

Street Preachers Convicted of 'Abuse' for Proclaiming the Gospel

Two street preachers have been convicted of public order offenses after a public prosecutor claimed that quoting parts of the King James Bible in the context of modern British society "must be considered to be abusive and is a criminal matter".

The prosecutor had argued that free speech must yield to multicultural reality in modern Britain, and that there was a clear threat to violence due to the words of the preachers and the criticism of Islam.

Michael Overd and Michael Stockwell were convicted Feb. 28 at Bristol Magistrates' Court. On Friday (Feb. 25), the court dismissed the case against a third man, Adrian Clark, ruling that there was no case to answer.

During the four-day trial, prosecutor Ian Jackson, claimed:

"To say to someone that Jesus is the only God is not a matter of truth. To the extent that they are saying that the only way to God is through Jesus, that cannot be a truth."

The men were found guilty under Section 31 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, for using "threatening or abusive words or behaviour or disorderly behaviour within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress, thereby, and the offence was religiously aggravated."

Michael Phillips, who represented the street preachers, said:

"This prosecution is nothing more than a modern-day heresy trial—dressed up under the public order act."

Free to Criticize Islam?

Mr. Stockwell had quoted a Bible verse in which Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6) and that he is the only way to heaven.

Mr. Stockwell said:

"If you are trying to come through Catholicism, through Jehovah Witness, through Mormonism, the Bible says you're a thief and a liar, and a thief comes to steal and destroy. But Christ came that we may have life."

He also entered debate with a Muslim gentleman in which both individuals stated opposition to the other's religious beliefs.

Mr. Stockwell said: "Men should be able to proclaim the truth and have diverse differences in the public forum, agreeing to disagree without harm or repercussions. Truth today is the new hate."

He continued: "I am an American, and there is no free speech in England. You criticize Islam; and a group of individuals don't like what you say and threaten violence to silence speech they disapprove of. The police and court shut down the 'free speech' to avoid public disorder. It is a green light to the Islamists and any other radical groups to silence speech. The police should be protecting us."

Mr. Overd said: "You can't have the threat of violence and public disorder to stop us criticising Islam and other lifestyles. Where is our freedom? If you don't like what I said, just move on and let others heard the message, but they want to end the free speech."

The court has awarded legal costs of £2016 against both Mr. Overd and Mr. Stockwell. A Criminal Behavior Order is being pursued against Mr. Overd, with the hearing delayed until May

2017.

'Over the Top'

Mr. Overd and his three friends were preaching in Bristol's Broadmead Shopping Centre last year (July 6, 2016).

They took it in turns to preach, and as they did so, a crowd gathered. At points, the crowd was loud and aggressive, with some swearing and being abusive towards the men. There was also, however, debate between the preachers and members of the crowd, especially on the differences between Islam and Christian belief. Several hecklers appeared to be supportive of Islam.

Police did not arrive on the scene until about an hour into the preaching. A police officer approached Mr. Clark, asking him to turn off his amplification, which he did.

Shortly afterwards a mounted police officer asked Mr. Clark to stop preaching so that she could speak to him. Whilst Mr. Clark spoke with the officer, Mr. Overd took over the preaching.

Soon afterwards, another police officer approached Mr. Overd and told him that he was "causing a disturbance" and "not welcome".

The officer told Mr. Overd that he was going to give him a Dispersal Notice. But instead of doing so, he forcibly removed Mr. Overd from the scene, despite Mr. Overd (who suffers from chronic back pain) crying out in pain.

The officer is later heard asking for advice on whether the men could be charged with offences, saying that Mr. Overd has "gone over the top" and "he's just wound up people".

Public Order Offenses

Mr. Overd and his friends were eventually taken to Patchway Custody Center, Bristol, held for several hours and released on police bail to return for questioning.

They were charged under Section 31 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 for using “threatening or abusive words or behavior or disorderly behavior within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress, thereby, and the offence was religiously aggravated.”

The charge against one of the men was subsequently dropped, however.

But the remaining three were additionally charged with offenses under the Public Order Act 1986 and summonsed to appear in court in early 2017.

Freedoms at Stake

Andrea Williams, chief executive of the Christian Legal Center, which is supporting the preachers, says the case raises huge questions about the state of freedom of speech and freedom of religion in this country and will be appealed. People will be shocked that a court now considers the Bible itself to be a form of hate speech, she says.

Andrea Williams said: “The Bible and its teachings are the foundation of our society and provided many of the freedoms and protections we still enjoy today. So it is extraordinary that the prosecution, speaking on behalf of the state, could say that the Bible contains abusive words which, when spoken in public, constitute a criminal offense. Today’s ruling, in effect, states that Bible is offensive and contains illegal speech which should not be shared in public. This is a very serious state of affairs, and the men will be considering next steps to challenge this decision.

“‘Offense’ is a very subjective thing and is easily manipulated to shut down viewpoints that people simply don’t like. Any suggestion that there is a right not to be offended must be strongly resisted. In today’s democracy, we need the freedom to debate, challenge and disagree.

“Mike Overd and Michael Stockwell were saying nothing that wouldn’t be heard at speakers’ corner in Hyde Park—presenting the claims of the Bible, answering the crowd’s questions and objections and responding calmly to abuse which was hurled at them. For a court to rule that this breaks the law is extraordinary.” {eoa}