

78-Year-Old Christian Preacher Who Called Islam 'Spawn of the Devil' Faces Judge

A Northern Irish Evangelical Christian preacher who described Islam as "satanic" and "the spawn of the devil" during one of his sermons was found not guilty on Tuesday of broadcasting grossly offensive remarks.

Pastor James McConnell, who has been supported by some leading politicians in the British province, was charged over his comments in the 2014 sermon, which was delivered in the independent church he founded and streamed live on the internet.

Judge Liam McNally said McConnell was "entitled to criticize Islam in a robust manner," and that his comments amounted to "nothing other than a bout of name calling."

The case comes against the background of growing anti-Islamic sentiment from some quarters in Europe, particularly far-right parties such as France's National Front.

The 78-year-old pastor, who recently retired after 60 years of preaching, denied the charges of improper use of a public electronic communications network and causing a grossly offensive message to be sent by means of a public electronic communications network, citing freedom of expression.

The judge said he believed the preacher did not set out to cause offense and was "preaching to the converted rather than the worldwide internet."

"The court needs to be very careful not to criminalize speech

which, however contemptible, is no more than offensive. It is not the task of the criminal law to censor offensive utterances," he said.

McConnell was initially defended by Northern Ireland First Minister Peter Robinson and called upon another senior minister of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—which shares power in Northern Ireland's devolved government—as a character witness.

Mainly Catholic Irish nationalists and pro-British unionists, most of them Protestants, are obliged to rule the province together under a 1998 peace deal that ended three decades of sectarian violence during which more than 3,600 people died.

McConnell, whose 2600-capacity Whitewell Metropolitan Tabernacle in Belfast is recognized as a Protestant church but also has Roman Catholic members, said he was very pleased with the verdict.

"I am very happy. I thought I was going down," he told Reuters after the judgment. {eo}

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