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- **The former Finnish Minister of the Interior faced three criminal charges for sharing her faith-based beliefs, including on Twitter/X**

ADF (14.11.2023) – In a victory for free speech, the Helsinki Court of Appeal has dismissed all charges against Finnish Member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen and Lutheran Bishop Juhana Pohjola, who were both tried for "hate speech" in August, having publicly expressed their Christian beliefs.

Räsänen, Finland's former Interior Minister, was formally charged with "agitation against a minority group" in 2021 under a section of the [Finnish criminal code](#) titled "war crimes and crimes against humanity" for sharing her Christian beliefs on marriage and sexual ethics in a 2019 [tweet](#), as well as a 2019 live radio debate and 2004 church pamphlet. Bishop Pohjola was charged for publishing Räsänen's 2004 pamphlet. The case has garnered global media attention as human rights experts voiced concern over the threat posed to free speech.

"I am deeply relieved. The court has fully endorsed and upheld the decision of the district court, which recognized everyone's right to free speech," said Päivi Räsänen after her victory.

"It isn't a crime to tweet a Bible verse, or to engage in public discourse with a Christian perspective. The attempts made to prosecute me for expressing my beliefs have resulted in an immensely trying four years, but my hope is that the result will stand as a key precedent to protect the human right to free speech. I sincerely hope other innocent people will be spared the same ordeal for simply voicing their convictions," added Räsänen, the former Finnish Interior Minister and grandmother of eleven.

In a unanimous ruling that upheld the District Court's March 2022 unanimous acquittal, the court dismissed the arguments of the state prosecutor. It found that it *"has no reason, on the basis of the evidence received at the main hearing, to assess the case in any respect differently from the District Court. There is therefore no reason to alter the final result of the District Court's judgment."*

The Court has ordered the prosecution to pay tens of thousands in legal fees to cover costs incurred by both defendants. The prosecution could appeal a final time to the Supreme Court, with a deadline of 15 January 2024.

Certain "opinions" about the Bible are "criminal"

During the high-profile trial, the prosecution attacked core Christian teachings and cross-examined Räsänen – who is one of Finland’s longest-standing members of parliament – and the Bishop on their theology.

In her opening statement at the August 31st appeal trial, Finnish State prosecutor, Anu Mantila, claimed that, *“You can cite the Bible, but it is Räsänen’s interpretation and opinion about the Bible verses that are criminal”*.

Throughout the cross-examination, Räsänen was asked multiple times by the prosecutor if she would update or remove what she had said about marriage and sexuality in her 2004 church pamphlet, titled “Male & Female He Created Them”.

“At the heart of the prosecutor’s examination of Räsänen was this: would she recant her beliefs? The answer was no – she would not deny the teachings of her faith. The cross-examination bore all the resemblance of a “heresy” trial of the middle ages; it was implied that Räsänen had “blasphemed” against the dominant orthodoxies of the day,” said Paul Coleman, Executive Director of ADF International, serving on Räsänen’s legal team.

The prosecution had argued that the intent behind the expression of faith was irrelevant, but in the appeal judgment the Court held that, the offence “is punishable only if committed intentionally.” Räsänen should have known, argued the state prosecutor at the August trial, that her words could be offensive to certain people and therefore should have refrained from voicing her beliefs. The prosecutor argued, “The point isn’t whether it is true or not but that it is insulting”.

Free speech defended

Coordinated by ADF International, Räsänen’s legal defence highlighted the strong protection that freedom of speech enjoys in international law, in addition to being integral to Finnish democracy. The defence submitted to the court that Räsänen’s use of the word “sin” in her tweet, which the prosecution had highlighted as “insulting” and therefore unlawful, was quoted directly from the Bible, and any judgment condemning its usage would directly condemn the Bible itself.

The Appeal Court recognized that, “there is no reason to alter the final result of the District Court’s judgment,” which had recognized that while some may object to Räsänen’s statements, “there must be an overriding social reason for interfering with and restricting freedom of expression”. The District Court had concluded that there was no such justification stating that, “it is not for the District Court to interpret biblical concepts”.

“While we celebrate this monumental victory, we also remember that it comes after four years of police investigations, criminal indictments, prosecutions, and court hearings. We applaud the Helsinki Court of Appeal’s ruling in this case, and we work towards the bigger victory when such ludicrous cases are no longer brought. In a free and democratic society, all should be allowed to share their beliefs without fear of censorship.

Criminalizing speech through so-called ‘hate-speech’ laws shuts down important public debates and poses a grave threat to our democracies. We

are relieved to see courts enforce the rule of law when state authorities overstep by seeking to penalize and censor statements that they dislike,” continued Coleman, who is the author of [‘Censored: How European Hate Speech Laws are Threatening Freedom of Speech’](#).
