



## **PEN INTERNATIONAL ENDORSES IRISH PEN CENTRE'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST IRELAND'S BLASPHEMY LAWS**

27 April 2011

PEN International strongly supports the repeal of Ireland's Defamation Act of 2009 and an amendment to the Irish Constitution's requirement that blasphemy be prohibited under Irish law.

PEN is an organization whose members pledge to promote good understanding and mutual respect between nations and to do their utmost to dispel race, class and national hatreds. We deplore the distrust, disparagement or denigration of any individual based on her or his religious beliefs. We condemn discrimination, threats, harassment, or violence against individuals based on their religion and support national and international prohibitions against such actions. PEN and its member centers are engaged in activities and programs around the globe aimed at reducing religious hatreds and suspicions in the post-September 11, 2001 world.

*"We are adamantly opposed to criminalizing speech considered insulting or offensive to religions" states PEN International President, John Ralston Saul. "Religions are systems of ideas, embodied in institutions and sometimes states. As such, they cannot lie outside the bounds of questioning, criticism and description – the whole terrain of free expression".* Insult and blasphemy laws such as Ireland's Defamation Act of 2009 clearly run counter to the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and other international free expression protections. Moreover, they do little to advance the goal of promoting respect.

For the past several years, PEN has worked successfully with other human rights organizations to reverse efforts by a number of nations within the United Nations to promulgate new restrictions on speech considered defamatory to religions. Many governments have supported the preservation of existing free expression protections and opposed the spread of blasphemy laws; among these is the government of Ireland, which has voted against resolutions that would require countries to introduce laws prohibiting religious defamation.

*“That Ireland would at the same time have passed legislation banning blasphemy is ironic, to say the least,”* notes Marian Botsford Fraser, Chair of PEN International’s Writers in Prison Committee. *“But it an irony with consequences: Pakistan’s ambassador to the U.N. recently cited Ireland’s blasphemy law in support of restrictions on defamation of religion.”*

At a meeting of the Writers in Prison Committee of PEN International in Brussels in March, 2011, PEN Centres unanimously endorsed support for repeal of Ireland’s Defamation Act. Also in March, 2011, the UN Human Rights Council unanimously passed a resolution in support of the rights of individuals to practice their religion.

PEN has been grateful for the support of the Irish government in voting against international restrictions on the practice of religion. We are confident that it shares our goal of protecting and promoting freedom of expression as a fundamental human right. In light of that common goal, we urge immediate repeal of the Defamation Act of 2009 and strongly endorse a constitutional amendment to remove the requirement to ban blasphemy from Ireland’s constitution.

For further information, please contact:

PEN International, Frank Geary, Interim Executive Director. Tel. +44 20 7405 7422, email: [frank.geary@pen-international.org](mailto:frank.geary@pen-international.org)

Irish PEN, Joe Armstrong, Chair. Tel. 00 353 46 9249285 / 00 353 87 966 1960, email: [joearmstrong@eircom.net](mailto:joearmstrong@eircom.net)

## **NOTES to EDITORS**

**PEN International** celebrates literature and promotes freedom of expression. Founded in 1921, our global community of writers now spans more than 100 countries. Our programmes, campaigns, events and publications connect writers and readers wherever they are in the world.

[www.pen-international.org](http://www.pen-international.org)