

War on religious freedom: We must stand up for Finnish Christians facing trial for their faith

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While most Americans were still asleep Monday morning, Finnish member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen and Lutheran Bishop Juhana Pohjola entered a courtroom in Helsinki, Finland. They are on trial for their faith in court proceedings that began three weeks ago, concluding an almost three-year-long campaign of legal harassment from the Finnish government. They and the prosecution made their final arguments Tuesday.

Päivi Räsänen, a 62-year-old medical doctor and grandmother of seven, faces three charges of so-called "ethnic agitation" for expressing her belief in the teachings of the Bible by having published a pamphlet on marriage in 2004, for taking part in a discussion on a radio show in 2019, and for a tweet with a picture of a Bible passage. For this, she faces up to two years in prison if convicted.

Meanwhile, Bishop Pohjola faces a single charge of "ethnic agitation" for merely hosting Räsänen's booklet on his church's website — that's it. If convicted, Bishop Pohjola faces the prospect of two years in prison as well.

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The absurd, anti-Christian hostility inherent in this case cannot be overstated. A prosecutor began the trial in January by reading unrelated Bible verses as examples of "bad" speech. This week, the prosecution continued its final arguments by stating that "the Bible cannot overrule Finnish law" and the use of the word "sin" can be "harmful."

Finland is a European liberal democracy that ostensibly promises its citizens basic human rights such as freedom of speech, religion, assembly, equality under the law, property rights, among others. However, the Finnish government seems to have forgotten these core values, acting more like a woke theocracy as it attempts to punish citizens who dare contradict the secular dogmas of the day.

As a politician, Räsänen should have every right to engage in debate on controversial topics without facing criminal charges. And as a Christian minister, Bishop Pohjola should at the very least be free to publish a pamphlet articulating a Biblical worldview without the possibility of jail time — as should all citizens regardless of their vocation or calling in life.

For years, many have warned that Western governments have been overtaken by radical secularism — guided by a disdain of Christianity — and that the slippery slope would result in people of faith facing trial for living out their beliefs in the public square. In Finland, the slide has stopped; that day has come.

Yet, this is not just a Finnish problem for the Finnish people. With media from all over the world covering this case, it is a critical reminder of what is to come — especially here in America when a modern society chooses to push acceptance of radical and unproven ideologies rather than embracing the very freedoms of religion and speech that allowed the West to flourish. It is evidently clear the rot has already begun to set in on our side of the Atlantic.

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Legislation passed recently by the U.S. House of Representatives underlines this point. The Equality Act passed last year would effectively outlaw disagreement on matters of sex and gender ideology. This poses a clear and dangerous threat to any American who adheres to and dares publicly profess widely held orthodox religious beliefs on marriage, sexuality, or what used to be commonly accepted beliefs about the biology of men and women. Just last week, the House passed the Global Respect Act, which would allow for visa sanctions to be placed on foreign individuals perceived to be out of step with the left's new and radical gender

ideology.

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To be perfectly clear, not only do these bills fail to protect religious freedom, they declare total war on it.

The events in Finland should serve as a nine-alarm fire to those who cherish the very political experiment in ordered liberty that enabled America and Western Civilization to flourish. The basic rights of religious freedom and free speech are under attack across the globe. When such blatant attacks are directed at high-profile figures in a Western democracy like Finland, we have a duty to raise the alarm and come to their defense.

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Throughout their trial, M.P. Räsänen and Bishop Pohjola have been gracious and kind while facing immense social pressure and media scrutiny. They are in our prayers as they await the court's decision, on March 30. May their witness embolden others to stand up for their fundamental human rights to live out their faith and express their beliefs without fear of government reprisal or being canceled.

Their battle is not only legal and political but spiritual. So is ours.

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