

This Is the Strangest 'Hate Crime' You've Ever Read About

A federal appeals court in Ohio on Wednesday overturned the hate-crime convictions of an Amish sect leader and 15 of his followers in beard- and hair-cutting attacks on fellow members of their religious faith.

The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati found that the jury in the 2012 case received incorrect instructions on how to consider the role of religion in the attacks.

Prosecutors had contended the crimes were motivated by religious disputes between Samuel Mullet Sr., a leader of a sect in Bergholz, Ohio, and other Amish religious leaders who had accepted into their communities people Mullet had excommunicated from his.

The majority of the three-judge panel found that "considerable evidence supported the defendants' theory that interpersonal and intra-family agreements, not the victims' religious beliefs, sparked the attacks."

Jurors heard testimony that Mullet's followers had restrained the victims and forcibly cut their hair and beards, using scissors, clippers, shears and battery-operated razors.

Amish women and married Amish men do not cut their hair or beards, which they consider symbols of religious life. The Amish are known for their plain dress and shunning of technology.

The district court judge told the jury that they could convict of a hate crime if the victim's religion was a "significant motivating factor" for the attack, even if the attacker also had other reasons.

But the appeals court found that in light of a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision, the jury should have been told to convict if the defendants would not have acted “but for” the victims’ beliefs.

The court noted that even people of the most theocratic faith may do things for non-faith based reasons, and ostensible faith leaders, “whether Samuel Mullet or Henry VIII, may do things, including committing crimes or even creating a new religion, for irreligious reasons.”

Seven of the 16 have already served prison sentences. Mullet received the longest sentence and was not scheduled to be released until 2024.

Prosecutors were not immediately available for comment.

Defense attorney Rhonda Kotnik said the government can retry the case or work out an agreement with the Amish but the ruling does not necessarily mean Mullet and others will immediately be released from prison.

Certain non-hate crime charges, including destruction of evidence and making false statements, were not part of the appeal and therefore stand.

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