

Lawyer who defended Asia Bibi named Secularist of the Year

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A lawyer who defended a woman who spent eight years on death row for blasphemy in Pakistan has been named as the [Secularist of the Year](#) for 2019.

Saif ul Malook, who defended Asia Bibi, was awarded the National Secular Society's annual prize at its [Secularism 2019](#) conference on Saturday.

The award presented by the human rights barrister and NSS honorary associate Geoffrey Robertson QC.

Asia Bibi was sentenced to death by hanging for allegedly insulting the Islamic prophet Muhammad in November 2010. Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered her to be freed in October 2018. It upheld her acquittal in the face of a petition urging its quashing in January.

Malook represented Asia Bibi from 2014 until the end of the process. He has faced [death threats](#) from Islamists in response, as have the judges who ordered her to be freed.

He is now [handling](#) another blasphemy case involving Shaghuftha Kausar, who faces a possible death sentence in Pakistan over a text message that allegedly insulted Muhammad. Both Asia Bibi and Shaghuftha Kausar are Christians.

Saif ul Malook said: "Thanks to the National Secular Society for recognising my efforts to secure the acquittal of Asia Bibi.

"To fight blasphemy cases in Pakistan is putting one's own and families' lives at risk. The moral support from organisations such as the NSS has given me the courage to take the case of Shaghuftha Kausar – another Christian woman on death row on blasphemy charges.

"I assure you that I plan to continue my mission in providing legal aid to all blasphemy victims even in future regardless to the threat to my life."

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "Saif ul Malook showed courage that few of us would be capable of summoning when he decided to defend Asia Bibi. Without his willingness to risk everything to stand up for her, the death sentence she faced for so long might have been carried out.

"His award should also stand as a testament to the many brave people who have defended Asia Bibi or challenged Pakistan's cruel blasphemy laws – some of whom have paid with their lives.

"And it should serve as a reminder that blasphemy laws are a theocratic outrage against freedom of expression wherever they exist. We urge the UK government to learn from the Asia Bibi case and do everything it can to hold countries which retain these laws to account for their violations of basic human rights."

At the conference, which focused on 'reclaiming religious freedom', the NSS also gave a lifetime achievement award to its former president Barbara Smoker.

The conference also saw Rachel Laser, the CEO of [Americans United for Separation of Church And State](#), deliver a keynote address on religious freedom in America in the era of President Trump.

It also saw speeches and discussions on religious freedom's relationship with freedom of expression, children's rights and religious orthodoxy.

The NSS is planning to upload video footage of the event in due course.

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