



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 14, 2012

Britain Trying to Ban Christians From Wearing Crosses on the Job

According to Britain's [Telegraph](#) newspaper, the case centers around two British women who "claim that they were discriminated against when their employers barred them from wearing the symbols. They want the European Court to rule that this breached their human right to manifest their religion." Government attorneys, in turn, "will argue that because it is not a 'requirement' of the Christian faith, employers can ban the wearing of the cross and sack workers who insist on doing so."



According to the *Telegraph*, the legal issue came to a head after the government's attempts to legalize same-sex marriage prompted an uproar by leaders of the UK's Catholic Church. The case hinges on how far Article 9 of the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) allows individuals to go in the expression of their faith. The measure states that every individual "has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion," a right that supposedly includes "freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance."

The two Coptic Christian women in the case, Nadia Eweida and Shirley Chaplin, had faced disciplinary actions from their employers after they refused to remove crucifixes from their clothing, arguing that the symbol was central to their Christian faith. In 2006 Eweida, who worked for British Airways, was ordered to remove or cover a small cross she wore around her neck. When she refused she was sent home on unpaid leave. While the airline changed its policy the next year and allowed Eweida to return to her job, it refused to pay her for the time she was suspended.

Chaplin, who worked as a nurse, was barred from serving at a hospital after she refused to obscure a cross she had worn for over 30 years on the job. In 2010 an employment tribunal to which she had taken her case decided for her employer, a trust for the government's National Health Service (NHS), ruling that its policy was based on health and safety issues rather than religion, and emphasizing that wearing a cross was not a requirement of her faith.

In March 2010 six senior Anglican bishops, including former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey,



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signed a letter in support of Chaplin, explaining that she had “worn the cross every day since her confirmation [40 years earlier] as a sign of her Christian faith, a faith which led to her vocation in nursing, and which has sustained her in that vital work ever since.” The religious leaders noted that the NHS trust’s uniform policy “permits exemptions for religious clothing. This has been exercised with regard to other faiths, but not with regard to the wearing of a cross around the neck.”

Having lost their appeals in British courts, the two women are appealing to the European supranational court. They point out that the British government appears to be singling out Christians for persecution, banning them from displaying symbols of their faith while allowing Sikh, Muslims, and other worshipers to wear turbans, *hijab*, and other items peculiar to their faiths.

Government attorneys called the women’s case “manifestly ill-founded,” arguing in court documents that the “wearing of a visible cross or crucifix was not a manifestation of their religion or belief within the meaning of Article 9,” nor was the restriction on their “wearing of a visible cross or crucifix ... an ‘interference’ with their rights protected by Article 9.” The government further argued that in neither woman’s case “is there any suggestion that the wearing of a visible cross or crucifix was a generally recognised form of practising the Christian faith, still less one that is regarded ... as a requirement of the faith.”

In a somewhat surprising turn, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, appeared to make a case for the government’s position, declaring in a recent Sunday address in Rome that in many instances the crucifix had become little more than jewelry that “religious people make and hang on to” as a substitute for legitimate faith.

Christians watching the case were particularly critical of the Archbishop’s observation that “the cross itself has become a religious decoration.” When a spokesman for the Archbishop explained that Williams’ words were being taken out of context, Andrea Minichiello Williams of the British group [Christian Concern](#) countered that “it’s not a time for the archbishop of Canterbury to be obscure and incomprehensible. It’s time for him to find his voice. He needs to be clear that for many the cross is the symbol of Christianity, and he needs to empower Christians up and down the country to wear the cross as a symbol of hope.”

By contrast, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, blasted the government’s position as “extraordinary,” saying that its reasoning “is based on a wholly inappropriate judgment of matters of theology and worship about which they can claim no expertise. The irony is that when governments and courts dictate to Christians that the cross is a matter of insignificance, it becomes an even more important symbol and expression of our faith.”

Similarly, Archbishop of York John Sentamu, the Church of England’s second highest ranking bishop, took a hard line against the government, arguing that its bureaucrats are “beginning to meddle in areas that they ought not to. I think they should leave that to the courts to make a judgment.”

And earlier, Bishop of Peterborough Donald Allister challenged the government’s argument, telling the *Telegraph* that “if you say wearing a cross isn’t a compulsory part of Christianity, we agree. But it is a duty of a Christian to be public about their faith as well as private, and that is clear New Testament teaching.”

Andrea Williams of Britain’s [Christian Legal Centre](#), which is assisting the women in the case, said that “it is extraordinary that a Conservative government should argue that the wearing of a cross is not a generally recognized practice of the Christian faith.” She noted that recently British courts “have



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refused to recognize the wearing of a cross, belief in marriage between a man and a woman, and Sundays as a day of worship as 'core' expressions of the Christian faith."

In a statement bitterly ironic to American Christians she added: "What next? Will our courts overrule the Ten Commandments?"



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