

Pastor Faces Prosecution for Calling Islam 'Satanic' in Sermon

Pastor James McConnell is in hot legal water after prosecutors have decided to press charges over a sermon he delivered in May 2014.

The sermon, which McConnell delivered to his congregation at the evangelical Whitewell Metropolitan Tabernacle in Belfast, called Islam "satanic" and "heathen." Local authorities deemed these remarks "grossly offensive," and because the sermon was also streamed online, as many churches' sermons are now, police have now found him in violation of the United Kingdom's 2003 Communications Act.

"That offense was one of sending, or causing to be sent, by means of a public electronic communications network, a message or other matter that was grossly offensive," said a spokesman for the Public Prosecution Service, citing a provision of the sweeping law.

Despite Jesus' exclusivity as the only path to salvation being a fundamental tenet of Christianity, the U.K. has enacted hate speech laws over the past decade that faith leaders have argued threaten to criminalize biblical beliefs. In addition to banning speech offensive to adherents of other faiths, Parliament has also banned speech against homosexuality and other LGBT issues, effectively hamstringing not only pastors and other clergy, but also common citizens seeking to share or discuss their faith with others.

When police first questioned McConnell, they offered him an "informed warning," which in U.K. law is recorded on a person's criminal record for 12 months, although it is not a conviction. McConnell refused the offer, and, after criticism

from members of the public who saw the sermon online, eventually issued a public apology, read by his lawyer while the pastor stood beside him on the stage, looking penitent.

“I wish to apologize publicly for any distress I may have unwittingly caused on my part,” the apology read. “My sermon was drawing attention to how many followers of Islam have, regrettably, interpreted the doctrine of Islam as justification for violence.”

Ultimately, even apologizing and explaining the reasoning behind his sermon wasn't enough for the Public Prosecution Service, who are now pressing charges against McConnell.

“The offer of an informed warning was refused by the defendant and accordingly the matter is now proceeding by way of a summary prosecution in the magistrates court,” the Public Prosecution Service spokesman said.