

Victory for free speech as Pastor James McConnell found not guilty over “grossly offensive” sermon

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The National Secular Society has welcomed a court's ruling that Northern Ireland Pastor James McConnell is "not guilty" for a sermon he uploaded online that was critical of Islam.

NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans described the ruling as a "welcome reassertion of the fundamental right to freedom of expression."

He added, "While we and many others disagree strongly with the tone and content of the Pastor's remarks, a heartening and broad coalition of groups have stood up for his right to express his views.

"At a time when freedom of speech is being curtailed and put at risk in any number of ways, this is a much needed statement from the judge that free speech will be defended and that Islam is not off-limits.

"While we welcome the ruling, serious questions remain about the PPS' decision to pursue this case, particularly given that it was brought about after a [complaint](#) from a man who had to retract his praise for the Islamic State's rule."

Dr Raied Al-Wazzan, who said Mosul "has become the most peaceful city in the world" under IS, was described as the "chief witness" for the prosecution.

The NSS had written to the Northern Ireland Public Prosecution Service in an attempt to have the prosecution called off and criticising their "chilling" decision to go ahead with the case. The PPS said their decision was "in the public interest" without explaining why.

Mr Evans added: "Now that McConnell has rightly been found not guilty, the PPS needs to be held to account for its reckless pursuit of this prosecution. The terrible effect on the exercise of free speech if McConnell had been found guilty are obvious.

"The right verdict has now been reached, but this case should never have been pursued."

The judge said that while McConnell had made offensive remarks, they were not "grossly offensive" under the law.

Delivering his verdict he added: "The courts need to be very careful not to criminalise speech which, however contemptible, is no more than offensive.

"It is not the task of the criminal law to censor offensive utterances."

Pastor McConnell had been charged under the Communications Act 2003 after he described Islam as "satanic" and "heathen".

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