

ABORTION

British government thinks again, “silent prayer is not unlawful”

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

13_09_2023

**Patricia
Gooding-
Williams**



“Silent prayer is not, in itself, unlawful”. After months of controversy, due to the shocking arrests of [Isabel Vaughan-Spruce](#), [Father Sean Gough](#) and [Adam Smith-Connor](#) for praying silently near an abortion clinic, the British Home Secretary, Suella Braverman,

has written a public **letter to police forces** in England and Wales, to clarify it is not a criminal offence to pray in the privacy of one's mind in public.

The welcome clarification scores an important goal for the pro-life movement and reaffirms the fundamental right to freedom of thought. But, "in itself", the minister's statement does not get to the heart of the matter which remains unresolved. Primarily, the letter does not address the thorny issue of the judicial straight jacket imposed by the legislation covering areas around abortion clinics which violates other fundamental democratic rights: freedom of movement, freedom of expression and freedom of religion. It's still a criminal offence to offer any form of charitable support to vulnerable pregnant women within a radius of 150 metres of an abortion facility under a **Public Space Protection Order** (PSPO) and the same restrictions will soon apply to every abortion clinic across England and Wales when "buffer zones" are introduced under the controversial **Public Order Bill** (POB) voted in March 2023.

Suella Braverman's letter comes at a time when public confidence in the police force is at an all time low and the government is under pressure to be seen to be taking action. It was to this end that the senior minister wrote a long letter to all police forces on the numerous varied ambiguities caused by police behaviour which has alarmed the public. She not only calls on officers to stop arresting people unlawfully but to collectively work to "improve public confidence in policing". This she writes has been damaged by the "perception that police in recent years have been seen, on occasion, to be taking a political stance", making concrete reference to sensational news episodes, including excessive indulgence towards supporting LGBT rights. Instead, their role she reminds them is to, "uphold the law as it is written... not to champion social change or take sides". The letter further reminded officers that, "holding lawful opinions, even if those opinions may offend others, is not a criminal offence".

Within this perspective, silent prayer on the streets of England is no longer a crime. The welcome news comes as a relief for many not least for Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, Father Sean Gogh and Adam Smith-Connor who we recall were all arrested after police officers interrogated them about their intentions and prayers which otherwise were imperceptible, prompting the introduction of the term "thought police" by the media.

In response to Suella Braverman's letter, Isabel Vaughan-Spruce said, "It is not for the government to determine my beliefs on abortion, my beliefs that women deserve better support, nor police the faith that I hold in my own mind. I'm delighted to see the Home Secretary clarify to police that it is not a crime to pray inside your own mind. This is a basic tenet of a free democracy – yet I have been arrested twice for doing

no more than that". Whereas, Jeremiah Igunnubole, legal counsel for [Alliance Defending Freedom](#) (ADF UK), who continues to support Vaughan-Spruce's legal defence, explained, "If Isabel had been shouting loudly about climate change on the street where she stood, there would have been no arrest. But because her silent, personal thoughts expressed a particular view on abortion – one that is not approved of by the authorities – she was arrested".

But, while the Home Secretary has put a stop to silent prayer being equated with "thought crime", it mustn't be forgotten that it is still illegal to pray out loud or visibly, or even to be a discreet presence with the possibility of talking to and offering concrete help to a young woman who is thinking of aborting her baby, without mentioning any gesture that could be considered intimidating or harassment. Under the current legislation, the only presence and activity permitted is indiscernible silent prayer by perhaps only solitaires.

One can't help wondering what would happen if a larger group of 20 or 30 people gathered to pray peacefully outside an abortion facility. Would that turn the tide once again? It's perfectly obvious, the law intends to crack down on the visible presence of pro-lifers to prevent women considering an abortion changing their minds. More importantly, these charitable volunteers offer real choices, provide information on the numerous services available to help these women, financial support or companionship. Something abortion clinics don't do. They offer one choice only: abortion.

As things stand, the legislation on abortion in the UK has been reinforced. Now, it remains to be seen, if and how much Suella Braverman's letter will be followed or if other means will be found to deter and intimidate silent prayer. It certainly does not guarantee Adam Smith-Connor a not guilty verdict in his court case on November 16th and nor does it protect Isabel Vaughan-Spruce from being taken to court for a second time. This is also what Adam Smith-Connor thinks who, commenting on the minister's letter with Daily Compass said that, "it's a positive development but there's a long way to go and I still have a court case pending, with no guarantee of the outcome at this stage".

Moreover, the British government is well aware that the restrictions being imposed around abortion clinics cancel other fundamental rights which are protected by domestic and international law: freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom of religion. But, Members of Parliament voted against an important amendment which would have explicitly protected silent prayer and offers of charitable support for women. In addition, the ambiguous and undefined use of the term "prayer" is partly responsible for the current situation and for which the government is as "guilty" as the

police, if not more. These are the issues still waiting for the Home Secretary's attention. In the meantime, let's celebrate Suella Braverman's letter, which quite rightly reminds the police that ordinary citizens have not lost their right to think thoughts, on any subject, whatever their location on British territory.