

STATEMENT BY DANIEL SCOT

My name is Daniel Scot. It is a great pleasure to be here in Britain – a country with a great reputation for free speech and religious liberty. But I am very concerned about a new law being proposed by your Government. I can tell you, from my personal experience, that the plans for an "incitement to religious hatred" offence are very dangerous to free speech.

Since 2001, we have had similar laws in the state of Victoria in Australia. These laws were used against me by a well-organised Muslim group after I criticised Islam in a church seminar for Christians. Although my criticisms of Islam were calm, reasonable and based on my considerable knowledge and experience - and although these comments were made in the setting of a Christian religious meeting - I was found guilty under these laws. If such laws can catch someone like me, then similar laws could catch anyone for criticism of religion.

Let me tell you what happened. On 9 March 2002 I gave a seminar in a church in Melbourne. The aim was to help Christians understand the Muslim faith. I have done many such seminars in churches throughout Australia. The reason that I speak on this subject is because of my particular experience and knowledge.

I was born in Pakistan in 1951. My parents were Christian. I grew up in Pakistan - a country which is predominantly Muslim and whose culture is

Islamic. I was lecturing in Mathematics at the FC College under the University of Punjab. In fact, in order to get this job I had to study Islam and pass an independent exam. In 1986 Pakistani law changed and blasphemy against the prophet Mohammed became a criminal offence punishable by death or life imprisonment. Shortly after this new law was introduced I was summoned before my College Authorities at Degree College Okara and pressured to convert to Islam. I explained that I had no assurance of salvation in Mohammed and Salvation was only through Jesus Christ. As a result of this, a charge of blasphemy was brought against me. I also learned that several thousand students were threatening to kill me. I went into hiding and eventually fled to Australia. I cannot go back to my homeland because of the capital charge against me.

So, when I give seminars to Christians about the teaching of Islam and when I talk about the dangers of fundamentalist Islam and Sharia Law, I know what I am talking about.

I also make it clear in my seminars that not all Muslims know what Islam teaches. Most Muslims do not know in detail the full teaching of Islam and are peaceful friendly people. But I believe it is important that people are aware of the implications of the full teaching of Islam. In my seminars I express criticism of Islamic teaching on jihad, women and other matters. These criticisms of Islam are not unique to me. They are mainstream international concerns.

On 9 March 2002 I was giving my usual seminar to a group of Christians in a church. Unknown to me, three Muslim converts were in the audience. They had been encouraged to attend by a Muslim who is a member of the Islamic Council of Victoria who also worked for the Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria. The three Muslim converts made notes of the seminar which formed the basis of a complaint that my seminar had vilified their faith.

I ended up in court. The case lasted from October 2003 until June 2005 and has cost us over 200,000 Australian dollars. The cost would have been higher but much of the legal work was done for free. I was found guilty of "religious vilification". But I believe I am innocent of such a thing. All I did was to state my well-founded beliefs about the dangers of fundamentalist Islam and Sharia Law. The case has caused me a great deal of alarm and distress.

Under the law I was charged with, any statements made for any genuine religious purpose by a person acting reasonably and in good faith are exempt from the "vilification" offence. But, despite my extensive knowledge and experience of Islam and despite the fact that my seminar was for Christians in a church, the judge dismissed this exemption. By the way, I understand there is no such exemption planned by the UK Government for its "incitement to religious hatred" law.

In Australia, this law is a civil law with civil penalties. The court has ordered me to place four advertisements in Victorian newspapers carrying a

statement bearing my name but written by the Islamic Council of Victoria. The statement says, among other things, that I have vilified all Muslims. It says I “presented the seminar in a way that was essentially hostile, demeaning and derogatory of all Muslim people, their God, their prophet Mohammed and in general Muslim beliefs and practices”. The cost of placing the advertisements would be about 70,000 Australian dollars. The court has also ordered me to give an undertaking not to make any similar criticisms of fundamentalist Islam anywhere in Australia at any time in the future.

If the court could show me where I have been inaccurate or untruthful, I would apologise for that. But everything I said was accurate. In all good conscience, I cannot apologise for telling what I believe is the truth. Nor can I keep silent about the teachings of fundamentalist Islam. I cannot say I was wrong, when I believe I was right. I cannot do what the court is asking.

As a result of this, I may be found in contempt of court. This offence carries a possible prison sentence. I do not want to go to prison, but that may be the price I have to pay. But I will not say my teaching was wrong and I will not stop speaking the truth about the dangers of fundamentalist Islam.

I understand the offence proposed by the UK Government is to be a criminal offence punishable by a maximum sentence of seven years in prison. This proposed law frightens me because I know what it could do.

I believe there are two things about my case which people should worry about. First, people should worry that fair comment and criticism about religion can so easily lead to a legal action under such a law. Second, people should worry that a well-organised minority religious group who knows how the legal system works can bring litigation to silence any criticism of its beliefs. I have no doubt that if the "religious vilification" law did not exist in Victoria, those three Muslim converts would never have been sent to my seminar.

There may be some people who do not agree with my criticisms of Islam (although there are many who do agree). But that is not the point here. The point is, I should be free to argue my views - and I should be particularly free to do so in a religious meeting. What if you want to criticise Islam? Or Christianity, or Judaism, or Hinduism? I believe you should be free to do so. I believe you should be free to do so without fear of being hauled before the courts.

I am a man who had to flee for my life from the effects of Islam. I have studied Islamic religious history and its holy books. I am an ordained Christian minister who spoke calmly and reasonably of my concerns about Islam to a Christian group in a Christian church. And in doing so, I have suffered a lengthy and costly legal action and been found guilty of "vilifying Islam". I face the possibility of going to prison. If it happened to me, it could happen to you.

Having been in fear of my life because of my Christian faith, I know how precious freedom of speech and religious liberty is. It is too precious to throw away in a misguided attempt to protect religion. An "incitement to religious hatred" offence will damage free speech and stir up religious groups to bring litigation against each other. If my story says anything, it says drop this proposal.