

What you can do

If this law is passed the freedom to proclaim the Gospel will be put in jeopardy. The changes proposed will fundamentally affect our freedoms.

Now, this will not all happen at once. Criticism of religion will not become illegal overnight. But there is a real danger that litigious organised groups will use the law to silence their critics. Case after case will ratchet up the restrictions on free speech and evangelism.

There will be a chilling effect on free speech.

There are clear indications that this is already happening. Let me tell you about three cases that The Christian Institute has heard about in recent years.

(1) Milnrow Evangelical Church, near Rochdale in Lancashire distributes thoughtful Christian literature to Muslim homes. Local Muslims also distribute their own literature to non-Muslims. In June 2002 a church

member was visited by two Police Officers who told him he had committed a serious racial offence by distributing the Christian literature to Muslims. He was told his name would go on police records and that they would file a report, implying that a prosecution could follow.

At this point many Churches may have backed down, but the Pastor of the church was a former Police Officer. He took legal advice from a leading human rights lawyer which confirmed that the Church had not broken any law and the police had acted wrongly. A robust official complaint was made. Thankfully the police responded by meeting with those concerned to confirm that no offence had been committed and by writing a conciliatory letter. But this case shows the danger of how laws not intended to suppress religious freedom can easily do so. A new religious incitement offence would have made the situation substantially worse.

(2) Last year the Institute met a trainee civil servant who worked for a Government agency. A Muslim member of staff got talking to her about what she called the similarities between Islam and Christianity. There were several conversations. A month later the trainee was accused by her

employers of harassing the Muslim. The Muslim had been keeping a diary record of all the comments made by the Christian. There was an enquiry. An apology was demanded. Soon afterwards the Christian trainee decided to leave the Government agency.

(3) Also last year The Institute had a call from a Christian who worked for a business. For years, the Christian was told by his employers that he could not talk about his Christian faith at any time at work including his lunch hour and even if he was asked about his faith. The Christian Institute is sure that the employer acted illegally in making this demand. The Christian involved was informed of this but decided that to challenge his employer would make it very difficult at work.

So, those cases show the kind of atmosphere Christians can now face. It is in this atmosphere that an incitement to religious hatred law will operate.

The Bill is to be/is being debated by the House of Lords in October. The Christian Institute believes it is likely that the Lords will not accept the proposal as it is currently worded. Therefore, The Institute believes that the Bill will return to the Commons, towards the end of this year.

So what can we do?

1. The first thing we have to do is to make sure we understand the issue.

This is why we are holding the meeting here tonight. Furthermore, there are briefings available at the back of [this hall] and on the Christian

Institute website www.christian.org.uk (which is very easy to remember)

We need to oppose the Government plans. And we need to do so in a way which is very firm, but also accurate. It will do no good to make wild and misleading claims.

2. The next thing we should do is pray. The Bible tells us ‘...that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.’ (1 Tim. 2:1,2)

Please make this a subject of concern for your own prayer, for your prayer groups and for your Church. Please pray that the proposals are defeated.

Please pray for wisdom for the Christian Institute and all the other organizations involved in responding to the Government's plans. Please pray for Christian politicians that they will be given wisdom. Pray for fair reporting of the issues in the media.

We must pray, but let's not pray instead of acting when we have it within our power to act.

3. This brings us to the third action point. It is anticipated that the Lords will reject the offence as it is currently worded. They may pass an alternative amendment in order to protect freedom of speech. If this happens, the Bill will go back the Commons and MPs must vote again. If this happens the Bill ping-pongs between both Houses of Parliament until one side backs down, a compromise is reached or the Bill runs out of time. Can I therefore urge you to visit your MP about this issue? Even if you have contacted your MP about this issue in the past, please visit your MP in person.

There are several Labour MPs who have grave reservations about the Government's plans. Some of them voted against the Government and even more abstained. The Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrat

party both oppose the offence as party policy. The Christian Institute has analysed the past votes of MPs. It is not a foregone conclusion that the Government will win a further vote in the Commons. That is why it is important you visit your MP at his or her ‘constituency surgery’ – the time they set aside to meet people in their constituency.

Explain your opposition to such a law, using measured polite language.

Ask your MP to vote against the offence if the Bill comes back from the Lords to the Commons. Your local newspaper or public library should be able to provide you with details of the time and place.

When you meet your MP, use the kind of arguments that politicians can understand. The two main points to get across are that this law – whatever the Government’s intention – would be manipulated to limit free speech, and the offence would create an incentive for religious (and secular) groups to pursue other religions through the courts. Far from ensuring religious harmony, this law would create religious tension.

A guide on visiting your MP is available on the literature tables or from The Christian Institute website. There is also a Question and Answer

paper on the arguments used to support the proposal. This contains the arguments you are most likely to face and answers to those arguments.

4. Finally, can I urge you to publicise this important issue. It is important that people understand what is going on. It is also important that people understand that Christians and others oppose this proposed offence. Write letters to your local and national newspapers.

If you hear this issue being discussed on the radio, then get on the telephone to the radio station and express your views calmly but clearly. Say you believe the proposed offence will encourage religious groups to settle their differences through litigation and damage free speech.