

GERMANY IS DRIVING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OFF THE ROAD

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Jalil Mashali expressed his faith publicly. As a result, he could be censored, saddled with legal costs, and

even lose his taxi license.

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Freedoms, when taken for granted, are eroded step by step until they are entirely lost. That is why we must always push back against authorities who seek to suppress existing freedoms.

Recently, there has been a public outcry following the German city of Essen's attempt to censor the innocuous religious expression of a Christian convert. In October 2023, taxi driver Jalil Mashali, who has lived in Germany for the past 22 years, received a letter from the city's road traffic authorities. In it, they accused Mashali of engaging in unlawful "religious advertising" because he had affixed a small Bible verse sticker on his cab's rear window. Due to the content, location, and minuscule dimensions of the sticker, Mashali argued that it does not constitute advertising. But instead of dropping the matter, the city fined him.

Those who know Mashali's story will understand the significance of the quote on the sticker: "Jesus-I am the way. The truth. And the life." Born in Iran and raised as a devout Muslim, Mashali has shared that he harboured hate for "unbelievers." Today, he testifies that Christ has completely changed his heart. His story is one of pain and redemptive healing.

At age 13, Mashali lost his lower left leg in a traffic accident. He had to undergo several operations that left him with chronic pain and the need to wear a prosthesis. Twenty years later, he travelled to Germany seeking further medical treatment in hopes of alleviating the pain in his leg. In total, he suffered through over 20 surgeries. He spent several months in hospital, barely sleeping. Driven to hopelessness when the pain remained unrelenting, Mashali considered committing suicide by rolling his wheelchair off the hospital's fourth-floor balcony. It was at this point that he was approached by a Christian

woman who offered to pray for him. Although he did not take her seriously, he accepted and was astonished when his pain ceased completely, and he was able to sleep through the night. When the pain didn't return, he began reading the Bible and eventually converted to Christianity. For him, the sticker is not religious advertising but an expression of his deeply held convictions and his firm commitment to the faith that healed him.

Although the fine and fees, amounting to €88.50, are not as exorbitant as the €1,000 fine with which Mashali was initially threatened, the crux of the matter is not the amount of the fine. In the worst-case scenario, Jalil could be deprived of the right to express his faith by being censored, saddled with legal costs, and even losing his taxi licence. Some don't understand the fuss, either regarding the city's stubborn insistence that Mashali remove the tiny sticker, or Mashali's wish to keep it despite the pressure he faces. But this isn't really a case about stickers or taxis: it's a case about religious freedom, which is a fundamental right and for good reason. For people to be able to live and speak about one's faith is the mark of a free society. The government should not be silencing peaceful expressions of faith.

In his former home country, Mashali would have likely been imprisoned or killed for sharing his beliefs. But freedom of religion and expression are protected in Germany, which has agreed to uphold the European Convention on Human Rights. Everyone should be able to safely express their faith in a free country like Germany, rather than being threatened for exercising their right to religious freedom.

Mashali is still standing firm, and rightly so, even though it might cost him dearly in the long run. If the administrative authority does not withdraw the fine, it will forward the case to the competent district court for a decision via the public prosecutor's office. It remains to be seen whether Mashali's fundamental right to freedom of religion will prevail. Until then, it is essential that we speak up in his defence, in order to safeguard freedom of religion for ourselves and for all.