

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 47th Session (21 June to 29 July 2021)**  
**Item 3: Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based**  
**on sexual orientation and gender identity**  
**Speaker: Humanists UK Representative, Andrew Copson<sup>1</sup>**

This intervention is made jointly by Humanists UK and Ozanne Foundation.

We would like to express support for the recent statement by Dr Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, that religions or beliefs cannot be used as a defence to prevent the outlawing of so-called 'conversion therapy'.<sup>2</sup>

Conversion therapy is damaging to all those who undertake it. Depression, anxiety, self-harm, an increased risk of suicide, poor educational outcomes, relationship breakdown, and homelessness are among just some of the long-term impacts.<sup>3</sup> It has no scientific basis. And yet, it continues to take place. In Malaysia, conversion therapy is not only legalised, but endorsed by the Government.<sup>4</sup> The passing of a new law in Hungary to ban schools from talking about sexuality or transgender issues is typical of moves that will lead to the normalisation of prejudice and leave vulnerable young LGBT people at risk of conversion therapy.<sup>5</sup>

We champion the human right to freedom of religion or belief. But part of that right is that manifestations of beliefs can be legitimately restricted if they harm the rights of others. People experiencing distress over their sexual orientation or gender identity should not be exposed to coercive, medically discredited practices, even religious ones such as exorcisms and "healing prayer". Over 370 senior religious leaders, representing all major religions, from around the world recently also supported this position.<sup>6</sup>

We ask the Independent Expert what plans he has to work with Dr Ahmed Shaheed to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is not abused to maintain these harmful practices?

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Shaheed, 'There is no legal defence of LGBT+ conversions' *The Guardian*, 23 April 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/23/legal-defence-lgbt-conversions-sexuality-rights-belief>

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Shaheed, 'There is no legal defence of LGBT+ conversions' *The Guardian*, 23 April 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/23/legal-defence-lgbt-conversions-sexuality-rights-belief>

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Roberts, 'Malaysian government openly endorses gay conversion therapy' *The Independent*, 14 February 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/23/legal-defence-lgbt-conversions-sexuality-rights-belief>

<sup>5</sup> Orsolya Petocz, 'We must not accept the extreme, normalised homophobia happening in Hungary' *The Varsity*, 26 August 2019. <https://www.varsity.co.uk/opinion/17776>

<sup>6</sup> Harry Farley, 'Gay conversion therapy: Hundreds of religious leaders call for ban' *BBC News*, 16 December 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55326461>