

Bishops, too, are entitled to unpleasant opinions

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A humanist politician in Ireland is trying to prosecute a Catholic Bishop for hate speech. Fine Gael election candidate John Colgan complained to the police about a homily delivered by the Bishop of Raphoe, Philip Boyce, at the Knock shrine, saying that it breached the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act, 1989.

The police have confirmed that they've prepared a file and forwarded it to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Mr Colgan's complaint referred to two particular passages in Dr Boyce's homily which he believes broke the law. One referred to the Catholic Church in Ireland being "attacked from outside by the arrows of a secular and godless culture".

The second stated: "For the distinguishing mark of Christian believers is the fact they have a future; it is not that they know all the details that await them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness."

The *Irish Times* reported that Mr Colgan said: "I believe statements of this kind are an incitement to hatred of dissidents, outsiders, secularists, within the meaning of the [Incitement to Hatred] Act, who are perfectly good citizens within the meaning of the civil law. The statements exemplify the chronic antipathy towards secularists, humanists etc, which has manifested itself in the ostracising of otherwise perfectly good Irish citizens, who do not share the aims of the Vatican's Irish Mission Church."

When Mr Colgan wrote to the Bishop asking for an apology and retraction, Dr Boyce responded that it was not his intention to "disparage in any way the sincere efforts of those with no religious beliefs, atheists, humanists etc. I have too much respect for each human person, since I believe all are created in the image of God. At Knock I wished to encourage and confirm the hope of believers, even in the present challenging times, since trust in God was the theme I was given."

Our interest in this case comes from the National Secular Society's long-time campaign to protect free speech from religious restriction.

We were at the forefront of getting the blasphemy law abolished and have opposed the introduction of legislation in [England](#) and in the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#) that would give religion a special protection from examination, criticism or mockery.

When they are first proposed, these kinds of laws are usually presented as an added protection for believers to practise and observe their religion without interference. But, of course, that right is already protected in just about every human rights charter ever written.

The danger from these laws usually comes from other rather more vague formulations that intend to prevent "religious hatred" or "vilification of religion" or "defamation of religion". Such phraseology seeks to protect not only the believer's physical safety, but also his or her feelings and sensitivities.

This puts us in a completely different – and dangerous – arena.

And this is why I absolutely oppose John Colgan's effort to prosecute the Bishop of Raphoe. Free speech is worth nothing unless it is available to everyone, believer and non-believer alike.

Does Mr Colgan not see that his attempted prosecution of the Bishop is no different from the efforts of Islamists to silence their critics through the use of blasphemy laws or by charges of 'Islamophobia' and racism? Or the religious activists who try to close art exhibitions that they claim offend their religious feelings?

When street preachers rail against homosexuality, they often upset people who overhear them. Indeed, there have been several cases in the UK of such preachers being arrested for inciting hatred against gay people when, in fact, they were simply repeating what it says in their holy book. Prosecuting them would have meant prosecuting the Bible - not a desirable use of secular courts' time. The NSS has stood up for the right of street preachers to say what they want, even if someone is offended, just as long as there is no threat to the physical safety of those they are insulting.

Those who choose to stop and listen to homophobic preachers and are enraged should not send for the Old Bill, but should shout back. Differences of opinion should be settled by debate and rational exchange, not through violence or intimidation.

Similarly with Mr Colgan. If he doesn't like what the Bishop said, he should argue with him, not seek his prosecution.

Actually, there was nothing in what the Bishop said that could be regarded as even remotely inflammatory or an 'incitement to hatred'. Inciting hatred that will lead to violence against people steps over the line, but criticising their opinions most definitely does not. If the Bishop thinks his pious approach to life is superior to that of atheists, then he should be entitled to say so. Equally, atheists should be able to argue back that the Bishop is deluded and ridiculous, if they want to.

But if in the unlikely event that Mr Colgan's complaint succeeds, the people of Ireland will have to think twice before engaging in vigorous debate on religious matters lest they, too, end up in the dock. This is utterly ridiculous.

Mr Colgan should withdraw his complaint immediately and grow a thicker skin.

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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