption and perversion of the proper and lawful relationship that the Bride should have with the Bridegroom. Those who give themselves over to apostasy are no better than the worshippers of Moloch, who supposedly devoured the firstborn children of ancient fearless Hebrews.

It should be noted that Schaeffer’s chief concern was the liberalization of Christianity, the theological progress that had ignited the fundamentalist movement in the first decade of the 20th century in America, and which also regarded modern science as a threat, particularly evolutionary theory. Schaeffer’s condemnation was reserved for those within the Church who were willing to consider innovations and novel interpretations of ancient scriptures; it was these pastors who he thought were of a kind with devil-worshippers, not the lowly atheist. Yet it brings me no small amount of satisfaction to point out that Schaeffer’s own son, Frank, has repudiated his father’s theology and the Evangelical movement that was buoyed by his father’s ministry. The junior Schaeffer now considers himself a “Christian Atheist,” positioning himself as an anti-fundamentalist who seeks to undo some measure of the damage caused by his paternal legacy.

By nature, apostasy is a kind of spiritual violence, a severing of the threads binding someone to their religious identity. For some, these may be more like shackles that restrict and restrain; for others, they may be an irreplaceable lifeline. In either case, the unmoored apostate now must pass through the apologetical blockade before she can leave the harbor, either by head-on engagement trading broadside shots, or by stealthily slipping past the fundamentalist flotilla while they restock their supply of bad theology and pseudo-philosophy. This is an exercise in immense bravery, trading the relative comfort and support of a known location with the uncharted and unknown. This is Isaac seeing the bindings in Abraham’s hand, and the knife in his belt, and the altar thirsty for blood, and standing up to his father by saying NO.

Apostasy is an act of self-actualization and heroism of the kind we find in our grandest myths. The apostate must pass three tests: that of the threshold, that of the darkness, and that of the light. To leave one’s religious background is to cross over a threshold of safety, a mental barrier that keeps the faithful inside in perpetuity. It is an effort in and of itself to recognize that such a
gate exists, still more to look beyond it and consider the possibilities, and only the staunchest may find themselves pushing through and passing into the unknown beyond. Once outside the boundaries of orthodoxy, there is a rush of chaos and darkness as the past is stripped away, piece by piece. We can never know or even guess at just how much of ourselves are built on foundations of sand, but the Stygian waters of doubt will wash them away without remorse. And finally, when the chaff of our past beliefs has been blown away by the dark wind, the apostate must open her eyes wide and search for new illumination. Something as small and simple as a candle in the dark is sufficient, for new fuel will become apparent and by the warm glow of the growing firelight she can forge for herself a more intrepid identity, a more harmonious life, and a stronger home.

A life in which apostasy is not just an option, but an inevitability, is one in which the virtues are on constant display. Even those who find themselves living happily within some orthodoxy are spiritually subjugated if they do not hold apostasy as a possibility. As Christopher Hitchens observed, near the end of his life,

“To me, the offer of certainty, the offer of complete security, the offer of an impermeable faith that can’t give way, is an offer of something not worth having. I want to live my life taking the risk all the time that I don’t know anything like enough yet. That I haven’t understood enough, that I can’t know enough, that I’m always hungrily operating on the margins of a potentially great harvest of future knowledge and wisdom.”

For those of us who can embrace the virtue of apostasy, this kind of life awaits.

All of our cool merchandise can be seen and purchased here: https://www.atheistalliance.org/our-shop/
The Reluctant Apostate

Sid Vicious was my brother’s cat, we discovered that Sid was a girl when she gave birth to a litter of kittens in his bedroom closet. Sid was my first experience with a pet and also my first experience with death. She was hit by a car in front of our house in the fall of 1986, I was 7. My mother held me as I cried and comforted me by explaining that God had taken Sid to heaven. God had a plan for everyone and everything, and that was His plan for Sid.

I was told as a little kid that I was Catholic, although the only times we to church was when someone died or got married. Which caused quite a bit of confusion for me as a child, because I had a tendency to conflate the two events. What I also found confusing was the whole concept of God. He loved us, created us, and would answer our prayers if we believed enough. Oh, and that little pesky hell thing. Supposedly he could do anything at all, and loved us, but would not hesitate to burn and torture us forever if we failed to love or believe in him. My understanding of love didn’t include torture. In fact, the idea of hell itself seemed counter to the idea of an all loving God.

I didn’t want to go to hell, so I tried to believe in God. I wanted my prayers answered, so I prayed to Him. I wanted to believe that Sid was in heaven, so I tried to believe in that too. When I questioned the existence of God to the dismay of my family, I was told that the evidence was all around me. Every time something good happened, that was proof of His existence. What about the bad stuff? Well, that was a test of faith. Part of His plan. When I questioned why God had to test our faith, when he could just give it to us, without the bad stuff or the threat of hell for that matter, I was told that God worked in mysterious ways. So, I stuffed my growing doubt and tried to believe. Apparently, my doubt was part of God’s plan too.

I tried to believe because I was taught to. As I grew, so did my doubts about God’s existence. The bigger my doubts became the harder I tried. The harder I tried, the bigger my doubts became. One day I realized that I wasn’t trying anymore, I was simply pretending. I wasn’t afraid of a god or hell that I was pretty certain didn’t exist, I was afraid of upsetting my family. I was afraid of being ostracized by my friends. So, I kept pretending.

If what I was taught about God was true, He wasn’t something I felt deserved worship even if I had succeeded in believing in Him. He wasn’t loving, he was cruel and vindictive. He didn’t bring comfort, he brought pain. The whole concept of God meant a lack of control over my own life. The idea of heaven was a pleasant one, until you considered the requirements to get there. The God I was taught to believe in, would send plenty of innocent people to hell for the simple sin of not believing. If God has the power to control everything that happens, then that makes it His choice to send people to hell. Why create it in the first place if he didn’t want people to go there? Not only had I stopped trying, I stopped pretending as well. I became a reluctant apostate.

I understand why people would want to believe that there is an omniscient and omnipotent being in control. That no matter what happens someone else has the wheel, it all has some deeper meaning. It’s how I felt in my mother’s arms the day Sid died. It’s a nice but ultimately hollow thought. It creates a barrier to accepting life as it is. It takes the control out of your hands and puts it in the hands of a deity that works mysteriously. It also removes the responsibility. Until you accept the things that are out of your control in life, you aren’t free to accept all the things you can. Belief in a god obstructs acceptance of the tough things that we face in life, and acceptance brings healing.

Trying to believe brought a sense of failure, admitting to myself that I didn’t believe brought a sense of relief. Understanding and accepting that I am in control and responsible for my own path in life, brought a sense of freedom.

Continued on page 9
But it also brought a sense of loss. I wanted to believe, I really did. I did not want to become an apostate. In my family and among some of my friends, apostasy was akin to evil. To renounce not only my Catholic faith but also the concept of a god or a higher power was the ultimate sin. I would be a disappointment to my family and would likely lose a friend or two. To reject the religion I was born into was to reject my very eternal soul. At least to my family.

But to continue to pretend to believe in something I did not, was to reject who I knew I was as a person. I would be rejecting myself to soothe the fears of the believers in my life who were certain I would go to hell. I did not want to become an apostate, but I couldn’t force myself to believe in something that I simply had no evidence for.

As I learned to accept myself as an atheist, I also learned that there were many who were still trying to pretend to believe. I encountered people who knew that they no longer believed but were afraid to say so. I realized that to be an outspoken apostate was to provide comfort and support to those who still felt like they were in the dark. Apostasy can be a lonely place to those who are surrounded by believers. I knew because I was in that place. The more of us that speak up, the more reluctant apostates can stop pretending to believe.

Continued from page 8

All of our cool merchandise can be seen and purchased here:
https://www.atheistalliance.org/our-shop/

Our Right to Be Secular Campaign has already accumulated thousands of signatures but we need thousands more before we take it to the United Nations Human Rights Council where we are the only atheist organization with consultation status.

If you haven’t already done so, please consider signing the petition. If you have, please consider encouraging your friends to do the same. The more people who sign, the louder our voice will be at the UN! Granting the right to be secular should be a basic human right. Help us to make that a reality!

Please shift, control and click the link, then sign:

https://www.gopetition.com/petitions/the-right-to-be-secular.html
Personal Freedoms Kill Religion

By James A. Haught

Why is religion collapsing in all Western democracies – and most rapidly in the United States? A major researcher lists multiple reasons: Revulsion by:

- young liberals against the sanctimonious partnership between bigoted white evangelicals and America’s Republican Party.
- nearly everyone, including Catholics, against child molesting by priests.
- nearly everyone, including Muslims, against hideous massacres by volunteer suicide “martyrs.” and,
- Rising prosperity and better living conditions that make affluent, educated people no longer need supernatural promises of heaven.

And, especially, rising personal freedoms unleashed by the Sexual Revolution that discredit outdated church Puritanism.

Dr. Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan outlines all these causes and more in his latest book, Religion’s Sudden Decline: What’s Causing It and What Comes Next?, by Oxford University Press.

Repeatedly, he says all major religions spent centuries enforcing “pro-fertility norms” that require women to stay home raising babies, subservient to husbands – and also demonizing birth control, homosexuality, masturbation, divorce, abortion “and any other sexual behavior not linked with reproduction.”

Churches presented these taboos as divine commands from God, with violations punishable by eternal burning in hell. But the Sexual Revolution freed billions to make their own choices, without fear. Dr. Inglehart writes:

“Since the Enlightenment, the struggle for human emancipation – from the abolition of slavery to the recognition of human rights – has been a defining feature of modernization. This struggle virtually always aroused resistance from reactionary forces....

“The recent legalization of abortion and same-sex marriage in many countries constitutes a breakthrough at society’s most basic level: its ability to reproduce itself. These changes are driven by growing mass support for sexual self determination, which is part of an even broader trend toward greater emphasis on freedom of choice in all aspects of life....

“In 1945, homosexuality was still criminal in most Western countries; it is now legal in virtually all of them. In the postwar era, both church attendance and birth rates were high; today, church attendance has declined drastically and human fertility has fallen.”

Page after page, he outlines how religion has fizzled and secularism has soared – mostly since 2007 when churchless people reached a “tipping point” that guaranteed escalating change.

“Since 2007, the USA has been secularizing at a more rapid rate than any other country for which we have data.... In the earliest U.S. survey in 1982, 52% of the American public said that God was very important in their lives; in 2017, only 23% made this choice. In 1982, 83% of Americans described themselves as a ‘religious person’; in 2017, only 55% did so. Conversely, in 1982, only 16% of Americans said that they ‘never or practically never’ attended religious services; in 2017, 35% said that... In 1982, 46% of Americans said they had ‘a great deal’ of confidence in their country’s religious institutions; in 2017, only 12% said this – only about a fourth as many as in 1982.... In high-income countries, the younger birth cohorts are much less religious than their older compatriots; among those born between 1894 and 1903, 42% said that God was very important in their lives; among those born between 1994 and 2003, only 11% said this.”

On and on, he spells out the relentless march of secularism.

Dr. Inglehart doesn’t declare specifically that religion will die in Western democracies in coming decades – or that the GOP will lose its white evangelical base and become toothless – but all his findings hint strongly toward that future. **Hurrah.**
That's quite the expression on your face, mom, seeming to say as nothing else could that one's alone with an armful of dust. We see the taut fears in the eyes of every numb inconsolable nun who once prayed proudly with beak uplifted, every leggy Mary lamenting what's done is done.

Now the tight bright dimple is gone! Gone! Of course, what did you expect who clumped at the cross and the hanging hip (no arms now to divide you from the shrivelling rot you once called a god) and saw that the lips were a plant's fake honey to scare off bees. Yes, the next time you go rushing up to see, drippy and dodgy with sin (like all of us), recall the guy's half-bone, half-dust. Why sad at another of life's passing laughs? He'll soon be brought down for purpling, like you.
A Mauritanian Atheist's story

I come from a religious ruled country that persecutes and oppresses atheists and ex-Muslims even more than Saudi Arabia does, but no one knows anything about it because it does not have petroleum or nuclear energy and, because it is poor, no one cares about the status of religious freedoms and freedom of expression in it. Mauritania is one of the countries that is completely absent from the world media because of the systematic blackout silencing atheists and suppressing them with the force of law.

Mauritanian society consists of several ethnic groups. The Arabs are a minority, but they control politics, religion and economy. We have no recognition of a choice other than to belong to Sunni Islam. Most people like me in Mauritania don't have freedom of choice or speech.

I created a network of Liberals of Mauritania to be the voice of atheists, non-believers, homosexuals and other minorities. Our goal is a secular state in which rights are equal. The repression and persecution practiced by the Mauritanian government and religious laws are inconsistent with all international laws and covenants.

The attempts to silence me reached the point where one of the Mauritanian parliament members: Mohamed boys, Al-Sheikh Al-Fadil, demanded in a public session the issuance of an international arrest warrant against me to return me to Mauritania and kill me because they do not want the world to know what is happening inside Mauritania. The community, the authority of the tribes and elders of religion incite to kill anyone who doubts, changes or leaves his religion.

As a Mauritanian atheist and human rights activist, my Mauritanian nationality was revoked, many lawsuits were filed against me and demonstrations demanded my death, I'm affected by a fatwa which results in me not being safe even in Europe. This is all because I am a person who expressed their opinion openly, clearly, and refused to be silenced.

Take Article 306 of the Mauritanian Criminal Code as an example: it provides the death penalty for blasphemy and apostasy. This law is an explicit violation of all international conventions which provide for freedom of belief and freedom of choice, and the freedom to display this choice without oppression, threat or persecution. It contradicts the text of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Laws like these perpetuate hate speech and violence against apostates in Mauritania. It denies us all citizenship rights and allows the use of violence against us by force of law because the law does not protect non-believers. The incitement of religious laws constitutes a large part of the spread of violence in religious societies as these texts give them the right to violence, persecution, discrimination against non-believers.

Many atheists were arrested and court rulings banned others from traveling, due to their criticism of Islam. One of my friends was arrested on charges of contempt of Islam and insulting sanctities. He was hidden for a long time, most probably executed.

The time has come to confront all the laws, ideas and ideologies that violate the dignity of the human being just because of his religious or gender difference. That is why the world should know about these violations.

The most important thing is for Mauritanian society to know that there are voices against these laws and systematic violence. I demand an end to violence, persecution and discrimination against non-believers in Mauritania and I ask the United Nations to intervene to protect us. It is time for us to raise our voices and claim our rights as Atheists in Islamic states.

Yahya Ekhou
Head of Liberals
Network Mauritania
Apostasy

by

Richard Lawrence

Apostasy seems a strange word to someone raised in the United States. As we go through our lives both we and some of the people we know question the religious beliefs they were brought up in. As our friends and neighbors progress through their education and lives, it is not unusual to hear of some abandoning their religion of birth and becoming members of some other religion: Catholics become Protestants and vice versa, some may even leave the Abrahamic religions and search out New Age or Eastern Religions. Some even abandon their religious beliefs entirely, becoming, as survey results are calling them these days, ‘nones’.

This searching and experimenting with different belief systems strikes the rest of us as nothing out of the ordinary, no different than choosing a different sports team to root for or even rooting for a different sport entirely. The freedom to pursue whatever avenue the mind wishes to go down is one of the privileges of living in a society that holds to Enlightenment values, specifically the idea that traditional authority is not always correct and humans can and should improve themselves through reason.

When the claims of religion contradict reason and by extension science, the child of reason, we should be and are, in fact, free to reject those claims.

Every reader knows that this freedom is not a given in other places of the world. Depending on the religious fervor of the country in question, leaving the “official religion” (another strange concept to those of us raised with Enlightenment values) may and, unfortunately does, come at the cost of one’s life. Many religions contain commandments that demand apostates should be killed. The Old Testament and the Koran both contain verses instructing the faithful to do just that.

Leaving the religious plantation (apostasy) is as illegal and life threatening in some countries today as it was for slaves attempting to leave the Southern plantations during the time of slavery here in the United States. This egregious behavior is not limited to theism; political religions such as Communism engage in this behavior. Having lived in the shadow of the Berlin Wall I know this all too well. Many paid the ultimate price at the foot of that filthy wall, their flight to freedom ending in a hail of bullets or an explosion from stepping on a mine.

These days Saudi Arabia and Russia, both noxious and festering cauldrons of theocratic and political fascism, respectively, are shining examples of this barbaric behavior. Jamal Khashoggi’s murder at the direction of Saudi Arabia’s crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and Putin’s attempted murder of Alexei Navalny, both by political reasons are clear indications that coming to the wrong conclusions about a political regime and voicing them will ensure a secular fatwa will be issued against you demanding your death.

Those who would charge others with apostasy (religious or political) and demand the required punishment of death all seem to claim a certain right over others. This right they claim, whether explicitly or implicitly, is the right of ownership. The purpose of your existence is to advance the goals of whatever system, political or religious, claims ownership of you. If you fulfill your duties, you will be allowed to live; assert or act in manner which repudiates that claim of ownership and you will either be imprisoned or killed, oftentimes both.

This is, at its core, what apostasy really is: the assertion of self-ownership and the repudiation of fascist claims to the contrary. Each and every man and woman is free to think and question everything they have been taught to determine the direction of their lives. Against that are those who assert you are their possession, like some farm animal, and, like some farm animal, when you are rebellious, they will snuff out your life. Questioning their right of ownership over you is an immoral act of the highest order and deserves a like

Continued on page 14
"You Can't Say That, We Would Have To Kill You"

That's what Sadia Hameed's mother said to her when Sadia revealed that she no longer believed in Allah.

Just let that sink in for a moment and try to imagine your mother saying that to you...

Or you saying that to your children...

This is the horrific threat that a great many children in Islamic societies experience.

Having an upbringing in constant fear of death unless you submit to adult control, results in one of two possible outcomes. You either grow up into a cowed person with no self confidence or self esteem - a psychologically damaged individual, or you become a rebel who strikes back at the system.

Muslim theocracies go to great measures to prevent the rebels but, for Muslims born in 'Western' democracies that route is a possible option. Sadia was born in the UK and she set herself the task of fighting for free speech.

It’s ridiculous to think that in several countries, women are kept, to all intents and purposes, as pets. They are not allowed to leave home without a male escort, which could be their father, brother, husband or son. When they are outside the house they must be covered from head to toe in a portable fabric cage: the burqa or, in slightly less fundamental societies, they must wear a veil to hide the beauty of their face or hair for fear of setting off men's uncontrollable lust.

Worse still, in legal cases, a woman's word is valued at only half that of a man's. This is the extreme level of second class citizenship that is permitted to half the population. Camel's sometimes get more respect and attention.

So Sadia's mission is a very valid and necessary one, although it's not been without some cost on her part. Some her family and friends no longer recognize her as a worthy person. This is the price that she has had to pay for kicking back at the faith she was raised in.

It's important to remember that we are all born a-theists and that a religion is imposed on us by the control freaks in our community. See the video of our interview here.

https://youtu.be/c_F_bklWxqQ

I wish Sadia every success.

John Richards
Benedict Spinoza was a seventeenth-century philosopher from Holland, of Iberian Jewish heritage, and modern democracies owe him a great debt. But Spinoza is arguably one of the most misunderstood figures in the history of secularism, for three reasons:

1. He uses the word God repeatedly when he means nature,
2. He is often vague in his meaning, says different things in separate writings or sometimes the opposite,
3. He denied being an atheist.

On point #1, he gets lumped into the category of a deist or a pantheist: someone who believes there is a higher power and/or believes that God and nature are two sides of the same coin. While it is easy to get this impression from a surface reading of Spinoza in his descriptions of God/nature, it is not an accurate categorization for what he believes. Many scholars speculate that this is because he was unable to openly state what he truly thought in his day. To get the full picture of what Spinoza thought, it is necessary to read everything and piece together his true meaning, like assembling a puzzle; this ties in to point #2.

Spinoza did not believe in a god at all, not even a pantheistic creator who kickstarted the universe and left it to its own devices. By this definition, he is properly categorized as an atheist, although that is something he denied. This becomes clear when you take into account the following considerations:

(1) the prejudices of the theologians; for I know that they are the greatest obstacle to men being able to apply their minds to philosophy, so I am busy exposing them and removing them from the minds of the more prudent;
(2) the opinion the common people have of me; they never stop accusing me of atheism, and I have to rebut this accusation as well as I can; and
(3) my desire to defend in every way the freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think; the preachers here suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness.

~ Letter 30 to Henry Oldenburg in 1665

Why he denied being an atheist, I can only speculate. My personal feeling, based on reading him thoroughly, is that he had actually convinced himself that his ‘philosophical love of God’ (read: fully grasping the nature of the universe and our place within it) did not rise to the level of atheism. He also disparages atheists in his writings as immoral, which also played a role in his denials.

The treatise Spinoza referred to was his Theological-Political Treatise, the foundational document of modern secular democracy. As Spinoza notes in points #1 and #3, the TTP was aimed at knocking the clergy off their pedestals, to remove their ability to hinder scientific and intellectual progress, and to advocate for a secular democracy that guaranteed unrestricted freedom of thought.

Spinoza’s influence on later political philosophers was immense, and his treatise lit the fuse that culminated in the American and French revolutions—leading to the first two secular republics—a century later.

Spinoza expert, Professor Steven Nadler, wrote a biography of the TTP: A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age. Nadler makes two key points about Spinoza and his call for secularism. The first, many often refer to Spinoza as a secular Jew, but his secularism was entirely independent:

If anything, he was the most prominent early modern model of the secular individual, someone for whom religious affiliation or heritage played no role whatsoever in his self-identity.

Due to Spinoza’s revolutionary vision for secular democracy, he is truly deserving of the title: ‘freethinking hero.’

Jason Sylvester
Diogenes of Mayberry

Public domain
Volunteer Opportunities
AAI has opportunities for volunteers in many countries. To apply, go to: https://www.atheistalliance.org/volunteer/
To be considered for a Directorship apply here: www.atheistalliance.org/apply-aai-board-role/

Do you have the write stuff?

Would you like to write for Secular World Magazine or our Website? Send submissions to: secularworld@atheistalliance.org

Join us

AAI’s vision is a secular world where public policy, scientific inquiry and education are not influenced by religious beliefs, but based upon sound reasoning, rationality and evidence, and where individuals who lack religious beliefs enjoy free speech, freedom of association and freedom to participate in public life.

To join, go here: www.atheistalliance.org/aai-membership/