



Two street preachers have today been convicted of a public order offence, after a public prosecutor claimed that publicly quoting parts of the King James Bible in modern Britain should "be considered to be abusive and is a criminal matter".

Prosecutor Ian Jackson also told the court that "although the words preached are included in a version of the Bible in 1611, this does not mean that they are incapable of amounting to a public order offence in 2016."

Michael Overd and Michael Stockwell were found guilty under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 at Bristol Magistrates' Court.

Last Friday the court dismissed the case against a third man, Adrian Clark, ruling that there was no case to answer.

During the four-day trial, Mr Jackson also argued: "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."

'Simply the language of the Bible'

Andrea Williams, chief executive of the Christian Legal Centre, which is supporting the preachers, says that the case raises huge questions about the state of freedom of speech and freedom of religion in the UK.

People will be shocked that a court now considers the Bible itself to be a form of hate speech, she says.

The preachers were represented in court by Christian Legal Centre allied solicitor Michael Phillips who told the court that "this prosecution is nothing more than a modern-day heresy trial - dressed up under the Public Order Act."

Describing the preachers' message, he said: "Every negative remark about other religions and ways of life are taken straight from those texts. The preachers do not use inflammatory language, but simply the language of the Bible. If it is the case that the crown seeks to ban biblical scripture, that would be a bold move."

He went on to argue that "free speech is foundational to the functioning of society - just as much as freedom of the press and democracy - and it must be protected at all costs."

"We need to stand against the movement which says it's only ok to say things that don't offend others. That might be nice for people in the short term, but it is not beneficial in the long term," he explained.

Free to challenge Islam?

Mr Overd, Mr Stockwell and two friends were preaching in Bristol's Broadmead Shopping Centre, in July last year

The group that gathered was sometimes loud and aggressive, with some swearing and hurling abuse.

The preachers took it in turns to address the crowd, and to answer questions and objections.

There was debate on several points, especially over the differences between Islam and Christian belief. Several hecklers appeared to be supportive of Islam.

At one point, Mr Stockwell had a debate with a Muslim man in which both individuals expressed their opposition to the other's religious beliefs.

'Threatening or abusive words'

The police did not arrive at the scene until about an hour into the preaching. **Video evidence submitted** to the court, shows Mr Overd being interrupted and forcibly removed from the scene by a police officer.

But the court found Mr Overd and Mr Stockwell 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."

In their ruling, the magistrates said that "we feel it has been proved that both defendants' behaviour went beyond preaching the virtues of their religion."

They ordered the two preachers to pay £2,016 each, in fines and costs.

Mr Overd and Mr Stockwell are appealing the conviction.

The Crown Prosecution Service is also pursuing a Criminal Behaviour Order against Mr Overd, with a hearing expected in May 2017.

Speaking of love, accused of hate

Responding to the judgment, Mr Stockwell said:

"Our motivation for public preaching is love. We want people to have access to the good news about Jesus Christ. I am shocked that God's message of love, is now considered hateful and dangerous. Today, speaking God's truth seems to be a hate crime, according to some.

"There is a very disturbing pattern here. We declare Jesus' message and critique rival beliefs such as Islam. Some people don't like what we say, and threaten violence to silence us. Then, instead of defending free speech and protecting us, the police shut down free speech to avoid public disorder. And then a court convicts us of provoking disorder and risking violence!

"Something has gone badly wrong. This gives a green light to Islamists and other groups to silence speech that they don't like, simply by threatening disorder or violence.

"Freedom of speech is under assault. People should be free to express their beliefs in public, without risk of harm, violence or other repercussions."

Freedoms at stake

Andrea Williams, chief executive of the Christian Legal Centre, responded to the judgment, saying:

"The Bible and its teachings are the foundation of our society and provided many of the freedoms and protections that 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 offence.

"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 these preachers are absolutely right to appeal the decision.

"'Offence' 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 to abuse which was hurled at them. For a court to rule that this breaks the law is extraordinary."