

Christian preacher arrested with anti-Islam sign at London Cathedral protest loses High Court battle with Met Police

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Ian Sleeper was arrested in 2017 over anti-Islam signs outside Southwark Cathedral

Christian Concern

A Christian preacher arrested outside a London cathedral with a placard saying “Love Muslims, Ban Islam, the Religion of Terror” has lost a legal claim that he was unlawfully detained by police.

Ian Sleeper was arrested on suspicion of a religiously aggravated public order offence after the incident outside Southwark Cathedral on June 23, 2017.

He staged the protest a few weeks after the London Bridge terror attack, when three Islamic State-inspired extremists killed eight people and injured 48 others in a van and knife rampage through the streets.

Earlier that year, a terrorist carried out an attack on Westminster Bridge, killing five, an Islamophobic van driver killed a Muslim man outside Finsbury Park Mosque, and a suicide bomber took 22 lives at Manchester Arena after an Ariana Grande concert.

Mr Sleeper, 57, was in possession of two signs when he was arrested - one stating “#Love Muslims, Hate Islam, Jesus is Love + Hope” and the other reading: “Love Muslims, Ban Islam, the Religion of Terror”.

The Metropolitan Police defended the rights of officers to intervene and shut down the protest, in the “febrile” aftermath of a series of terrorist attacks.

He was held in custody by the Metropolitan Police for more than 12 hours before being released on bail, and two months later he was told there would be no criminal charges.

Mr Sleeper, an evangelical Christian preacher, sued Scotland Yard, claiming false arrest, false imprisonment and breach of human rights.

After losing the initial legal battle, he took his case to the High Court, arguing his right to protest had been unlawfully blocked.

But Mr Justice Sweeting ruled on Tuesday that Mr Sleeper’s human rights had not been breached by his detention, and police had a case that his arrest was “necessary”.

“The basis for arrest was not confined to the possibility of a risk of harm eventuating to (Mr Sleeper) himself but extended to the risk to ‘other persons’ as a result of public disorder”, the judge noted.

He backed the conclusion that “the arrest and detention...was lawful.”

Venturing his case at an earlier hearing, Mr Sleeper’s barrister, Bruno Quintavalle, said: “The sign cannot reasonably be said ‘clearly to interfere’ with any rights of others.

“People in a mature democracy, such as the United Kingdom, are expected to be able to put up with insulting and abusive opposition to their religion or to their religious convictions and, this being the case, any violence which the sign might have provoked would not be a natural consequence of that speech nor would it be reasonable.”

He continued: “In any case, upon objective review, the court could not have concluded that any violence that might have resulted from the sign was a natural or reasonable consequence of the speech contained on it since the sign called upon the reader to ‘love Muslims’.

“As such, no offence... could objectively have been committed and no arrest and subsequent detention could therefore have been justified lawfully.”

The court heard a member of the public found the sign “a little bit distressing” and alerted police, with officers then asking him to give up the signs.

Mr Sleeper refused and was then arrested.

The Metropolitan Police fought his claim for damages, and argued in the High Court that the first judge who assessed Mr Sleeper’s case had come to a “reasonable finding...that exhorting people to hate a religion in the febrile context of Southwark in the aftermath of

the terrorist attack in Borough, and in Finsbury Park, was abusive and might lead to public disorder – whereas the same might not be the case at another time and in another place in, say, a debating society.

“It was also reasonable for the learned judge to believe that the appellant wanted to ban Islam, not least because he held up a sign saying that.”

After the ruling, a Met Police spokesperson said: “Our officers apply the law without fear or favour. We welcome this decision to uphold the finding that Mr Sleeper’s arrest was necessary in the circumstances and carried out proportionately.”