OPEN LETTER to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

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cc: Ban Ki-moon (bkm@un.org)

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In re: Application of apostasy and blasphemy laws

Your Excellency,

We wish first to congratulate you on your appointment as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. We wish you all success in encouraging compliance by UN members with their international human rights obligations. We particularly welcome the appointment as High Commissioner of one who, coming from the Middle East and an Islamic society, understands the particular challenges of implementing human rights protections in the region.

We are addressing you about the fact that 1.3 billion Muslims do not have the freedom to change their religion, an internationally guaranteed human right. As you know, individuals who try to leave Islam are often faced with torture, imprisonment and even death. Former Muslims are not allowed to exist in Islamic states.

This in contradiction to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes freedom of thought, conscience and belief, including the right to change one’s belief. United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Professor H.
Bielefeldt has emphasized that there is no religious freedom without the freedom to change one’s belief.

In over 10 Islamic states the punishment for apostasy and blasphemy is death. In over 26 countries it is illegal for an individual to change his or her religion. They includes countries like Malaysia, Jordan and Morocco, which are considered moderate Islamic countries.

This map shows where apostasy and blasphemy laws are applied:

Allow us to illustrate our concerns with several examples:

- **In Jordan**, in March 2008 relatives who then reported him to the authorities savagely beat Jordanian Christian Muhammad Abbad Abbad, who had converted from Islam fifteen years before. He was taking to the Sweilih Islamic court without legal representation and charged with apostasy. Sentenced to one week of imprisonment for contempt of court, Muhammad and his immediate family fled the country. On April 22, 2008, the court found Muhammad guilty of apostasy. It annulled his marriage and declared him to be without any religious identity. Despite the fact the family had left the country, Jordan issued arrests orders against them. As of November 2010, the family remained in another location. (Persecuted, the global assault on Christians, 2013,147).

- **In Sudan**, Meriam Yahia was sentenced to death and 100 lashes for leaving Islam, accused of apostasy and adultery by the judiciary. During her imprisonment she delivered her second baby while in chains.

- **In Pakistan**, Asia Bibi is accused of blasphemy. Her appeal was just rejected and her death sentence was upheld. She has been in prison since 2009. She is the mother of five children. For more information see:

- Shahzad Masih and Shama Bibi, a Christian husband and his 4 month pregnant wife were beaten and then burned to death by a mob of angry Muslims at a brick kiln in Kasur, **Pakistan**. This took place on Tuesday, November 4, 2014, for alleged “blasphemy.” They had four children. For more information see:

- **In Iran**, Saeed Abedini has been in prison for two years for apostasy. Abedini was sentenced for having "undermined the Iranian government by creating a network of Christian house churches and ... attempting to sway Iranian youth away from Islam.” For more information see:

- **In Egypt**, Mohamed Higazy has been sentenced to five years imprisonment accusation that Hegazy was involved in “activity that could damage the public interests of the state.” For the last five years he has been trying to change his religion in his identity papers, but without success. For more information see:
• In Malaysia, Mrs. Lena Joy “Azlina binti Jailani” was forced to leave the country in order to change her religion from Islam to Christianity and to be able to marry a Christian. It is illegal for a woman of Muslim descent to marry a non-Muslim. For more information see:
  http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/05/30/us-malaysia-religion-ruling-idUSSP20856820070530

Excellency,

Those who have left Islam face threats, not only in Islamic states, but also in other societies, including those of Europe, where authorities do not offer sufficient protection from threats; many are forced into hiding.

We plead with you, High Commissioner, to address this tragic problem as a priority of your term in office; to give 1.3 billion Muslims the freedom to change their religion.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you to discuss how your office and other UN institutions can work with civil society to address these issues.

This letter has been initiated by the nongovernmental organizations Set My People Free and the Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe and endorsed by others as well.

Yours sincerely,

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Aaron Rhodes, President, Forum for Religious Freedom - Europe
Thierry Becourt, President, CAP Freedom of Conscience / Liberté de Conscience
Willy Fautré, Chairman, Human Rights Without Frontiers
Morgana Sythove, Stichting - Foundation Pagan Federation International
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