

Verdict delayed in prosecution of "offensive" Northern Ireland preacher

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The judge presiding over the trial of Pastor James McConnell – accused of sending a grossly offensive message by uploading a sermon critical of Islam – will not give a verdict until 5 January 2016.

McConnell, aged 78, was charged under the Communications Act 2003 with sending a "grossly offensive" message for a sermon in which he called Islam "satanic" and said that although there may be "good Muslims in Britain" he didn't trust them.

The judge rejected an attempt during the trial by McConnell's legal team to have the case thrown out and said he would reach a judgement on the "interesting" case in the New Year.

Keith Porteous Wood, the executive director of the National Secular Society, said: "This is a chilling prosecution and regardless of the verdict next year the trial is a sad indictment of free speech in the UK. What Pastor McConnell said was no doubt very offensive to a great number of people, but that is immaterial.

"Religious believers of different faiths must have the right to hold strong opinions about the beliefs and doctrines of others, to give forthright sermons, and to debate each-other openly; just as the non-religious must have the right to reject all religion and express their criticism and satire of religious ideas.

"While we reject what McConnell has said, it is clear that he was not inciting violence. The threshold for restricting freedom of speech should be set very high, and this case does not approach that boundary. We see this as an important test case."

The National Secular Society and a range of Christian groups have been joined in their opposition to the prosecution by Dr Muhammad Al-Hussaini, an imam, who has been vocal in defending McConnell's right to freedom of expression.

Al-Hussaini said that the decision to press the prosecution against the fiery Christian preacher was "contrary to our country's tradition of freedom of expression."

McConnell refused to accept an informed warning for the sermon, which would have been on his criminal record for 12 months. Under questioning during the trial McConnell said, "If I took that informed warning that would be me gagged."

The preacher said that the prosecution was "ridiculous" and that he never had any intention of hurting Muslims.

The National Secular Society was very [critical of the decision](#) to prosecute the Pastor and wrote to the Public Prosecution Service of Northern Ireland to register its serious concerns about the decision, arguing that it would chill free speech.

In correspondence with the NSS the Public Prosecution Service [claimed](#) that the prosecution was in the "public interest" – a conclusion which the National Secular Society strongly contested.

It was [revealed](#) in July that the principal prosecution witness against James McConnell was a Muslim who praised the Islamic State's rule of Mosul. In January 2015 Dr Raied Al-Wazzan, said that "since the Islamic State took over, [Mosul] has become the most peaceful city in the world." He added that "you can go from east to west of the city without fear", in comments he later 'withdrew'.

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