

EU adopts guidelines on freedom of religion or belief

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This week, the European Union's Council of Foreign Affairs adopted a report offering [guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief](#). The aim of the guidelines is to promote the fundamental human right to freedom of religion or belief in countries beyond EU borders.

In its report, the EU proclaims impartiality on religion and belief, and commits to protect people's rights rather than any particular belief system; where, "international human rights law protects individuals, not Religion or Belief *per se*". It notes that the free exercise of religion and belief "directly contributes to democracy, development, rule of law, peace and stability", and makes specific mention of the need to protect those who change or leave their religion and those with non-theistic or atheistic beliefs.

The guidelines also explicitly oppose any religious justification to restrictions on other fundamental rights and to violence against women, children, members of religious minorities and persons on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity. They point out that there are some practices, associated with the manifestation of a religion or belief (or perceived as such), which may constitute violations of human rights. The fact that the right to freedom of religion or belief is sometimes invoked to justify violations of other human rights is an EU concern; it states that, whilst it is "committed to the robust protection and promotion of freedom of religion or belief in all parts of the world", such justifications can never legitimise the undermining of human rights

During the original drafting of the guidelines in the European Parliament, there had been reference to a right to conscientious objection in relation to "morally sensitive matters"; this was eventually deleted, instead restricting conscientious objection to military service only.

In its promotion and protection of the freedom of religion or belief abroad, the EU is strong on freedom of speech; it opposes any attempt to criminalize freedom of expression on religious grounds, and remarks that the right to freedom of religion or belief does not include the right to have a religion or a belief that is immune from criticism or ridicule. It also notes that laws criminalizing blasphemy in non-EU states should be repealed.

However, as the European Humanist Federation (EHF) [has pointed out](#), whilst these guidelines are forceful on criticizing blasphemy laws abroad, it should be noted that blasphemy is still outlawed in some EU member states. The EHF has urged the EU to "adopt a coherent position on blasphemy and to encourage Member States to abolish blasphemy laws", as has been previously recommended by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Venice Commission.

Also see: [New EU guidelines on religion and belief make plain that no religion is entitled to special rights](#)

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