

## Lesson Plan – Exploring Secularism

KS5 lesson 3 - What are apostasy laws?

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| <b>Background</b>          | Students should read the Stimulus 1 with the definition of apostasy and apostasy law and the current situation in the world. This is followed by Stimulus 2 which looks at different viewpoints about why we should or should not have apostasy laws in place today. In the exercise part, students should reflect and discuss on the viewpoints and evaluate whether apostasy laws are detrimental or positive in our modern liberal democracies.  |
| <b>Subjects</b>            | <b>Religious Studies</b>  |
| <b>Links to curriculum</b> | <p><b>OCR: A LEVEL Specification RELIGIOUS STUDIES</b></p> <p><b>Developments in religious thought (03-07)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Significant social and historical developments in theology or religious thought including the challenges of <b>secularisation</b>, science, responses to pluralism and diversity within traditions, migration, the changing roles of men and women, feminist and liberationist approaches.</li><li>• Two themes related to the relationship between religion and society, for example: the relationship between religious and other forms of identity; religion, equality and discrimination; religious freedom; the political and social influence of religious institutions; religious tolerance, respect and recognition and the ways that religious traditions view other religions and non-religious worldviews and their truth claims.</li></ul> <p><b>Content of Developments in Islamic thought (04)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tolerance: tolerance of non-Muslims according to the Qur'an</li><li>• Religious freedom in Muslim society: Anti-apostasy laws in Islam and their contemporary interpretation.</li></ul> <p><b>WJEC: A LEVEL Specification Religious Studies</b></p> <p><b>(Unit 3: A Study of Religion) Option A: Christianity</b></p> <p><b>Theme 2: Significant historical developments in religious thought</b></p> <p>Challenges from pluralism and diversity within a tradition:</p> <p>Difference between religious pluralism and tolerance of religious diversity; the exclusivist and inclusivist views expressed in the Christian Bible.</p> |

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|                          | <p><b>AQA: A LEVEL Specification Religious Studies Religious pluralism</b></p> <p>Freedom of religion as a human right in European law and religious pluralism as a feature of modern secular states; the influence of this context on Christian/Hindu/Muslim thought.</p>  |
| <b>Key Question</b>      | <b>What are apostasy laws?</b>  |
| <b>Learning Outcomes</b> | <p>Students should demonstrate they can:</p> <p><b>Basic</b></p> <p><i>Explain what apostasy is.</i></p> <p><i>Explain what apostasy laws are.</i></p> <p><i>Explain the secularist position on apostasy laws.</i></p> <p><b>Advanced</b></p> <p><i>Evaluate arguments for and against apostasy laws from a range of liberal and conservative positions.</i></p>  |
| <b>Stimulus</b>          | <p><b>Stimulus 1 - What is apostasy and what are apostasy laws?</b></p> <p>“Apostasy is the act of giving up your religious or political beliefs and leaving a religion or a political party.” (Cambridge Dictionary).</p> <p>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 <b>the right to leave religion entirely</b> and the right to freely identify with whatever label fits for the individual – including atheist, humanist, agnostic, etc. (from Humanist International).</p> <p>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</p> |

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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.

#### **Stimulus 2**

##### **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.

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|                 | <p><b>Viewpoint 4 Individual right does not trump over collective right</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p><b>Viewpoint 5 Apostasy laws are oppressive tools to deal with critical thinking</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p><b>Viewpoint 6 Majority has more rights than the minorities</b></p> <p>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.</p> |
| <b>Exercise</b> | <p><b>Discuss stimulus 1:</b></p> <p><i>Q1. Why do you think many countries in the past had apostasy laws? What was its purpose?</i></p> <p><i>Q2. Why do you think the majority of the countries do not have apostasy laws anymore?</i></p>  |

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|                        | <p><i>Q3. Why do you think some countries still hold onto apostasy laws today?</i></p> <p><i>Q4. Is prison or even death sentence an appropriate punishment for apostasy?</i></p> <p><b>Discuss stimulus 2:</b></p> <p><i>Q1. Rank the viewpoints from strongest to weakest. Why have you chosen that one to be the strongest or weakest?</i></p> <p><i>Q2. In viewpoint 2, does apostasy law promote good order in society and prevents disorder? Why do you think so?</i></p> <p><i>Q3. In viewpoint 2, is leaving your religion a political act that threatens the order of the society?</i></p> <p><i>Q4. In viewpoint 3, do you know any contemporary examples of persecution of apostates?</i></p> <p><i>Q5. In viewpoint 3, why do you think some people would take the justice into their own hands and persecute apostates?</i></p> <p><i>Q6. In viewpoint 4, do you think the role of the state should be to protect the religion of the majority?</i></p> <p><i>Q7. In viewpoint 4, are the rights of the collective (majority) more important than the minority?</i></p> <p><i>Q8. In viewpoint 4, is it justified to protect the majority from the individual in such a way?</i></p> <p><i>Q9. In viewpoint 5, who do you think defines who is an apostate and who is not? Based on what?</i></p> <p><i>Q10. In viewpoint 5, are apostasy laws promoting pluralism and diversity? Why?</i></p> <p><i>Q11. Decide in pairs, are apostasy laws going against human rights?</i></p> <p><i>Q12. Decide in pairs, what should we do with the fact that some countries still have apostasy laws?</i></p> <p><i>Q13. Which viewpoints do you think are secularist views? Why?</i></p> |
| <b>Take it Further</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Research the working of the groups that give help and support to people who left their faith and are socially stigmatised by their families and communities (Faith to faithless UK).</li><li>2. Research what current ongoing cases of apostasy are happening in the world.</li></ol>  |

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| <p><b>What do secularists think about apostasy laws?</b></p> | <p><b>Viewpoints 1,3 and 5 are secularist views on apostasy laws</b><br/><b>Viewpoints 2,4 and 6 are non-secularist views on apostasy laws</b></p> <p>Secularists hold that there should be a separation of the religion and the state, and advocate for freedom of and from religion and equality of belief and disbelief. This means that any state that hold onto apostasy laws fails on all the criteria of a secular state that promotes equality and freedoms. Firstly, apostasy is a theological concept and comes from a religious law. Secondly, it promotes inequality of religion or belief by differentiating between “believers” and “disbelievers” where the other one is punished for not conforming with the religiously defined criteria for “believers”. Lastly, it promotes restriction on the fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief by punishing those that do not comply.</p> |
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