

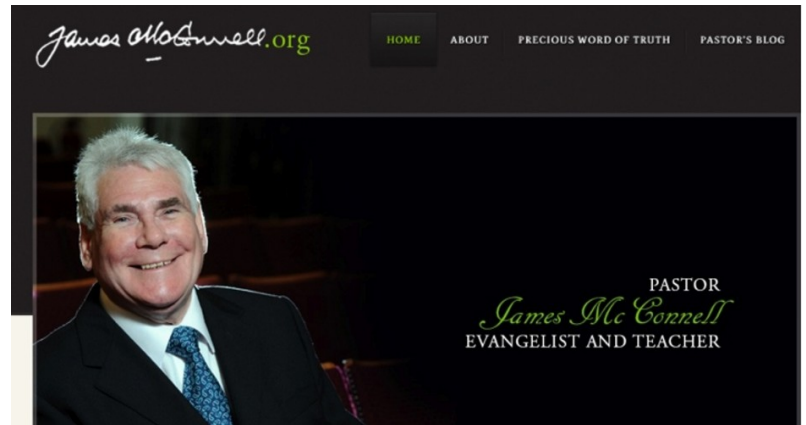


Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 18, 2015

Irish Preacher Tried for Saying He Doesn't Trust Muslims

The trial of an Irish evangelical preacher for his allegedly “grossly offensive” remarks about Muslims has just concluded, though the minister won't find out until the new year whether he'll be forced to pay for expressing his opinions.

In a May 2014 sermon at Belfast's Whitewell Metropolitan Tabernacle, one of the largest evangelical congregations in Northern Ireland, Pastor James McConnell highlighted the plight of Meriam Ibrahim, a young Christian woman who, because she refused to convert to Islam and married a Christian man, was [sentenced to death](#) by a Sudanese Muslim court. (Ibrahim eventually took refuge in the American embassy and now resides in the United States.)



“People say there are good Muslims in Britain — that may be so — but I don't trust them,” McConnell said. “Islam is heathen, Islam is satanic, Islam is a doctrine spawned in hell.”

For making these remarks — which, by and large, represent orthodox Christian theology — McConnell was brought before District Judge Liam McNally of the Belfast Magistrates' Court for alleged violations of the 2003 Communications Act. Because McConnell's sermon was live-streamed over the Internet, “he is accused of improper use of a public electronic communications network, and causing a grossly offensive message to be sent by means of a public electronic communications network,” according to the [Belfast Telegraph](#).

It is clear that the government has long been out to get McConnell over the sermon and finally found a law that could be used against him. The 78-year-old pastor, now retired, [told the court](#) that he was initially investigated about a potential hate crime, but the police determined that no crime had been committed. “I have never hated anybody in my life and that includes Muslims,” McConnell asserted on his [blog](#).

Next he was presented with an “informed warning,” which he refused, telling the court, “If I took that, it would be an insult to the One that I love, for I was standing up for Him, for His Gospel and for His truth. If I took that informed warning, that would be me gagged. I will take my stand, no matter what happens today.”

A year later, after combing the law books, prosecutors charged McConnell under the Communications Act, a move the preacher declared “absolutely ridiculous.”

Interestingly, McConnell appears not to have been prosecuted for his declarations about Islam itself but for his implication that he doesn't trust Muslims — or at least none in Britain.

“He's saying, ‘I don't trust a single Muslim’ — that's what he says,” prosecutor David Russell told the court.



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“He characterizes the followers of an entire religion in a certain, stereotypical way,” Russell added, “and that is grossly offensive, and that is not protected by saying it from the pulpit.”

In other words, in the United Kingdom of 2015, the government believes it a crime to state publicly that one distrusts a politically protected group of people because it might offend some of them.

Russell went on to argue that such remarks would not be protected when applied to adherents of any religion, but it is surely significant that this case is being brought on behalf of Muslims against a Christian pastor for a relatively mild insult (i.e., saying they’re untrustworthy) that no one alleges has incited violence against anyone.

The prosecutor claimed the charges have “nothing to do with his [McConnell’s] freedom of expression or his freedom to preach,” which is patent nonsense, as is Russell’s assertion that “the decision to prosecute is proportionate and necessary.” The notion that one’s freedom of speech or religion is forfeited when he transmits his opinions via electronic communications is absurd. If prosecuting McConnell for saying he distrusts Muslims is “proportionate and necessary,” why is the British government not prosecuting the purveyors of the far more vile statements about Christians and Jews — and, yes, Muslims — that abound on the Internet, radio, and television?

For his part, McConnell, while not recanting a single word of his sermon, expressed his regret that it had offended anyone, saying that was never his intention. Under questioning, he also clarified that he did not distrust all Muslims, only those that adhere to Sharia law — the law under which Meriam Ibrahim was convicted.

McConnell, who became a Christian after being orphaned at age eight, preached his first sermon at 13, and entered the ministry at 17, received a great deal of support during his trial. “The 100-seat public gallery was packed to capacity with Christian supporters,” wrote the *Belfast Telegraph*. A Member of Parliament, a missionary, and a Catholic priest all appeared as character witnesses on McConnell’s behalf.

Sammy Wilson, the legislator, who is also a member of Whitewell Tabernacle, said, “One of the attractive features of his preaching is that there is no ambiguity in what he says because it is said, not just with force but also with compassion.”

Father Patrick McCafferty, the priest, stated, “I can say that Pastor McConnell has no hatred for anyone whatsoever and the people of his church are not people who go out in this community and cause trouble, they are the exact opposite.”

One defense witness’ appearance was refused by the court. Muhammad al-Hussaini, a senior research fellow in Islamic studies at Westminster Institute, wished to testify in favor of McConnell’s free-speech rights but was denied. He did, however, [tell](#) the cleric’s supporters outside the court that “in a free and democratic society we enter into severe peril when we start to confuse what we perhaps ought or ought not to say, with what in law we are allowed to, or not allowed to say.”

Court testimony revealed that after the controversy over his sermon had been whipped up, McConnell visited two men believed to have been hate-crime victims and gave them money to repair broken windows in their home.

McConnell’s attorney, Philip Mateer, “urged the court to find the pastor not guilty, describing him as a man of ‘superlative good character’ who helped drug addicts and other ‘down and outs’ that ‘watery, middle class clergymen’ might consider as ‘untouchables,’” reported the *Belfast Telegraph*.



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“In all other circumstances,” Mateer maintained, “the pastor might be considered a credit to the community.”

McConnell’s three-day, non-jury trial ended Wednesday, with Judge McNally reserving judgment until January 5. If convicted, McConnell could spend up to six months in prison or be fined heavily. He has said he won’t pay any fine but, despite his poor health, is willing to go to prison. “But be assured,” he blogged, “when I come out I will start again and preach the truth of the gospel!”

The pastor, who remained optimistic throughout the ordeal, said he thought the trial had been “fair” and added, “I can’t wait now to January 5. I want to see the outcome. I want to win.”



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