

### **Definition**

“Apostasy is the act of giving up your religious or political beliefs and leaving a religion or a political party.” (Cambridge Dictionary).

The right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a fundamental right of every human being. As stated in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, FoRB “includes freedom to change his religion or belief”, which includes in turn the right to leave religion entirely and the right to freely identify with whatever label fits for the individual – including atheist, humanist, agnostic, etc. (from Humanist International).

Historically, many empires that have embraced a state religion developed apostasy laws that criminalised leaving the religion like Sassanid, Roman or Arab empires. The Justinian Code of Roman Empire, after it embraced Christianity as the state religion, criminalised leaving Christianity. Later on, this code went on to form the basis of law in most of Western Europe during the Middle Ages and so apostasy was similarly persecuted to varying degrees in Europe throughout this period and into the early modern period. This has changed after the fall of feudal system and birth of modern nation states that brought the ideas of citizenship, human rights, political and civil rights and equality before the law.

Currently, around the world there are around 20 countries that criminalise apostasy, out of which 12 have capital punishment prescribed, and the rest have prison sentences. These countries normally have established state religions and their law is heavily influenced by religious teachings.

### **Viewpoints**

#### **Viewpoint 1 - Against the right of freedom of religion**

Laws that criminalise apostasy are clearly against the human right of freedom of religion or belief. Freedom of religion means the right to hold on to a religious belief, which inevitably includes the right to change it if. Apostasy laws only allow you to choose one religion in your lifetime which clearly is not freedom at all.

#### **Viewpoint 2 - Freedom of expression is not absolute**

The right of freedom of religion is absolute, but the right of expression is not absolute and needs to be qualified and balanced with the freedom of religion. This means that how we express our religious identity or reject it is not absolute and not a fundamental human right. Choosing a religion is a human right, but leaving it publicly in a country that has established religion is a political act that is similar to rebellion towards the state. Apostasy laws are a good tool to prevent disorder and are justified restriction of freedom of expression.

### **Viewpoint 3 - Promotes intolerance**

Apostasy laws create a culture of intolerance and hatred towards freethinkers and diverging views inside the same religious tradition. There are numerous cases in the countries that keep apostasy laws where a vigilante mob has attacked, persecuted and often killed someone who would be a suspect of committing an apostasy even before any legal proceeding.

### **Viewpoint 4 - Individual right does not trump over collective right**

In my religion, abandoning your religion is a punishable crime. Why should the individual have more right of freedom of religion than the whole collective? If the country is made of the majority of people of my faith, and we have established religion and laws influenced by the majority of people's deeply held religious beliefs, then leaving that religion publicly will have negative impact on the collective and might influence others to do the same. It is the role of the state to prevent that and protect our religion.

### **Viewpoint 5 - Apostasy laws are oppressive tools to deal with critical thinking**

Apostasy laws are just an oppressive tool to deal with any form of dissent and criticism, and are inextricably linked with the concept of heresy (promoting false teachings). People with diverging views inside the same religious tradition (usually more liberal or modernist) are often accused of falling out of scope of traditionally defined religious identity and are proclaimed to be apostates without them even ever actually abandoning the religion, they are just holding a "false belief" by the standard of the establishment. This allows those in power who define who is a believer and who is not to stomp on any progressive thinking inside the same tradition.

### **Viewpoint 6 - Majority has more rights than the minorities**

Why should there be equality and freedom for all religions or worldviews? If a country has a majority of people of the same religion than those people have more rights than others. This means they have the right to protect their religion and defend it against negative influences from the inside and from the outside. For this reason, criminalising abandoning of your faith is justified law that protects the majority in the society and they have all the right to do so.