



Focus on Religious Freedom

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"Are you Praying?" A Cautionary Tale for America

A pro-life volunteer, Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, was approached by police in Birmingham, England on Dec. 6, 2022 and asked, "Are you praying?" as she silently stood near a closed abortion clinic. She was subsequently arrested when she admitted she "might" be praying inside her head. She was charged with four counts of breaking a Public Space Protection Order (PSPO), designed to stop antisocial behavior, because police received complaints from an onlooker who suspected she was praying even though she was not holding a sign or making any visible form of protest. She had been spotted near the clinic three other times and when asked about these occasions, she explained that she may have been praying but she also may have been thinking about other things. Nevertheless, she endured this ordeal even though her 'behavior' was quiet and peaceful.

"It's abhorrently wrong that I was searched, arrested, interrogated by police and charged simply for praying in the privacy of my own mind. Censorship zones purport to ban harassment, which is already illegal. Nobody should ever be subject to harassment. But what I did was the furthest thing from harmful - I was exercising my freedom of thought, my freedom of religion, inside the privacy of my own mind. Nobody should be criminalized for thinking and for praying, in a public space in the UK," Isabel told Alliance Defending Freedom UK.⁽¹⁾

George Washington University Law Professor, Jonathan Turley, wrote, "... free speech has been in free fall in the UK for years. It is a cautionary tale for those in the United States, which is facing arguably the largest anti-free speech movement in its history. ... It is easy for Americans to wave off such European prosecutions by pointing to our First Amendment. However, there is a growing movement in the U.S. to replicate such European laws."⁽²⁾

"The UK is an example of the slippery slope of speech criminalization that inevitably took them to 'thought crimes,' even criminal prayers. These cases should be a wake up for all who value free speech (and freedom of religion). If such prosecutions stands, free speech literally does not have a prayer in the Western world."⁽³⁾

***"If the freedom of speech is taken away, then dumb and silent we may be led,
like sheep to slaughter." - George Washington***

(aleteia.org, 12/24/22(1); jonathanturley.org, 12/24/22(2)(3); gbnews.uk, 12/23/22; nypost.com, 12/22/22; birminghammail.co.uk, 12/20/22; cna.com, 12/21/22)