

Bible Teaching Could Soon Become a Crime With 'Anti-Extremism Banning Orders'

Traditional Christian teaching could effectively be "criminalized" in some settings in Britain under David Cameron's plans for new anti-extremist banning orders, a top Anglican theologian and former Parliamentary draftsman has warned.

The Rev. Dr. Mike Ovey, a former lawyer and now principal of Oak Hill Theological College in London, a training school for Church of England clergy, said proposals for new "Extremism Disruption Orders" could be a "disaster area" for people from all the mainstream religions and none.

Mr. Cameron and Theresa May have signalled that the new orders, planned as part of the Government's Counter-Extremism Bill, would not curb the activities of radical Islamist clerics but the promotion of other views deemed to go against "British values" even if it is nonviolent and legal.

Ministers have defined British values in the past as including broad notions like democracy, tolerance and the rule of law.

In a speech last month Mr. Cameron said that for too long Britain had been a "passively tolerant society" in which people were told "as long as you obey the law, we will leave you alone."

Dr. Ovey warned that unless the criteria are tightly defined, the orders could be used against almost anyone and would have a "chilling effect" on preachers and even call into question the curriculum of colleges such as his.

Even basic Christian tenets, such as the belief that Jesus is

the Son of God, could be deemed to be offensive to other religions and branded un-British, he said.

It would also be easy to argue that there was a “clear trajectory” between, for example, teaching mainstream Christian ideas about subjects such as abortion and the actions of violent end-abortion groups, he added.

“It Doesn’t Work”

Dr. Ovey, who worked as a parliamentary draftsman in the 1980s when anti-terror legislation to deal with the IRA threat was being framed, said: “They are going to say this is far-fetched and will never happen.

“That is essentially a government saying, ‘Trust us with your civil liberties.’

“I would say frankly human experience tells us the last thing you ever want to do is trust a government with your civil liberties.”

“The government is going around saying it is all a time of national emergency.

“I think I want to say we have been there before and got the T-shirt. It doesn’t work.”

It follows a series of recent cases of Christian street preachers being arrested by overzealous police after complaints by people who claimed their traditionalist message was homophobic or condemnatory.

His comments came as alliance free-speech campaigners, including faith groups and atheists, prepare to launch a new campaign against the plan.

Last week Lord Blencathra, the Conservative peer, told the Lords that the orders could open the door to “idiot police forces arresting a couple of ladies from the WI and a

traditionalist Church of England vicar who has said something radical—for example, that he actually believes in God.”

“But where do the problems really lie?” he said.

“Do we have Buddhist suicide bombers? Are there Free Presbyterians beheading Roman Catholics in Benbecula? Are there jihadi Jehovah’s Witnesses? Of course not, so who then deserves to be caught in this wide net of extremists?”

“A Disaster Area”

Dr. Ovey added: “We don’t know what British values are other than whatever Theresa May decides on the particular Monday when she wakes up and has to make one of these orders.

“Having an inclusive definition is hopeless from a legal point of view.”

He went on: “Is a police officer going to listen to me saying that Jesus is the only way in a Muslim part of the East End?

“There is always the argument that it will be OK on the night, yes you might be arrested but you will be released—but there is always the thought that you won’t be.

“The thing with a law like this is that there are going to be some people saying, ‘I’m not going to run the risk,’ and someone like me who is going to run the risk is going to look more extreme.

“As a lawyer I think it is a disaster area and as a Christian believer and teacher I think it is a disaster area.

“There has got be a better way to do it.”