

United Nations Human Rights Council, 41st Session (24 February to 20 March 2020)

Item 3: Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Speaker: British Humanist Association Representative, Tallulah Gordon¹

We welcome the Special Rapporteur's recommendation that states 'condemn expressions of hostility against ... LGBT+ persons including by religious figures or 'justified' with reference to religious belief', and to repeal laws criminalising blasphemy.

This February, the United States announced the launch of its new International Religious Freedom Alliance.² We are concerned that, despite its purpose being to promote freedom of religion or belief worldwide, a number of the Alliance's 27 members nonetheless continue to criminalise blasphemy, and some actively discriminate against minorities. In Poland, which is set to hold the next Ministerial on Religious Freedom this July, arrests and prosecutions for blasphemy are actively made.³ This includes the arrest in 2019 of activist Elzbieta Podlesna for displaying a poster of the Virgin Mary with a halo in the rainbow colours of the LGBT flag.⁴ It is unclear how Poland can form part of an alliance that seeks to promote freedom of religion or belief while simultaneously suppressing this right through its own blasphemy laws. More generally, the Polish Government frequently discriminates against LGBT people, women, and other minorities, and this is often done in the name of religion.

We are also concerned by the Alliance's repeated use of language that excludes the non-religious. This includes its use of the term 'religious freedom', rather than freedom of religion or belief. Any international partnership that seeks to promote freedom of religion or belief must acknowledge that this right applies equally to both the religious *and* non-religious.

We ask the Special Rapporteur if he agrees with our concerns, and how he will ensure that the new Alliance's work supports his aim to abolish blasphemy laws, including in its own member states? We also ask if he will work to ensure that it is fully inclusive of the non-religious?

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

² Humanists UK, 'UK signs up to US-led 'International Religious Freedom Alliance'', 6 February 2020.

<https://humanism.org.uk/2020/02/06/uk-signs-up-to-us-led-international-religious-freedom-alliance/>

³ Humanists International, 'Freedom of Thought Report 2019: Poland'.

<https://fot.humanists.international/countries/europe-eastern-europe/poland/>

⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'Poland: Arrest Over Virgin Mary's Rainbow Halo', 8 May 2019.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/08/poland-arrest-over-virgin-marys-rainbow-halo>