



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on January 7, 2016

Irish Pastor Acquitted of Making “Grossly Offensive” Remarks About Islam

The Irish pastor tried for preaching a sermon in which he said he didn’t trust Muslims was acquitted Tuesday of all charges by a Belfast judge, closing the books on a case that should never have been brought in the first place.

As *The New American* previously [reported](#), in May 2014, James McConnell (shown, center), 78, then pastor of Belfast’s Whitewell Metropolitan Tabernacle, delivered a sermon critical of Sharia law in which he said, “People say there are good Muslims in Britain — that may be so — but I don’t trust them. Islam is heathen, Islam is satanic, Islam is a doctrine spawned in hell.”



After other unsuccessful attempts to punish McConnell for his homily, the U.K. government seized on the Communications Act, which makes it a crime to transmit “grossly offensive” messages over a public electronic communications network, in this case the Internet, over which McConnell’s sermon was live-streamed. The pastor was charged with two counts under the 2003 law.

McConnell was tried in the courtroom of Judge Liam McNally for three days in December. Although the minister’s entire sermon was played for the court, the prosecution’s case, as McConnell’s attorney pointed out, rested on just five words. The prosecutor argued that McConnell was well within his rights to declare Islam “heathen,” “satanic,” and “spawned in hell,” but he’d crossed the line of “grossly offensive” speech when he said he didn’t trust Muslims. McConnell, for his part, clarified that he only distrusts those Muslims who adhere to Sharia law and that he bears no ill will against any Muslims.

McNally, who had reserved judgment until January 5, agreed with the prosecution that McConnell’s remarks about Islam were protected speech but disagreed that his saying he distrusted Muslims was offensive enough to warrant conviction, which would have carried with it a fine or jail time. (McConnell had said he would not pay any fine but would go to jail if necessary.)

“He is a man with strong, passionate and sincerely held beliefs,” McNally said. “In my view Pastor McConnell’s mindset was that he was preaching to the converted in the form of his own congregation and like-minded people who were listening to his service rather than preaching to the worldwide Internet. His passion and enthusiasm for his subject caused him to, so to speak, ‘lose the run of himself.’”

According to the [Daily Mail](#), “When considering the remarks about mistrusting Muslims, Judge McNally said he was satisfied the pastor had not set out to intentionally cause offense.”

“If he had clarified this in his sermon and set out in a clear and precise way why Sharia law was repugnant to him he could have saved himself a lot of trouble,” McNally said. “In the manner in which



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he did express this he has, in my view characterized the followers of an entire religion in a stereotypical way."

Still, the judge [concluded](#), "The courts need to be very careful not to criticize speech which, however contemptible, is no more than offensive. It is not the task of the criminal law to censor offensive utterances. Accordingly I find Pastor McConnell not guilty of both charges."

McConnell, naturally, was relieved, saying outside the court, "I am very happy that there is liberty to preach the gospel." He also said justice had been served, with his attorney adding, "You can only expect justice in the next world ... on this occasion the law and justice have come together."

McConnell, who became a Christian at age eight and preached his first sermon at 13, reiterated his court testimony that he stood by every word of his allegedly offensive sermon but regretted that it had caused some Muslims to think he was "out to hurt them."

"There was no way I was out to hurt them," he said. "I wouldn't hurt a hair on their head."

"If there are Muslims out there, I want to assure them I love them and, if they need help, I am there to help them, but their theology and their beliefs I am totally against them."

McConnell also affirmed that he would preach the same sermon again despite the controversy, though "I would word it differently because I would be conscious I was hurting innocent Muslims."

There was much praise for the verdict, although it was often tempered with reminders of the precarious nature of long-established liberties and the need to consider others when speaking one's mind.

"Today's verdict is a victory for common sense and freedom of speech," Peter Lynas, national director of the Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland, said in a [statement](#). "This case contains challenges to both the State and the Church. It is vital that the State does not stray into the censorship of church sermons or unwittingly create a right not to be offended. Meanwhile, the Church must steward its freedom of speech responsibly, so as to present Jesus in a gracious and appealing way to everyone."

Dr. Norman Hamilton, convenor of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, said, "As a church we are increasingly troubled that the state is seeking to limit freedom of speech, freedom of thought and freedom of conscience in the interests of political correctness. It is essential that the Christian church and all Christian people are at the forefront of promoting such freedoms for the benefit of every citizen, as far as they are consistent with the building of a genuinely free and pluralist society."

McConnell had been supported during his trial by Muhammad al-Hussaini, a senior research fellow in Islamic studies at the Westminster Institute, and even some atheists stood by him. On Sunday, Boyd Sleator, chairman of the organization Atheist NI, told the [Belfast News Letter](#), "Pastor McConnell's remarks will strike many as offensive and irresponsible, but as a society we ought to resist the urge to declare things criminal simply because they might hurt our feelings. That a judge is left to decide whether or not Pastor McConnell's remarks are worthy of legal consequences may set a precedent for all manner of irreverence and criticism being deemed against the law."

The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) defended its prosecution of McConnell, saying, "The decision to bring this prosecution was entirely consistent with the duty of the PPS to put before the court those cases in which it is considered there is a reasonable prospect of a conviction."

But McConnell, who said his prosecution took 18 months and required him to make seven court appearances, maintained, "The public funds that have been used to pursue me would have been put to far better use in hospitals or schools." Nevertheless, he had nothing but kind words for both the



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prosecutor and the judge.

He also found a silver — perhaps even gold — lining in having been forced to stand trial.

“The best bit for me was when they played my sermon in court,” he recalled. “The clip with the controversial comments was only 35 seconds long but they played the full hour-and-a-half sermon. I was delighted. I don’t think I converted anybody in court but at least they all had to listen to the gospel.”

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