

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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October 25, 2019

The Honorable Samuel Brownback
Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom
Office of International Religious Freedom
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Re: Speak out against Italy's recent blasphemy conviction

Dear Mr. Ambassador:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and our national membership of 30,000 Americans. FFRF is dedicated to upholding the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and educating the nation about non-theism.

Ambassador, we are aware that you have repeatedly spoken against blasphemy laws in Islamic majority countries, including in the 2019 Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Unfortunately, that report did not list Italy as a country of concern for religious freedom. This is despite the fact that the Commission's 2017 report on blasphemy laws had placed Italy in the most severe category of countries with blasphemy laws that conflict with international human rights protections.

That oversight is unfortunate, and the 2017 report was prescient, given the fact that an Italian court this week has enforced the country's blasphemy law. Distinguished Italian photographer Oliviero Toscani was convicted of "insulting religion" and fined €4,000 for (correctly) pointing out that a Catholic Church's violent imagery would be disturbing to an alien visitor just arriving on our planet, making the church look worse than a masochistic club:

"Imagine to be an alien who has just landed. You enter in a beautiful Catholic church, without knowing anything about religion. You enter and see a bloodied man hanged and nailed to a cross, an altar with naked babies flying, Saint Bernard without the skin . . . I believe that a masochist club wouldn't be such at the upfront."

Many of us in the United States and around the world share Mr. Toscani's views. (It is easy to forget, growing up in a Christian-majority society, that Christianity is

fundamentally based on vicarious redemption through human sacrifice. Catholics should have a sense of humor about this fact rather than trying to silence it.) Blasphemy laws are a relic of the Dark Ages that violate basic fundamental human rights of free speech and religious freedom. They have no place in a modern, free society. The United States has recognized this and should be consistent in its condemnation of blasphemy laws.

We ask that you speak out against this Italian law and its enforcement, and ensure that the Ambassadorship for International Freedom extend its objections to blasphemy laws even-handedly and beyond Islamic theocracies. They must apply equally to Christian-majority countries such as Italy. True religious freedom by definition must include the right to dissent. No one should ever face government-imposed penalties for speaking against a religion, a sect, its dogma, or its imagery.

As you know, more than 70 countries across many regions maintain these archaic rules, in some instances punishable by life imprisonment and death, as well as often facing violent extrajudicial retribution from other citizens.

The existence of Italy's disgraceful blasphemy law gives Islamist-based countries and regimes an excuse to justify their own blasphemy laws. I personally attended the July Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, and was moved by the speech given by Shaan Taseer, the son of the late Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer, who was assassinated for supporting Asia Bibi, the illiterate Christian woman who had faced death for blasphemy. Mr. Taseer personally prevailed on you at that conference, even directing his remarks specifically to you, to speak out against Pakistan's blasphemy law and the persecution of many Pakistanis. As he noted, "There are 200 more Asia Bibis" and he urged you and the U.S. government not to let "complacency set in." Taseer noted these other victims of Pakistan's blasphemy laws include the elderly, children, the poor, mentally and physically challenged, most of whom are illiterate and in jail without a trial or due process. To quote him: "These are the foot soldiers fighting for the world that we believe in, for a new and progressive society free of religious persecution."

As FFRF has long pointed out, blasphemy is a victimless crime, but blasphemy laws create many innocent victims. We urge you to condemn the Italian law and ruling in the name of all the "foot soldiers" around the world fighting for freedom.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President
Freedom From Religion Foundation