

United Nations Human Rights Council, 37th session
26 February - 23 March 2018
Item 3 ID - Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
Speaker: Humanists UK: Dr David Harvey

Thank you, Mr President.

First, we want to pay tribute to former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, and founder of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Asma Jahangir, who died earlier this year. Humanists will always be particularly grateful to her for insisting that the rights of the non-religious be defended just as vigorously as the rights of religious people. But of course her work fighting for human rights and democracy wherever they were threatened was and is appreciated by all.

We welcome the most recent report from the Special Rapporteur, and share his concern at the pervasive discrimination against the non-religious exercised in many States, particularly those with official or favoured religions. This discrimination takes the form of anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy laws in a number of States, which persist despite the consistent recommendations to repeal from successive Special Rapporteurs. As Dr Shaheed notes, such laws are 'incompatible with the ICCPR' and are frequently used to target humanists and non-believers specifically.

While anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy laws run counter to freedom of religion and belief *explicitly*, false invocations of 'religious liberty' can be just as problematic. In the UK, this is currently manifested in the appeals to religious freedom made by the proprietors of some religious schools when seeking to justify intolerance towards LGBT people, for instance.¹ Elsewhere around the world, the pervasive use of 'conscience clauses' dangerously confuses the right to hold and express one's beliefs with a right to arbitrarily discriminate against people on grounds including gender, sexual orientation, and religion or belief too. Current controversies surrounding the provision of sexual health and abortion services to women in the United States are a troubling example of this.²

We therefore encourage all States to heed the advice of Dr Shaheed and his predecessors in adopting a 'deep grounding of secularity based on human rights' when dealing with religion and belief. At the very least this should involve the repeal of all anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy laws, but it ought also to entail proper restrictions on religious behaviour that unjustifiably infringes the rights of others.

Thank you.

¹ <https://humanism.org.uk/2018/02/07/humanists-uk-responds-to-government-rse-and-pshe-consultation/>

² E.g. see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/28093756>