

Christians' rights: Martyred on a cross of secular liberalism



Shirley Chaplin, a nurse, was moved to a clerical role for refusing to remove a crucifix necklace
Photo: APEX NEWS & PICTURES

You might think of the Reformation or perhaps the fate of alleged witches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But there is a much more contemporary answer; the last English martyr was arguably a 69-year-old street preacher called Harry Hammond.

Twelve years ago, Mr Hammond went into Bournemouth city centre on a Saturday afternoon carrying a placard which read: “Jesus Gives Peace, Jesus is Alive, Stop Immorality, Stop Homosexuality, Stop Lesbianism, Jesus is Lord.”

As he started to speak, a crowd surrounded him, pushed him to the ground, threw water and soil at him, and pulled down his sign.

The police arrived, noted that Mr Hammond had been attacked and arrested him for the incitement of

his attackers.

They did not arrest anyone who had assaulted him. In court they said that they had been uncertain whether they should protect or arrest him.

I would not have believed such a scenario was possible in this country.

Many people, including Christians, would not agree with Mr Hammond's views, but, as a victim of violence, should he have been arrested? Even Peter Tatchell, best known for campaigning in support of gay rights, offered to testify on Mr Hammond's behalf.

My own family history has Jewish roots, and so it was with a sense of irony that I discovered that the legislation used to arrest Harry Hammond has its roots in the Public Order Act of 1936, passed to prevent Oswald Mosley's Black Shirts from marching through a Jewish neighbourhood in London's East End.

Those who drafted the original version of this Act would be horrified to see its new application.

Since the Hammond case just over a decade ago, the British courts have become a battleground for the clash of secular and Christian viewpoints.

The battle has been almost universally one way as the rights of Christians, in terms of the ability to practise their faith in the public sphere, have been eroded to the point where they have virtually no protection.

The cases that I have been instructed in are alarming- and it's not just the "little people": health workers or junior civil servants.

It's also the top accountant being told he's lost his job because a public authority disapproves of his church's website.

And it's not just people's jobs that are at stake. Even the right to worship is under threat with Christians being prosecuted for singing hymns at church on a Sunday because they're too noisy.

I have acted for a doctor and nurse who prayed for a patient; for an employee who disapproved of people living together (the very belief in marriage was discriminatory); for the Exeter Christian Union, excluded from the student body for believing that you should have to be Christian to join the Christian Union.

I almost forget my own case when the Bar Council launched a prosecution against me which could have prevented me from practising in this field, but were forced to back down after stinging criticism from a High Court Judge.

And this is not an erosion of rights for people of faith - Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs continue to be

protected by the law - but for people of one particular faith: Christianity.

The battle will, no doubt, continue.

It seems that the British legal system is intent on removing the Judeo-Christian foundation of our laws, which have served us for a thousand years, replacing them with a secular, liberal worldview which dispenses tolerance to all those who agree with it and relentless hostility, or even persecution, to those who do not.

Tuesday's judgment in the European Court on cases affecting the rights of Christians in Britain is a Magna Carta moment. Its verdicts will have a profound impact on the civil and religious liberties of millions of people in the UK and beyond.

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