

When Thinking a Prayer Became a Crime

Read Time: 4 minutes 50 seconds

At first, it seemed too absurd to believe. Surely, there must be more to the story than meets the eye.

It turns out that what was reported was quite accurate: a Christian pro-life leader in England was arrested not simply for standing in front an abortion clinic. She was also arrested for the crime of praying while standing there, even though she was simply praying in her own head. Talk about being prosecuted for a “thought crime”—this really and truly happened.

In the words of Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, leader of the U.K. March for Life, “It’s abhorrently wrong that I was searched, arrested, interrogated by police and charged simply for praying in the privacy of my own mind. Nobody should be criminalized for thinking and for praying, in a public space in the U.K.”

A pastoral colleague had sent me the report which stated, “In yet another assault on Christianity in Britain, a pro-life activist was arrested for silently praying outside an abortion clinic in Birmingham, England.”

Embedded in the article was a link to the Twitter account of Mary Margaret Olohan, which contained a video of the arrest.

In the video, the police officer asks Vaughan-Spruce politely, “Are you praying?” She responds, “I might be praying in my head.” (Do I need to add my standard caveat, “I’m not making this up!”?)

At present, however, there is an additional note added by

Twitter which states, "The woman in the video, Isabel Vaughan Spruce, was not arrested for silently praying. She was arrested for breaking a temporary Public Space Protection Order on four separate occasions which was used to ban protests outside of an abortion clinic due to safety concerns." (The note is linked to this story).

That's what I had been wondering about when I read the initial piece and watched the video. Perhaps she was not allowed to be standing in front of the clinic at all? Perhaps that was her crime?

Despite the outrageousness of such a regulation, since it appears clear that she was not harassing anyone nor was her presence a threat to anyone, what if her presence was the issue, not her praying? Wouldn't that mean that the attention-getting headlines were not accurate? Wouldn't that mean that the very headline to this article was misleading?

It turns out that there are, in fact, Public Spaces Protection Order zones that protect abortion clinics and other places. But there was no personal order against Vaughan Spruce standing in front of this particular clinic, nor is it illegal simply to stand in or be present on the street, even with the PSP0.

As noted in the official press release from the Alliance Defending Freedom U.K., "The censorship zone measure introduced by Birmingham authorities criminalizes individuals perceived to be 'engaging in any act of approval or disapproval or attempted act of approval or disapproval' in relation to abortion, including through 'verbal or written means, prayer or counselling.'"

Accordingly, "Whilst in the police station, Vaughan-Spruce was shown pictures of herself outside the abortion facility. She said she could not recall from the pictures whether she was praying at these specific moments, or whether these had been

taken at times that she was distracted and thought about other things, such as her lunch. She maintains that all her thoughts were equally peaceful and imperceptible and that none should be criminalized.”

Yes, she was questioned as to whether she had been praying in her own mind. This is not made up. This is not the figment of Christian paranoia. This is what literally took place.

In response to this outrageous arrest and interrogation, Jeremiah Igunnubole, legal counsel for Alliance Defending Freedom U.K. stated that, “Isabel’s experience should be deeply concerning to all those who believe that our hard-fought fundamental rights are worth protecting. It is truly astonishing that the law has granted local authorities such wide and unaccountable discretion, that now even thoughts deemed ‘wrong’ can lead to a humiliating arrest and a criminal charge.”

In fact, the police actually “imposed restrictions, as part of her bail, on Vaughan-Spruce engaging in public prayer beyond the PSP0 area, stating that this was necessary to prevent further offences.”

To paraphrase, “Thou shalt not pray, even in the privacy of your mind, anywhere near this abortion clinic!”

One month prior, on Nov. 24, in Bournemouth, U.K., “Local woman Livia Tossici-Bolt was praying quietly with a friend in a public space when she was warned by local authorities that their prayer could cause ‘intimidation, harassment or distress,’ and was asked to move away.”

To be clear, I have not been quoting from Orwell’s “1984.”

To the contrary, not even Big Brother could read our thoughts. Not even the Chinese Communist Party can read its people’s minds. Not even Kim Jong-Un of North Korea imprisons alleged dissenters for daring to think a thought. Only God Almighty

knows the thoughts of people's hearts.

Of course, the British police didn't know what Vaughan-Spruce was thinking either, because of which they had to ask, "Are you praying?"

Oh, the crime! Oh, the horror!

"Yes, Officer, I confess! I am guilty, so guilty! I might have been praying in my mind!"

To repeat: This was not Orwell's "1984." This was England in 2022. Let that sink in.

In the days ahead, I would encourage every freedom-loving citizen of the U.K. to stand peacefully (and without obstructing others) in front of every abortion clinic nearby, engaging in silent prayer.

Numerous street preachers have been arrested in recent years simply for giving an honest answer to a Bible question or preaching out of certain biblical texts (most recently, see [here](#)). Now, Christian pro-lifers are being arrested for the crime of praying, either out loud or silently. Who can imagine what's coming next?

With confidence I can say this: If the Christians (and other freedom lovers) in the U.K. do not push back now, with grace, humility, kindness and courage, there most certainly will be a "next."

The time to speak and act (and pray!) is now. {eoa}

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