



## A Call to Abolish the Death Penalty for Offences Against Religion

We, the undersigned, take the position that:

1. “Offences against religion” are defined as any acts deemed to insult or offend religious morals, including, but are not limited to, apostasy (abandoning one’s religion), blasphemy (insulting a religion), and proselytising (encouraging someone to leave their religion). In Islam, *riddah* رردة or *irtidad* ارتداد encompasses the modern conception of offences such as apostasy, blasphemy, and proselytising, and in this statement, the term *riddah* is used to refer to offences against religion. In 12 countries, the death penalty remains a legal possibility for offences against religion. Where codified legislation exists, provisions are often vague, ambiguous, and broad, and they have been directed against political opponents, minority groups, progressive scholars, and activists whose lives are under threat because of these laws. Even in countries where the death penalty is not carried out, its mere prescription continues to stifle religious freedom, and in some cases creates an environment in which people feel entitled to engage in mob violence against persons accused of offending religious morals.
2. In jurisdictions where the death penalty is a legal possibility for offences against religion, the punishment, whether codified or not, is justified on the basis of the Sharia. However, the Holy Qur’an is clear: “there shall be no coercion in matters of faith” (2:256). Therefore, any text of the Hadith (record of the sayings and traditions of the Prophet’s tradition) that indicated that the death penalty should be imposed for apostates must be interpreted using a contextualist approach, as the Holy Qur’an does not impose the death penalty for *riddah*. Many contemporary Islamic scholars have offered new interpretations that reconcile the spirit of the Holy Qu’an and certain text of the Hadith. They argue that *riddah* in the context of the Prophet’s tradition 15 centuries ago was seen as treason or a betrayal of the Muslim communities. In other words, renouncing Islam was not framed as a religious transgression, but a political one that justified the application of the death penalty. This egalitarian approach to the authority of religious texts in Islam has led to the rich plurality of Qur’anic exegeses, Hadith understanding, and schools of jurisprudence (*madhahib*) which we have today.
3. In line with modern interpretations of Islam, *riddah* should no longer be a capital offence. People are no longer categorised by their religious background. The old categorisation of Muslims and *ahl dhimmah* (non-Muslims living in an Islamic state with legal protection) has been replaced by the concept of citizenship (*al-Muwathinun*) in the Constitutions adopted by some Muslim states. Today, non-Muslims have the same rights as Muslims, including the right to practice or not to practice a religion, to promote a religion, to change one’s religion, and to not be persecuted for one’s religious beliefs.
4. Scholars of Islamic studies need to come together in promoting, protecting, and maintaining religious freedom. Different interpretations among scholars are to be acknowledged and appreciated. However, we must reject the classic formalistic interpretation that cannot be reconciled with the modern understanding of Islamic law. More importantly, we must refuse the



politicisation of religion by governments, and demand the fostering of harmony among all citizens, regardless of their religious background. Indeed, the spirit of the Holy Qur'an endorses both religious freedom and a respect for life: "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion" (109:6); and "If anyone killed a person, it would be as if he killed all mankind, and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind" (5:32).

5. The incitement of hatred against religious groups is a legitimate topic for legislation. However, personal opinions or statements of religious disbelief should not be criminalised. Guaranteeing religious freedom while retaining the death penalty for such behaviour is not true religious freedom. We urge governments to abolish the death penalty for offences against religion in their legislation as an urgent first step.

Click [here](#) to sign.

Signed:

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