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Atheist Afghan granted religious asylum in UK

An Afghan citizen has been granted asylum in the UK for religious reasons - because he is an atheist

BBC news (14.01.2014) - The man fled to the UK from a conflict involving his family in Afghanistan in 2007, aged 16, and was allowed to stay in the UK until 2013.

He was brought up a Muslim, but during his time in the UK became an atheist, his legal team said.

They said he would face persecution and possibly a death sentence if he was returned to Afghanistan.

The team was from the University of Kent's Law School which offers legal services through its Kent Law Clinic.

'Entitled to protection'

They believe it is the first time a person has been granted asylum in the UK on the basis of their atheism.

Lawyers lodged a submission to the Home Office under the 1951 Refugee Convention which aims to protect people from persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

They said the man's return to Afghanistan could result in a death sentence under Sharia law as an apostate - someone who has abandoned their religious faith - unless he remained discreet about his atheist beliefs.

But because every aspect of daily life and culture in Afghanistan is permeated by Islam living discreetly would be virtually impossible, they said.

The case was prepared by second-year law student Claire Splawn under the supervision of clinic solicitor Sheona York.

Ms Splawn said: "We argued that an atheist should be entitled to protection from persecution on the grounds of their belief in the same way as a religious person is protected."

'Proud history'

Ms York added: "The decision represents an important recognition that a lack of religious belief is in itself a thoughtful and seriously-held philosophical position."

The British Humanist Association said the case may well have a claim to be a first in being based on non-religious beliefs.

Chief executive Andrew Copson said: "Freedom of belief for humanists, atheists and other non-religious people is as important as freedom of belief for the religious but it is

too often neglected by Western governments who focus too narrowly on the rights of Christians abroad, as we have seen recently.

"It is great to see Britain showing a lead in defending the human rights of the non-religious in the same way.

"Increasingly in the last two years our Foreign Office is speaking up for the rights of non-religious people abroad - to now see the Home Office extending the UK's protection to non-religious refugees within our borders is something we can all be proud of."

The Home Office said: "The UK has a proud history of granting asylum to those who need it and we consider every application on a case-by-case basis."
