

# The Bible Is on Trial in Europe

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Kara Kennedy

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At the heart of Päivi Räsänen's case is a simple question with massive consequences: Can quoting the Bible be a crime? (ADF International)

A Finnish parliamentarian quoted the word of God in a social media post. Then she was charged under her country's Crimes Against Humanity law.

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Six years ago, [Päivi Räsänen](#) wrote a tweet that changed the course of her life—and is still, to this day, challenging the definition of religious freedom in Europe.

Räsänen has been a member of parliament in Finland since 1995. She's also a member of the nation's [Evangelical Lutheran Church](#)—which in 2019 announced its [official sponsorship](#) of an LGBT Pride event. In response, [she wrote](#): “How can the Church's doctrinal foundation, the #Bible, be compatible with the lifting up of shame and sin as a subject of pride?” She posted this comment alongside a picture of the Bible verse [Romans 1:27](#), which describes homosexuality as shameful: “Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.”

The next day, she opened her morning newspaper to find out that she was being investigated by police for hate speech.

“In the beginning, I didn't even believe it. It was so absurd,” Räsänen told me when we spoke recently. Surely she'd be the first to know if she was being investigated? And yet. “It turns out that a citizen had made a criminal complaint about my Twitter update and then the police started to investigate it,” she said. “The police had already informed the media before I got the information.”

During her time as minister of the Interior of Finland, between 2011 and 2015, she'd overseen the police. Now, they were interrogating her as an official part of an investigation—one that has dragged on ever since, finally reaching the Supreme Court of Finland last month.

At its heart is a simple question with massive consequences: Can quoting the Bible be a crime?

It's worth stating the fundamentals here. First, the Bible contains verses that can be offensive to modern ears—verses that condemn whole swaths of human behavior that most of us see as morally neutral. Second: Millions of Christians around the world are guided by the Christian text. Third: In democratic countries that protect freedom of religion and speech, they have every right to say so publicly.

By now, you've probably heard the stories emanating from Europe about the erosion of freedom of speech. There was the comedian [who was arrested](#) upon entry into Britain for an [X post](#) that read: "If a trans-identified male is in a female-only space, he is committing a violent, abusive act." (He added that it was okay to "punch" such a person.) There was the [mother jailed](#) after impulsively calling for mass deportations online after the son of Rwandan immigrants brutally murdered three little girls at a dance class and critically wounded six more. She wrote: "Mass deportation now, set fire to all the fucking hotels full of the bastards for all I care. . . . If that makes me a racist, so be it." The post was deleted a few hours later. And then there were the German authorities who [began a criminal investigation](#) into a social media user who'd called a politician "fat."

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To the average American, these posts are certainly distasteful: Nobody reasonable wants the mass murder of migrants, or the humiliation of trans people. The [majority of people in Western democracies](#) agree that homosexuality is not sinful. But the average American would also be shocked to learn that these kinds of views could land you in jail—or even in a police station, being interrogated. "Altogether," Räsänen told me, "I was held for 13 hours."

She went on to explain how the authorities focused on things that are, for many Christians, ordinary beliefs from the Bible:

I was made to answer very theological questions. The police were asking me things like, "What is the book of Romans? What is the message of the book of Romans? What is the message of its first chapter? What do you mean by the word *sin*?" He asked me to explain the word *shame*, and also other passages from the book of Genesis.

Nearly two years on from the initial tweet, in April 2021, the Finnish Prosecutor General [brought three charges](#) of "agitation against a minority group" against Räsänen, under the country's [War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity law](#). The crime carries penalties of up to two years in prison, per charge.

It wasn't only her tweet that was under the microscope. One of the charges related to her participation in a 2019 radio debate on human sexuality, and another to [a pamphlet](#) Räsänen co-authored just over 20 years ago, in 2004, titled *Male and Female He Created Them: Homosexual Relationships Challenge the Christian Concept of Humanity*. Räsänen has written that its purpose was simply to articulate historic Christian teaching on sexuality—"the message of grace is for all people, including members of minorities." But according to the prosecution, what she wrote in the pamphlet and said in the debate was illegal—as was that tweet.

Four years later, she still hasn't been found not guilty.

After two unanimous acquittals, [first by](#) the Helsinki District Court in 2022 and [then by](#) the Court of Appeal in 2023, one might have thought that would be the end of it. But it was not. The Finnish state prosecutor appealed yet again, dropping the radio-debate charge but dragging Räsänen before the Supreme Court for a third trial, which took place last month. There is no verdict yet.

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Before this latest trial, Räsänen told reporters outside the courtroom "My case will show whether quoting the Bible can become a crime in a free country."

Räsänen is being defended in part by the Alliance Defending Freedom International, a subsidiary of the U.S.-based conservative Christian legal organization Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF). Her lawyer, [Paul Coleman](#), noted the strange chronology of the case: Finland's current hate speech law was adopted in 2011—seven years after the pamphlet was written—and the prosecution began another eight years after that. The pamphlet had been "sitting in a basement for 15 years," he said, until police began investigating the 2019 tweet and "opened up nearly three decades of public life" to find more material. "They're really reaching back in time here," he added, raising "all sorts of questions regarding the rule of law and due process."

On top of that, Räsänen's co-author Juhana Pohjola—the second bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland—has also been charged. (His church body published the pamphlet.)

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Last month, during the Supreme Court case, prosecutors demanded criminal convictions for both Räsänen and Pohjola, as well as fines. They also sought the removal of both Räsänen's social media post and online content from the pamphlet.

The [state insisted](#) that the case was not attacking Christian theology. In her opening statement, the state prosecutor emphasized that "the authors of the Bible are not indicted"—but those who interpret what it says can be.



“You can cite the Bible,” she argued, “but it is Räsänen’s interpretation and opinion about the Bible verses that are criminal.”



“It is Räsänen’s interpretation and opinion about the Bible verses that are criminal,” argued the prosecutors at her latest trial. (ADF International)

Criminal how? According to the prosecution, Räsänen’s defense of scripture was “insulting.” Räsänen should have known, it said, that her words could be offensive to certain people and therefore refrained from speaking. The state argued that her “intent is irrelevant” and that what is relevant is how others interpret what she said. Under this view, the threshold for hate speech is not incitement or calls to violence, but emotional impact.

Bishop Pohjola, who [spoke during the trial](#), argued that the idea that Räsänen was insulting a minority group fundamentally misunderstands Christian teaching, stating: “Condemning sinful deeds does not mean questioning a person’s worth and dignity.”

“The very idea of religious freedom,” he added, “is that you are free to teach the Christian message, even if someone finds it offensive—but then you can exercise your right not to listen.”

Nobody can say when this case will be closed—but Räsänen’s lawyer argued that even if she and Pohjola are found not guilty, it has done severe damage to religious freedom in the West. “In these cases, the process becomes the punishment,” said Coleman. “The idea is that if you can drag someone through an experience like this”—especially someone so high profile—“then everyone else is looking on, and then people self-censor out of fear that they don’t want the same thing to happen to them.”

Räsänen believes her case has already had a “chilling effect” in Finland. “I have got messages from some pastors who have sent me their drafts for sermons and asked me, ‘Could they be accused of saying something like that?’” she said.

The average Finn probably doesn’t agree with Räsänen, or the Book of Romans’ statements about gay relationships. In 2019, the year she tweeted, [76 percent](#) of Finns supported gay marriage. But the fact is that many Christians *do* accept the Bible’s teaching on sexuality. Others might find their beliefs cruel, wrong, or distasteful—but in a free society, that shouldn’t decide whether they’re allowed to express them.