

# Women and Equalities Committee

## Oral evidence: The Government's consultation on conversion therapy, HC 878

Wednesday 24 November 2021

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Elliot Colburn; Jackie Doyle-Price; Kim Johnson; Anne McLaughlin; Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

Questions 1 - 30

### Witnesses

I: Dr Sheikh Ramzy, Director, Oxford International Islamic Information Centre, and Imam, Oxford and Oxford Brookes Universities; Simon Calvert, Deputy Director for Public Affairs, The Christian Institute; Danny Webster, Head of Advocacy, Evangelical Alliance.

II: Jayne Ozanne, Director, Ozanne Foundation; Dr Ilias Trispiotis, Associate Professor in Human Rights Law, University of Leeds; Rev Dr Helen Hall, Associate Professor, Nottingham Law School.

Written evidence from witnesses:

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Sheikh Ramzy, Simon Calvert and Danny Webster.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's meeting of the Women and Equalities Committee and our evidence session on the Government's consultation around conversion therapy. Can I start by thanking you all for coming to give evidence today? It is hugely appreciated. We recognise that this is an area where there are some very strongly held and differing views. I am sure we could spend a great deal of time thoroughly investigating the whole range of views. I am very conscious that the Government consultation ends on 10 December, which is why we are doing two short evidence sessions this week and next week, so that this Committee can prepare a response to the Government ahead of that deadline.

I hope that today's session will draw out some of those key questions, but if, after the session, there is anything you wish to send us in writing, we would certainly be very pleased to receive it. Committee members will ask you questions in turn, but it will start with me. I will come to each of you in turn. Can I ask you to briefly introduce yourselves and, if relevant, your organisation?

**Simon Calvert:** Yes, I am Simon Calvert. I am deputy director for public affairs at the Christian Institute. I am a solicitor by training but non-practising. I have been doing this work for 25 years. The Christian Institute has 60,000 supporters across the UK, including 5,000 churches and church leaders. We do a lot of church-facing work and we do a lot of public-facing work.

**Dr Ramzy:** God bless you all and good morning to all. I am Dr Sheikh Ramzy. I am one of the representatives of Muslims in the United Kingdom. I am the imam of Oxford Brookes University and director of the Oxford Islamic Information Centre. I am a director of Justice 4 Rohingya, director of Oxford City of Sanctuary, a director of the Tell MAMA Thames Valley, a trustee of the Universal Peace Federation and of course a humble servant of humanity. I live to serve humanity, regardless of colour, background or gender.

**Danny Webster:** Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to give evidence this afternoon. I am Danny Webster. I am head of advocacy at the Evangelical Alliance. The Evangelical Alliance is a membership organisation across the UK with around 3,300 churches, 600 organisations and tens of thousands of individual members. We were founded in 1846. We are the oldest evangelical organisation in this country. We are part of the World Evangelical Alliance across the globe.

Q2 **Chair:** Sheikh, can I start with you? I appreciate that this is a big question, but, succinctly, can you outline to the Committee how you would define conversion therapy?

**Dr Ramzy:** In terms of defining conversion therapy, I have a different opinion myself. For example, if you had to define conversion therapy, I would call it a reversion and not a conversion, with all respect, because

conversion is a change into something; reversion is a return to something. If, for example, my son, with all respect of course, becomes one part of LGBT within two or three months or so, I would like to return him back, not convert him back. These are the things that have to be said. To me, conversion therapy, as you call it, is just praying and talking, for example.

**Simon Calvert:** It is easy to say what conversion therapy is not, and that is my concern today. If one friend at church asks another friend to pray with him, that is not conversion therapy. If a church leader teaches from the Bible the Christian position on sexual ethics, that is not conversion therapy. If parents lovingly and sensitively encourage their children to follow them in the footsteps of their faith, that is not conversion therapy.

My concern today is that there are some who want a ban that does encapsulate those things. It concerns me that there seems to be a drive, at least in some quarters, for a very theologically based ban that is targeting a particular belief. The Christian sexual ethic, the belief that the only right context for sex is marriage and that marriage can only be between a man and a woman, is a belief that is protected by human rights laws. We have to be very careful that we do not allow the understandable drive to address the issue of conversion therapy and people being coerced and abused to be twisted out of shape into a law that is actually used to target people for holding the Christian sexual ethic.

Q3 **Chair:** I am sure that later questions will draw some of this out. Is it your view that we should have a very prescriptive list of what it is and is not? What sort of detail should any Government proposal go into?

**Simon Calvert:** Do we talk about the proposals as they are from the Government? Is it helpful to get into that now?

Q4 **Chair:** It may be later. I just wondered in terms of the principle. Is it your view that we should have it set out absolutely clearly and defined in law what constitutes conversion therapy and what does not?

**Simon Calvert:** Since we are talking about a criminal law, it has to be very clear. If people are potentially to lose their livelihoods under any criminal law, we indeed have a human rights obligation to make sure that law is clear and that people can understand it. People have to understand when they are breaking it and when they are not breaking it. If the conversion therapy ban is clearly expressed and tightly targeted at behaviour that is coercive and abusive, that is a law that is going to receive a lot of support. If it is hazy—and there is a lack of detail in the Government proposals; I do want to get that in—that is a lot more concerning.

**Danny Webster:** The term “conversion therapy” is not a helpful one. It obscures more than it clarifies. It is overly broad. A lot of the treatment of it ranges from frankly quite harrowing abusive forced practices all the way through to, as Simon has said, potentially capturing consensual

prayer and pastoral care in churches. That range of activity is too broad to be categorised in a single way.

I would agree with Simon that legislative clarity is essential. People have to know whether they are going to be breaking the law. When definitions are tight, it enables the policies that flow from them to be made more easily. In regards to the current proposals, there are questions around consent and coercion. If it is a tight definition that is clearly set out, it is easy to see when consent has been given or when coercion has taken place.

One of the problems with the definitions in other jurisdictions, as well as the Government's current proposals, is that they have a tight definition to start with, for example changing someone's sexual orientation, and then they add in additional clauses. For example, the legislation in Victoria talks about "actions to repress or to reduce non-heterosexual attraction or sexual behaviour". This widens what is covered in that. That is potentially the area that captures church activity that we would be much more concerned about.

The current Government proposals talk about actions around remedying or controlling. That is not language that we would use in churches, but, if someone were encouraging someone else to abstain from sexual activity, could that be viewed as trying to control someone's sexual orientation? It is that breadth of actions that becomes unhelpful in the definitions. We would want to see real clarity in the definitions there.

**Dr Ramzy:** It is very important, and I agree with both my honourable gentlemen and brothers. In the realm of Islam, you cannot describe this as something called "conversion therapy" at all. We do not have anything at all in the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet, or the holy book that says, "You have to go this way or you have to go that way".

Therefore, what is not conversion therapy? For example, Lot or Sodom and Gomorrah are parts of my book. If I read it, am I doing conversion therapy? I can read it in centre. It is from my book. I can read it when somebody calls me. I can read it in the mosque. I can read it in my prayer. If I say, for example, "Sodom and Gomorrah, this says that; this says that", is it conversion therapy? It is very, very vague. I would have thought you have to go back to the drawing board.

Q5 **Chair:** Danny, coming back to you, is there a difference between therapy or practices that aim to change someone's sexual orientation as opposed to those practices that might aim to change somebody's gender identity? Is it helpful that we are discussing both in this consultation or should those be separate?

**Danny Webster:** The practices involved are different. It is possible to address both in one policy, but it becomes more complex. There are questions about change that is already happening. If someone is seeking to change their gender, the question is about how that applies in that context. There is talk about affirmative therapy being in one direction,

but does it apply in both directions? It makes the policy more challenging. It can be done. It is a task for the Government to see whether it is done effectively.

Our concern is about when churches are engaging with people who are exploring either their sexual orientation or their gender identity at someone's wish. If they choose, churches should be able to engage with them and should be able to provide counsel and support to them.

**Q6 Chair:** Simon, can I ask you a bit about talking therapies? I want to ask about the sorts of talking therapies that would be recognised by professional psychotherapy bodies and talking conversion therapies. Do you see that there is a distinction, a difference, or not?

**Simon Calvert:** You mean a distinction or a difference between talking therapies and what?

**Chair:** I mean between talking therapies that are recognised by professional psychotherapy bodies and talking therapies that are not and that might be practiced by religious bodies or any other organisation.

**Simon Calvert:** I am not a therapist and that is not my area of expertise. My area of expertise is the work of the church. What concerns me is that a lot of the discussion around this issue seems to be targeting ordinary harmless practices going on in churches. You will routinely see people refer to conversion therapy as including "corrective rape and prayer". They put those two things in the same sentence. That is routine, as if these are on the same spectrum.

You read activists from the Ban Conversion Therapy campaign saying things like, "Spiritual guidance is really just religious speak for conversion therapy". Some people say that churches offering pastoral care, sitting down and talking and preaching to people about their lifestyle does not constitute conversion therapy. I am sorry: it does. You even have people specifically calling for gentle non-coercive prayer to be caught by the ban. That cannot be right. Most people would not think that is fair.

It would also not be human rights-compliant. There are article 9 rights, and this Committee will be very conscious of that. There are article 9 rights not just to hold religious beliefs but to manifest them. There are rights for Christian organisations and churches as organisations to hold and manifest their beliefs and to order their own affairs. There are article 8 rights for families; there is an article 8 right to privacy. Therefore, there is a right for parents, within limits, to bring up their children as they see fit.

These are important rights that have to be kept in the mix. It is possible to devise a conversion therapy ban that is human rights-compliant, that does tackle genuine abuse and that does not get used to undermine the ordinary work of churches, but it is going to be difficult.

**Dr Ramzy:** With due respect, I second what Simon has said. What is important is that, as I said, Islam does not have conversion therapy.

People come and they talk to me. I will give you an example. They say, "Sheikh, my child is 12 years old and he is not praying. He wants to go out of Islam. He is not praying". I say, "Okay, son, do you know about prayer?" He says, "Yes". I say, "Do you know about your books?" He says, "Yes". I say to the parents, "Leave him. Let him go". He comes back. This example that I have said is something that happened. The boy was 12 years old. He was going with different people, who were not praying. Suddenly, in a year, he changed and he was going with all the Muslims, praying and going to the mosque, and he was happy. This happens.

Of course, we have to remember what we have here. We have parental choice on the therapy. I was head of education for the Muslim Council of Britain for a number of years. Of course, we talked with the Government and everything else. We found that if, for example, the mother or the parents decide they do not want to put the child in a class where they are talking about sex or whatever, they can take them to the library. This is happening. That is a parental choice. Again, I do not mind if they are 18 or 19. Going forward, there is no problem if they have tried to come and talk and they go.

Underage children sometimes get confused. Sometimes it is right, but we have to give them a chance and we have to talk to them as well. We cannot take away this right from the parents. We cannot say, "In school, you can take them from this class to that class, but, if he becomes LGBT, for example, you must not touch him; you must not talk to him. He can come to mosque".

What I would like to mention here is the family, the foundation of the family. This puts the child against the parents and the other children, which we see happening many times. Of course, this child will suffer. If they are 12, 13 or 14 years old, they will suffer. We do not want this child to suffer. For example, it is a ridiculous thing to have a five-year sentence and to give a limit. To whom? It is to the parents. If you put the parents or the father in prison, who is going to feed the children?

I looked at the proposal, and I thought that there is too much emotion going into it. It is too much about doing this and that and not thinking about what the consequences are for the child here or in other countries. It is very important that we be careful to keep the foundation of the family together. Of course, we see; we look. I have to say that I am totally against any therapy that is physical, whether that is FGM, which I am leading on in Oxfordshire, or other kinds of things. We do not have these. We have talking and praying.

I will give you an example about the five-times prayer. In the chapter of the Spider in the holy Koran, almighty God says, "Verily, pray. Stay in prayer. Your prayer keeps you from all bad things". At the moment, with due respect to my religion and the Koran, of course the Koran says that this is wrong. Besides that, it says that rape is wrong, thieving is wrong, drugs are wrong and too much alcohol is wrong. A lot of things that are

prohibited are wrong. Equally, people need to be looked after if their child goes and does something like this.

However, I will tell you one thing, madam Chair. People get confused, especially children. Children jump from here to there to there. I have always said on television, radio and everything that children should be children. Do not push them to adulthood. Let them pray. Let them play with each other. At seven or eight years old, boys and girls are jumping together without knowing anything. They are jumping together. Of course, they said, "Of course, we have to ask the girl if the father is touching her or whatever". I said, "Yes, but do not go too far. Let the children be children. Let them pray. Let them enjoy their childhood".

Give me one second to tell you about confusion, if you do not mind. My apologies if I am going on too much. In terms of confusion, I was in a place with 70 people, and they were talking about themselves. I do not know why they were talking about it; that is a different thing. Do you know what happened? A granny stood up and said, "I am confused about my sexuality. I am a granny. I have two daughters and six grandchildren. My husband died, and we were together for 40 or 50 years. I am 68 years old. I do not know what I am now". It is very important. People get confused, whether they are children or not. Therefore, we have to help them. If you see that they are in the right direction, God bless them; if they are not, we guide them. Who loves the children more than the parents? God bless you. Thank you for allowing me to speak.

**Danny Webster:** Just briefly, "talking therapies" has a fairly established definition in a health context. If that was the definition being brought into a conversion therapy context, it would be fairly clear how that would be applied. That is not how it is being applied. The Government have more or less made up the phrase "talking conversion therapies" to separate it out from other physical conversion therapies. In doing that, they have opened this up to a whole range of other activities that could be included.

We have discussed this with the Government Equalities Office to try to get some clarification as to what would be covered and what would not be covered. We provided some scenarios to them. One such scenario is a church leader who is speaking on issues of marriage and sexuality in a church context. If they speak from the front about that, is that a talking conversion therapy? We think probably not based on the definitions. The consultation talks about protecting pure speech acts. That is probably protected. Afterwards, they provide a context where people can come forward for prayer or for further conversations around the issues raised.

If someone prays with someone who comes forward because they are struggling with same-sex attraction and they would like to live a life that is abstinent, is that prayer classed as talking conversion therapy? This is done at the person's request. Likewise, they might say, "I would like to meet with someone over the course of a couple of months to talk about this, to explore this and to work out how what my faith says applies to my life and how I work that out". These are the fairly normal pastoral

activities of a church that could end up being captured within a definition of talking conversion therapy. The breadth is problematic.

Q7 **Elliot Colburn:** I would like to move on to explore the issue of consent. Sheikh, if I could begin with you, I have a fairly simple question. Do you believe that conversion therapy can cause harm?

**Dr Ramzy:** In Islam—I am talking about this from the perspective of Islam—no, it cannot, because it is a part of the religion. If they ask, I do not say anything at all except what the religion says. If I want to pray for them, I will pray for them. I can say nothing in any conversion therapy that will damage them at all. Again, my opinion is that it is a return, a reversion. It is not a conversion.

For example, two months ago a child came. He had lots of friends. The scenario is that there were two boys in one bedroom. They were together and suddenly they say, "What happened?" After that they ask, "Has he become a part of LGBT by doing that?" He has confused himself. He wants to hide it. Of course, if they tell the parents, it is going to be difficult for them. They have to come to the imam and the imam, the scholar or the mosque will help them. They are people who have the experience. They help them so they do not experience any division.

It is very important. Many of them come from Asia, for example Afghanistan, Pakistan or Africa, where a child goes missing and never comes back. They never come back. If the child is a girl, for example, they go and get married and it is finished; nobody can trace them. It is very difficult. Therefore, we want them here. Let us do our job instead of scaring us. If I say, "God bless you", it is conversion therapy. The consequences are huge: five years, 10 years, two years. Why is that? You have to care about their faith. 6 billion people follow a religion. That is not only Muslims, but Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism—you name it. They care for the children.

Therefore, conversion therapy does not harm anybody at all. I am against the physical side. There is no physical side in Islam. No, it does not harm. We only pray. It is just sitting like me and you are there. I pray for him. I pray for you. God bless you.

Q8 **Elliot Colburn:** Danny, can I ask you the same question, please?

**Danny Webster:** If we are talking about the range of practices categorised under conversion therapy, it is clear that people have suffered harm, particularly if you read accounts from across the globe. If you read some of the UN accounts, there are some harrowing and frankly quite abhorrent practices that have taken place. People have suffered harm. I would want to make clear that those practices are wholly wrong.

There is then a range of other practices. Most of what we see in the current context does not reflect that, but I would want to be clear that those practices that are forced, abusive and coercive are wrong, and we would want to stand against those.

**Dr Ramzy:** Hear, hear.

Q9 **Elliot Colburn:** We have heard some evidence to suggest that conversion practices could even have positive outcomes. Do you have any evidence of that?

**Danny Webster:** The benefits that I would talk about are for people who have the sort of spiritual support to live their lives how they choose in accordance with their religious beliefs. These are people who would describe themselves as gay, lesbian or same-sex attracted who, because of their beliefs and because of what they hold deeply to be true, want to live a life in accordance with that. Therefore, they want and receive support to help them do that. I would not call that conversion therapy, but those are the practices that, first, I would want to see protected not only because of the human rights respects but also because they have been beneficial to people who have been on that path.

**Simon Calvert:** No one is going to benefit from being coerced or abused. That is the threshold that the Government are talking about for their law, and that is the right threshold. Whatever the context or whatever the motivation, if somebody is being coerced and abused, the Government proposal is around "coercive or controlling behaviour that causes serious alarm or distress and has a substantial adverse effect on the victim's usual day-to-day activities". That is the threshold.

Again, to agree with Danny and to repeat myself, that does not include people praying with their friends. That does not include parents sensitively raising their children in the Christian faith. Again, those things are not conversion therapy. They are beneficial. I am not going to sit here and say that there are beneficial forms of conversion therapy. The case that I am putting to you is that the ordinary work of churches—harmless, gentle and non-coercive practices—are beneficial. In drawing up this law, we have to be very careful that, by accident or by design, we do not drag any of that into the firing line.

Q10 **Elliot Colburn:** I am going to explore this in a little more detail. It sounds very much like there is a divergence here in terms of what you as panellists would define conversion therapy as and what has been widely reported in media, for example, and by some campaigners.

Perhaps I could give one scenario and you could help draw a distinction for me here. If I use the example of the Liverpool church that had an undercover journalist go in, videos came out of that church of a lot of speaking in tongues, a lot of shouting and a lot of really aggressive language. That was defended by the leader of that church as prayer. Would you draw a distinction there between what you define as gentle pastoral care and the normal activities of the church, which should not fall in to a definition of conversion therapy, and coercive behaviour as described within the Government consultation, for example? Is that where a distinction would lie?

**Simon Calvert:** You and I have certainly seen stuff on TV and heard accounts of stuff going on in churches that makes you wince. What you

are talking about there, in terms of shouting and so on, does not reflect my personal theology. You would want churches to be more careful about what they do.

I would put this to you. The question for parliamentarians is going to be about what exactly Parliament wants to make a criminal offence. You mentioned speaking in tongues. Again, that is not my theology, but I am sure you are not saying that people who believe they are speaking in tongues should be criminalised for speaking in tongues. I know you are not saying that, but I am trying to draw lines here. You mentioned people shouting their prayers. Should it be a criminal offence to shout your prayers? Most people would not think that it should be.

Again, we come back to coercive, controlling and abusive behaviour. If you had a religiously neutral law with a clear and high threshold of the kind that we are talking about, dealing with coercive and controlling behaviour, that could be applied in all sorts of contexts and could protect people from genuine harm. As I look at the examples that get put into these discussions by some of the activists pressing for a ban, they say things like, "My church was very gentle. I asked my friends to pray with me, but I now think that is bad and that it should be criminalised". It is not reasonable to say that it should be criminal to pray with somebody when they ask you to pray with them.

**Dr Ramzy:** Hear, hear.

**Simon Calvert:** If you look at the case studies on the Ban Conversion Therapy campaign website, a lot of what they describe is horrifying, but you will have lines like these. Somebody says, "It became clear that they were teaching that people must remain celibate unless they really felt they were ready for heterosexual marriage". This person says that this was harming people. Nobody seriously, surely, wants a criminal law to stop churches from teaching celibacy. That is my concern.

A lot of the rhetoric behind this would result in us bringing in one of the most religiously repressive laws that we have seen in this country for centuries. We cannot do that. We have to be focused on behaviour that deserves to be criminal, not a theologically motivated or theologically targeted law.

Q11 **Elliot Colburn:** I want to expand on this question of "ask", because a big feature of the consultation is this idea around consent. Again, we have a divergence between what campaigners are asking for and what is in the consultation. Simon, if I could again perhaps come to you first on this one, the Government's proposals state that adults should be allowed to voluntarily engage in conversion therapy if they are given all relevant information about what a therapy or practice involves as well as information about the known risks. There is a lot of controversy here, because there is a long-established principle that you cannot consent to harm. Then there is the argument of what constitutes harm. There is a lot to unpack there, but could you give me your view? Do you agree with this proposal within the consultation? Is it problematic?

**Simon Calvert:** I will try to give a short answer to this, but it is very complex. We are grateful that the consultation paper includes several reassurances about the kinds of things that I am talking about, the everyday work of churches, but there is a huge lack of detail in the proposals and there is confusion within the consultation paper itself.

The Government say that they are going to ban coercive and controlling behaviour that causes serious alarm or distress, as I have said, that has a substantial adverse effect. Secondly, it has to be motivated by conversion therapy. That is not terribly clear. That probably means an intention to change someone's sexual orientation or to change them to or from being transgender. Quite how you put that in criminal law I have no idea. Thirdly, adults can consent to this, but under-18s cannot.

If the threshold really is a high and clear criminal law threshold of genuinely coercive, controlling or abusive behaviour, why would anybody want to consent to it? However, if the threshold is not high and clear, if Parliament gives us a criminal law that is hazy and risks vicars finding themselves in the dock, having to explain whether or not their prayers were caught, you do need a consent defence. At the very least, you need the vicar to be able to bring in the person who says, "I asked him to pray. I consented to him praying for me". That is the only circumstance in which I can see consent being relevant: if the core offence is too broad in the first place. It is much better to get a focused core offence.

Q12 **Elliot Colburn:** Sheikh and Danny, I want to come on to you. If I can perhaps add on a little bit to the question and then hand over to you both, should adults be given information about the efficacy of the practice before they consent to it? That is almost leaving aside the consultation.

**Dr Ramzy:** I was going to comment on what you said before. You asked if we had an example of somebody who was, for example, gay and who converted or reverted back. That is the example that I wanted to give you. Do you want me to give you that example?

Q13 **Elliot Colburn:** I am sorry. To clarify what I meant by that, the question was around positive outcomes.

**Dr Ramzy:** I had a friend some time ago who was wearing a dress. He was a Christian. He was wearing a dress, but of course he was a friend. We knew each other for a number of years, and there is no problem. He likes wearing pink or whatever. We talked, and suddenly one day he came and—I am talking about some time ago before all of this happened—he said to me, "I do not want to be gay anymore. Please help me". I said, "Just pray to God. You are not a Muslim. Of course, pray with me, but pray to God". He prayed and he prayed and he prayed and he prayed to God. He finished, and he got married. He has a daughter now.

He needed support therapy, not conversion therapy. I call it support. He needed somebody there and then to support him to go for these things. He came for himself. If a person comes and says, "I am gay and I want help, and I give you consent to pray for me", that means he wants to change. Otherwise, we do not push him. We do not say, "Please come;

please come". This is one thing that we had. It is a very important support therapy. We can support him.

In the Islamic arena or the Islamic religion, in terms of the people who want to come back, they know, more or less, about Islam; they know, if you call it a therapy, what the therapy includes. He says, "Sheikh, can you pray for me? I do not feel very good now. I want to change". We give him support. We should. As humanitarians, we should give him support. In the religion, we should give him support. On a caring basis, we should give him support. Of course, yes, if you want to assure him, say, "My brother, I am praying for you. I am reading to you from there, there and there. God bless you. I pray for you to God to guide us both in the right direction". Do you understand what I am saying? The person does not feel, "It is me only". It is, "Guide us both in the right direction".

Of course, the important thing is we have to keep them in the religion as well; otherwise they get lost. They love to be Muslims. Islam allows them. There is no problem to be, for example, gay and a Muslim, because the most sinful thing is a loss of [*inaudible*]. Almighty God does not forgive anyone bringing a partner or praying to somebody else, but he does forgive anything after that as he pleases. I am not able to say, "You are a sinner", or, "You are not a sinner". I am there to support him and to care for him, if he wants, for example, to come back. It is not, "I am going to do an exorcism"; this is nothing to do with Islam. Maybe other religions are doing this, but Islam does not do that. God bless.

**Danny Webster:** On your original question around consent, the tighter this definition is and the clearer we are about what activities are being encompassed within this, the easier it is to see how a process of consent would operate and, on the other side, how coercion would be shown, if that has not been the case.

The risk is a definition that potentially includes in its scope the normal day-to-day activities of churches. If practices of consent are brought into that, it just changes the dynamic. People need to freely engage with things. People choose to receive prayer; they choose to receive pastoral care. It is part of their day-to-day or week-to-week interaction with their church.

On the question around information, it is important that people understand the teachings of a church and what a church stands for. If someone is looking for prayer in a church context or seeking pastoral support in that church context, they are saying, "I want support to help live in accordance with the beliefs that I have and the beliefs that this church has", they have the information about what they are seeking to engage in. That is what is important.

It is also important in this that there are no promises of outcomes that are not going to happen or may not happen. That is where care is needed. Coming back to your earlier question, we would want to encourage best practice in terms of what prayer ministry looks like and what people expect to come from that. All of that is about creating an

environment that respects people, treats people with dignity and operates with care and compassion, so that you do not have people being ill informed about what they are engaging with.

**Chair:** Can I just interject? We are going to need much more succinct answers, please. We are getting very tight on time.

Q14 **Elliot Colburn:** Yes, I have one more question. Simon, can I address it to you, as succinctly as possible?. In terms of the definition of "voluntary", the Government proposal says, "The decision to either consent or not consent to an act must be made by the person and must not be influenced by others". Is that a workable definition?

**Simon Calvert:** It is a definition that is already used. It is the definition that we have.

Q15 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** I just have a quick question to follow up on some of the things that Danny Webster said earlier. It chimed a lot with me. I can see what is spiritual comfort and what is conversion therapy. The difficulty of putting that into law is very challenging. I just wanted your thoughts about whether the term "therapy" is helpful in this context. We are effectively talking about what are coercive practices. From my perspective, coming at this from a background in health, the term "therapy" is fraught with risk for me. It might outlaw things that are designed to give comfort and support to someone. Some people do struggle with their sexuality or their identity.

**Danny Webster:** Yes, I would largely agree. In reference to the Government proposals, as I have thought about it, I thought of three different categories of activity. There are physical conversion therapy practices, which are largely already criminal and which the consultation addresses. That is the first category. The second category is this newly created category of talking conversion therapy. The third category are not conversion therapy practices.

Most of what I am concerned about are not conversion therapy practices. The term "therapy" is unhelpful when we talk about this. It is prayer; it is pastoral care; it is the regular day-to-day support. There are some activities that sit in this middle box that are perhaps more structured therapy or pseudoscientific practices. That is a relatively narrow category that the term "therapy" could be used for, but mostly what I am looking at are things that I do not think should be categorised as "therapy", because that is not an appropriate term.

Q16 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Would you have a suggestion for a better word than "therapy", by any chance? I cannot get beyond "practices". This is the difficulty.

**Danny Webster:** There are religious practices that should be protected and that human rights frameworks should protect, because they are the regular activities of churches. That covers preaching, pastoral care and prayer ministry. It covers how churches engage both with their congregation and the wider community as well. When you are talking

about more structured activity, maybe “therapy” does the job, but it does suggest something that is more structured. If the definition that we see in law is tighter, that could make sense. Where there is the risk of it being broadened out into a lot of other activities, that is when it blurs the lines and potentially confuses things.

Q17 **Anne McLaughlin:** Thank you very much for your time. My first question is to Dr Ramzy and Simon. What is the difference between conventional prayer and prayer that could be considered to be conversion therapy? I know we have spoken about this already, but what is the difference? We have heard about the church in Liverpool. What is the difference between conventional prayer and prayer that could be considered conversion therapy?

**Dr Ramzy:** Conversion prayer is the exactly the same. For example, if a person comes to me who is LGBT, LGBT is not a disease for which we say, “You need a therapy”. LGBT is natural. One person is H, for example, heterosexual. If you call it a disease, that is something different. We are not thinking about a disease.

For example, there was someone who was heterosexual, became a homosexual and came back to it. What I do is exactly the same. You could call it therapy. Whatever you want to call it, I just say, “Pray to almighty God and he will help you. It is as simple as that. Pray to God and he will help you. He is the all-hearer, the all-knower. For example, many people come to me having done something wrong. I am a registrar of marriages and divorces. A man comes to me with three children. He says, “I am a sinner. I have three children”. I say, “Okay, it is between you and God. It is nothing to do with me. You should do two units of prayer before you consummate again”. It is done and he is happy, because it is something to do with God.

There is nothing different between that and when I am talking to a person who, for example, came willingly to talk to me about his situation about sex or whatever. We guide them. There is nothing like, “You have to do that”. There is no, “You have to do it”.

Q18 **Anne McLaughlin:** There is no difference between—

**Dr Ramzy:** There is no difference. Conversion prayer is just the same. Friday prayer is exactly the same.

Q19 **Anne McLaughlin:** Before I ask Simon, I might have misheard you there, but did you say that you do not look at the disease. Did I mishear what you said?

**Dr Ramzy:** It is a natural thing. I was saying that if we give you therapy, the definition of therapy is to do with somebody who has a disease or somebody needs a therapy for something. This is not a disease. They are natural people.

Q20 **Anne McLaughlin:** What you are saying is that homosexuality, for instance, is—

**Dr Ramzy:** It is natural. At the moment, we are talking about them and telling them it is natural, but of course they want to change from there to there. What is the fuss about?

Q21 **Anne McLaughlin:** Simon, do you have a view?

**Simon Calvert:** We cannot have and do not want a criminal law that goes to the theology of the prayer. It cannot be a criminal law about whether you pray the right kind of prayer, theologically speaking. If somebody prays and their prayer reflects the Christian sexual ethic—this is the one that I set out at the beginning: that sex is for marriage and marriage is between a man and a woman—that might not be a popular view or a fashionable view, but it is the mainstream Christian view and it is a protected view.

If their prayer simply reflects that theology, you cannot make it criminal just for that reason. If, for example, somebody is holding somebody down against their will, allegedly to pray for them, that is the breach of existing criminal law. If somebody is screaming abuse into somebody's face, that, again, can and should be caught by existing law. The same would be true if they were keeping somebody in a room against their will. These are things that, regardless of the motive or where it is taking place, already should be criminal. Criminal law can be used in that situation.

Q22 **Anne McLaughlin:** Danny, I have different questions for you, but did you want to come in on this particularly?

**Danny Webster:** I would just come in briefly on this. I would largely echo what Simon was saying. We would encourage good practice in prayer. I would want to encourage churches to treat people well. As Simon said, in contexts where someone is locked up or held down, that is where the law should come in. The prayer itself is not something that should be criminalised

**Dr Ramzy:** Hear, hear.

Q23 **Chair:** Can I just interject on something? Simon, you talked about somebody being held down against their will or locked in a room against their will. What if it is with consent?

**Simon Calvert:** I cannot see how it can be. If somebody either at the time or later thinks that they were held down against their will or kept in a room against their will, they should make a complaint to the police. It should be a matter for the police and potentially the CPS to look at. It has nothing to do with the theological content or otherwise of the prayers. It is just basic existing criminal law.

Q24 **Anne McLaughlin:** Other than prayer, what other religion practices are you concerned could be classed as conversion therapy and outlawed as a result of this legislation?

**Danny Webster:** This gives me an opportunity to touch on some of the aspects of the Government's proposals relating to under-18s. One of the

things that we are concerned about is that a wide-ranging ban could restrict churches or youth ministries from articulating and teaching what they believe around sexuality and marriage to people who are under 18 because of the absolute prohibition suggested.

If the ban is wide and if it were to cover teaching or pastoral care, it could put churches in a position where they cannot offer pastoral support to LGBT young people who come to them for support. The support that churches provide to young people should not require churches to affirm a particular view of sexuality. Churches should be allowed to hold to the view of sexuality that it should be between a man and a woman within marriage, and should be allowed to provide support to young people who seek it in that context.

**Simon Calvert:** We took legal advice from Jason Coppel QC. We put to him a series of specific scenarios and ordinary church practices. We asked him to take the wording of the conversion therapy ban from the state of Victoria in Australia. That is on the statute book and comes into force in February next year. We asked him to look at the draft wording in Canadian Bill C-6. We asked him to look at the definition advocated by the Ban Conversion Therapy campaign.

We asked him to assess, first, whether these ordinary scenarios would be caught by a ban in those terms and, secondly, whether that would be human rights-compliant. The scenarios included things like evangelism, where somebody shares her faith with a friend at work and the friend at work is interested but reacts angrily when she learns that all people everywhere must repent of sin, including sexual sins. We had an example to do with church membership. In that example, a church removes a man from membership for being persistently unfaithful to his wife, and the unfaithfulness involves homosexual activity. We asked him to look at baptism and confirmation classes, where the teaching in the class includes Christian living and teaching on sexual ethics. We asked him to look at churches' policies on who they will and will not administer communion to.

In the specific scenarios, which are set out in his opinion, he said, "In each case those ordinary, harmless, everyday church practices would be caught by the Victoria ban, the Canada ban and the Ban Conversion Therapy wording". He said, "In turn, in each case that would be a breach of the human rights of Christians". Those are the current scenarios that we are concerned about.

Q25 **Anne McLaughlin:** I am not sure whether somebody going up to somebody at work, denouncing them and telling them they must free themselves from being who they are is everyday or normal.

**Simon Calvert:** Let me talk that through. Somebody is sharing their faith with somebody at work. I agree. This is the problem with the issue. We start by talking about homosexuality, because that is the presenting issue here. It is not the way that Christians start their conversations. It rarely comes up in churches. It is in the Bible but it is not on every page

of the Bible. When it comes up, the churches have to teach what is in the scripture.

Anyway, somebody is sharing their faith and the person is asking them questions. "What does this mean?" "As Christians, we believe that all people are sinners. Everyone, 100% of the population, is a sinner in need of forgiveness. That is why Jesus Christ died on the cross. He died on the cross for sinners". "What do you mean by 'sin'?" "There are a thousand and one things that you could mention. It is inconvenient for all of us, because we all find ourselves in that list somewhere". If the person in this scenario is a lesbian and she asks the direct question—the Christian does not raise it; her lesbian colleague, her friend at work, asks her the question—she has to be able to give a direct answer to that question.

Q26 **Anne McLaughlin:** Asks her what question?

**Simon Calvert:** I am sorry. I mean if she asks her the question, "Do you mean that homosexuality is a sin?" That was the particular factual scenario that we put to Jason Coppel QC: if the Christian answers the question straightforwardly and her colleague objects to that. For all sorts of reasons, people object to hearing about aspects of the Christian faith, not just to do with homosexuality. People do object and they do get angry sometimes. I understand that, but the question is whether you want to inject criminal law into that situation.

Q27 **Anne McLaughlin:** Dr Ramzy, do you have any other religious practices that you are concerned could be considered conversion therapy, other than praying, and could be outlawed?

**Dr Ramzy:** Of course, this is happening all around the world. We have many different sects and many different schools of thought. They think differently. In general, no, but, as far I know, it is only people sitting and talking nicely to each other. They say, "If you want to leave, you can leave", or whatever. They come themselves. They come willingly. I would have thought that other countries were doing different things. In this country, as Simon said, people have been shut in rooms. If a father says to his daughter, "You are not allowed to go to school or do this and that until you are married", that is a forced marriage, not an arranged marriage. These things must be completely outlawed.

Talking is why we are there. We are servants of humanity and servants of the community. We are there to talk to people. We are there to serve and to help them. Otherwise, for example, with all respect, people will say, "I am gay. I do not want to live anymore. Nobody is helping me. Nobody is helping me. Let me take two tablets and I am gone". Then people say, "He is in trouble in the eyes of God. Why did you not help him?" If I help him, suddenly the Government are coming in and saying, "Five years you are in prison". Why? It has been rushed. What we have here has been totally rushed and it is totally emotional.

I would not agree with any sentences that they give. It will put me off. I will say, "I am sorry. Go away". He says, "I am desperate". People will come, but, if I say something, maybe they will put me in prison.

Q28 **Anne McLaughlin:** I am sorry to stop you, but I know time is tight. I just wanted to clarify which practices you meant. This question is for whoever wants to answer it. If you could, please do it succinctly. I was initially going to ask Simon, but anyone can answer. How do you respond to the argument that some of the practices amount to degrading treatment for LGBT people?

I just want to give you some of the words of somebody who I know who underwent conversion therapy in a religious setting for 17 years. He said, "There is a real injustice to conversion therapy that you will never fully understand or appreciate unless you have been through it. You do not just become ashamed of this one part of your life. It permeates your whole life. It seeps into every corner and crevice of your personality and it coats absolutely everything with shame. How that manifests itself in my life is by having an inability to accept myself or be comfortable in my own skin. I have never, ever been able to accept or receive love, let alone been in the position to express my love".

Conversion therapy did not work, because he is who he is and you cannot make him somebody he is not. How do you respond to that?

**Simon Calvert:** I do not want to downplay anyone's individual experience, but I think you asked a question about torture, degrading treatment and article 3 of the European convention. Was that what the start of your question was about?

Q29 **Anne McLaughlin:** I did not mention the torture. There was no physical torture, just degrading treatment.

**Simon Calvert:** Yes, degrading treatment. Forgive me if I have misunderstood, but some people are trying to make the case that using the term "conversion therapy" is degrading treatment and, therefore, is a form of torture and is a breach of article 3 of the Human Rights Act. I think you are going to hear from somebody later about that. There will be a law protecting people. This Parliament will pass a ban and it should be a ban that protects people from real abuse. The argument that it is relevant to article 3, torture and degrading treatment is a red herring.

I mention that because we asked Jason Coppel to look specifically at that question. He said that the vast majority of cases in which degrading treatment has been found to be a breach of human rights law has been in contexts where there is a substantial power imbalance and restricted liberty, so prisons, mental hospitals and things like that. The degrading treatment argument is a red herring. We can get to a good law, protecting people from abuse, but I do not think that is a valuable part of the discussion.

**Anne McLaughlin:** Do we have time for anybody else to respond?

**Chair:** No, not really. I was going to try to bring Kim Johnson in for the last few questions.

Q30 **Kim Johnson:** Most of my questions have been asked. Danny, you alluded to under-18s and pastoral support. Do you agree that there

should be a total ban on conversion therapy for under-18s?

**Danny Webster:** Further to what I said earlier, if the definition is tight, if it is a formal therapy that people engage in, it becomes less problematic. If the definition is wide and it covers or affects pastoral care, prayer ministry and activities of churches, the ban on churches or anyone else from providing that to under-18s becomes something that stops churches from providing support to LGBT people. In that context, suddenly the ban on under-18s becomes very problematic.

We are back to the definition. If the definition is really tight, it plays into that. At the moment, the breadth, or the potential breadth of it, means that the ban on under-18s actually stops churches from providing support to people.

**Chair:** It is probably best that we move on to our second panel please. Can I take this opportunity to thank all three witnesses for the information you have provided us this afternoon? If there is anything you wish to add in writing, please do feel free to do so. However, could you bear in mind the date of the Government's consultation closure please? Thank you.