

JUDGMENT

UK, shock verdict: silent prayer against abortion is a crime

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"I'm tranquil but I am very disappointed and overwhelmingly sad for my country. It is the first thoughtcrime conviction in British history". This is how **Adam Smith-Connor** commented on the phone to the *Daily Compass* immediately after District Judge Orla

Austin found him guilty of silent prayer yesterday, at Poole Magistrates' Court in England. The judge also ordered him to pay £9000 in court fees and gave him a two year conditional discharge meaning he will be sentenced only if convicted of future offences within the next two years.

Smith-Connor lost his case after his defence attorneys failed to convince the court that prayerful thoughts, beliefs and opinions were not a crime, especially as he stood partially hidden behind a tree, they argued, peacefully and silently on a public street and had his back to the facility. According to the ruling on 16 October, Smith-Connor, a former army veteran and father-of-two, had breached a Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) with his prayers, an action prohibited by the law. The judge wrote in her note of judgement that Smith-Connor had failed "without reasonable excuse to comply with a requirement of the PSPO, namely he failed to leave the required area when asked by an Authorised Officer".

Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPO) are intended to deal with persistent anti-social behaviour in a local area that is detrimental to the community's quality of life. They do so by imposing conditions on the use of that area to ensure everyone can use and enjoy public spaces without experiencing nuisance and annoyance.

The PSPO buffer zone in Bournemouth where Smith-Connor was stopped by the police, was introduced in October 2022 to protect the British Pregnancy Advisory Service clinic in Ophir Road from pro-life activities under two articles 4a and 4g of the PSPO. The verdict against Adam is based on a loose interpretation of article 4a which prohibits: "Protesting, namely engaging in an act of approval/disapproval or attempted act of approval/disapproval, with respect to issues related to abortion services, by any means. This includes but is not limited to graphic, verbal or written means, prayer or counselling."

For the judge, silent prayer behind a tree, falls under this legal provision but understandably, Smith-Connor, continues to maintain his innocence. He claims that none of the activities described in the law describe his actions on 24 November 2022 for which he has been convicted. "Today is a dark dangerous day for our nation. The government has sanctioned venturing in to peoples minds and looking into their thoughts. I hope my guilty verdict will wake people up to what's going on in Britain", said Smith-Connor after the ruling.

The judge highlighted the evidence provided in court against Smith-Connor which included emails he had written to the local council stating his plan to pray for his

son Jacob, who had died in an abortion 22 years ago and those suffering from abortion near the British Pregnancy Advisory Service clinic (BPAS) in Bournemouth; that he was consciously praying within the boundary of a buffer zone; his head was bowed and his hands clasped in prayer. Bearing this in mind, Judge Austin wrote in her judgement, "I find that the defendant was capable of being seen by those in the area, he was engaged in prayer and that his conduct would have been perceptible to an observer". These "acts of disapproval related to the Clinic's activities" breached the buffer zone. Smith-Connor's actions, in her opinion were "deliberate".

After the ruling, Jeremiah Igunnubole, legal counsel for Alliance Defending Freedom UK (ADF), called the result a "legal turning point of immense proportions." "A man has been convicted today because of the content of his thoughts – his prayers to God – on the public streets of England," Igunnubole said. "We can hardly sink any lower in our neglect of basic fundamental freedoms of free speech and thought."

"If thought becomes a crime then we've moved into the realm of thought policing as well as discriminating against those with religious beliefs, this should be a concern to each and every person of goodwill regardless of their faith or even which side of the abortion debate they stand on", said Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, director of UK March for Life. She was found **not guilty** of similar charges by Birmingham Magistrate's Court in 2023 and recently **received compensation** after police officers arrested her for praying near an abortion clinic.

Smith-Connor intends to appeal the ruling. In the meantime, he has reached a court agreement to pay Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole Council (BCPC) the £9000 fine in £250 monthly instalments for the next three years. In fact, once the guilty verdict had been pronounced wrangling over legal costs occupied most of the three hour hearing. King's Council representing the Council unsuccessfully tried to burden ADF, which had defended Smith-Connor, with their legal costs of £100,000 which the Council will now have to pay despite not having the money due to its insolvency.

The disproportionate investment of £100,000 spent on prosecution for praying provoked a reaction from former U.K. Member of Parliament Miriam Cates. "This isn't '1984,' but 2024 – nobody should be on trial for the mere thoughts they hold in their mind," Cates said. "It's outrageous that the local council are pouring taxpayer funding into prosecuting a thought-crime at a time where resources are stretched thin."

Moreover, the echo of the shocking sentence has also reached the British Parliament. Sir Edward Leigh, "Father of the House of Commons," meaning the most senior member of parliament, expressed outrage at the judgement. "It is disgraceful that

in Britain in 2024 someone can be put on trial for praying silently in his head," Leigh said. "Unfortunately, we have seen repeated cases of free speech under threat in the U.K. when it comes to the expression of Christian beliefs. To offer a prayer silently in the depths of your heart cannot be an offence. The government must clarify urgently that freedom of thought is protected as a basic human right."