

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 40th Session
(25 February-22 March 2019)
Item 3 ID - Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
Speaker Humanists UK representative, Rachel Taggart-Ryan**

Thank you Mr President.

Freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression are fundamental human rights as laid out in Articles 18 and 19 of the UDHR. Paramount to these rights is the freedom to change one's beliefs and to impart and receive information without fear of prosecution.

We therefore welcome the report from the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, in particular its restating that legal restrictions on blasphemy are incompatible with human rights.

However, I note that the report does not address the recent judgment at the European Court of Human Rights that upheld blasphemy restrictions in Austria.¹ The judgment cited that freedom of expression can be curtailed if it causes offence to at least one religious adherent.

Regardless of the details of the case, this judgment sets a very bad precedent by suggesting that European states can decide there is a previously non-existent right to protection for 'religious sentiment'. This runs counter to the principles held by the UDHR, and to the spirit and purpose of human rights as an international enterprise.

We therefore encourage all States to heed the advice of Dr Shaheed and his predecessors to continue to progress towards repealing blasphemy laws.

Thank you.

¹ European Court of Human Rights, Case of E.S. V. Austria
<https://www.bailii.org/eu/cases/ECHR/2018/891.html>