

# INSIDE A MODERN-DAY HERESY TRIAL

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It was exactly one year ago, on a cold, dark winter evening in January 2022, when Paul Coleman arrived in Helsinki for the modern-day heresy trial of Finnish MP Dr. Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola.

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It was a cold, dark winter evening in January 2022 when I arrived in Helsinki, Finland, for the modern-day heresy trial of Finnish MP Dr. Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola. Arriving at my hotel, I was assigned room 101—confirming my suspicions that what I would experience the following day would be nothing short of Orwellian.

Räsänen, a longstanding member of the Finnish parliament, was being criminally prosecuted for 'hate speech.' There were four charges before the court. Räsänen faced an accusation of 'hate speech' for tweeting a picture of some Bible verses directed towards the national church of Finland after it became a sponsor of the Helsinki Pride Parade in June 2019; an accusation of 'hate speech' for writing a small booklet on marriage and sexuality for church members in 2004; and a further accusation of 'hate speech' for discussing these issues during a live radio debate in December 2019. Pohjola, in turn, faced a criminal charge for representing the Luther Foundation Finland that published the booklet in 2004. These 'hate speech' offences carry a maximum sentence of two years in prison, though on this occasion, the prosecutor was merely pursuing heavy fines and recantations.

Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) International has been supporting Räsänen since we first heard of the police investigations against her in 2019. However, we never thought the case would actually go to trial. The vast majority of 'hate speech' accusations get dropped after the police reluctantly concede no crime has been committed. The mere arrest and subsequent investigation is usually enough to damage the innocent party's reputation and warn onlookers not to make the same 'mistake.' It is a deliberate tactic that drives self-censorship across Europe.

But this case was different. Yes, the police investigated Räsänen and Juhana over a series of months. Yes, the investigations were absurd (police interrogated Räsänen on her

theology to such an extent that she joked with her friends that these interviews had become her weekly Bible studies). But the police ultimately decided no crime had been committed and, in a 10-page decision, recommended no further action. Yet, Finland's Prosecutor General overrode that advice and brought forward the prosecution anyway. And so, almost three years after the investigations began, and approaching 20 years since the booklet was first written, we were headed to a criminal trial.

The wind was howling and it was still dark and freezing cold on the morning of the trial. The Helsinki District Court is part of a series of factory buildings located near the city's docks, constructed in the '40s and repurposed for use by the Finnish Ministry of Justice. Bleak, industrial, and imposing—with a large tower flashing ominous red lights like a set of watching eyes—it was the perfect setting for this dystopian experience.

In contrast to the stark surroundings, Räsänen was smiling warmly, as always, as she arrived with her husband Niilo, a Lutheran pastor. Together, they have five children and ten young grandchildren—a number that has been steadily growing as the proceedings against her have rumbled on. Räsänen was greeted at the courthouse by dozens of supporters, who braved the cold to stand with her in solidarity. Inside, what looked like the entirety of Finland's media establishment awaited.

Confidently holding her Bible, Räsänen made the point that, above all else, it was Biblical teaching on marriage and sexual ethics that was on trial that day. And, with that, she headed inside the courtroom.

Three judges and a clerk sat at the front, their faces obscured by masks and computer screens. Two prosecutors sat to the side, also behind computer screens. The two defendants sat beside their two criminal defence lawyers. There was no jury. There were no witnesses; no alleged victims in the courtroom to give evidence. The case would be about the mounds of paper piling up across the desks—countless pages chronicling the various things Räsänen has said during her past two decades in public life.

I imagine heresy trials from the Middle Ages would have been conducted in similar fashion: methodically, clinically, and quietly. There was no courtroom drama or commanding oral advocacy; there were no rhetorical flourishes. Everyone stayed seated the entire time, and the only movement occurred when the lead prosecutor wheeled her chair too far from the microphone and had to wheel herself back to be heard by the media gallery above.

"Old Woman Reading," a 71 x 55 cm oil on panel by Dutch artist Gerard Dou (1613-1675), a.k.a. Gerrit Dou, courtesy of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

From her wheely chair, the prosecutor began by explaining that the case was *not* about the Bible. It was *not* about Christianity. It was *not* about theology. She then started reading various passages of the Bible aloud in court—evidently passages she didn't like, passages that had nothing to do with the case, and of course, passages that were presented without any theological context. As the rest of the day unfolded, it became clear that the case absolutely was about the Bible.

At the heart of the prosecutor's case was the notion that the popular saying "*love the sinner, hate the sin*" goes too far. Ironically, this phrase is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, not the Bible. But in any event, according to the prosecutor, this concept is unacceptable in a modern society such as Finland. Hence, it is irrelevant that Räsänen wrote, in her 2004 booklet, "according to the Christian concept of humanity, everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, is equal and of equal value." According to the prosecutor, by calling certain actions "sin," one violates the dignity of the "sinner." There can be no distinction between the action and the person's very identity. By this logic, to say that sex outside of marriage is sinful according to the Bible is *de facto* insulting, degrading, hateful, and potentially prosecutable. This is a radical proposition with far-reaching implications, obscured by the polite and sterile proceedings of the day.

As the trial dragged on, much of the mainstream media drifted away. They had their photos and soundbites and they heard the prosecutor's long speeches at the start of the day, but many didn't stay to hear the defence. Nine hours later, in front of an emptying

courtroom, the prosecutor wrapped up by cross-examining the defendants on their theology, and, specifically, their hermeneutical methods. The bizarre set of questions included: what is the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament? Why are some passages of the Bible interpreted literally? Does the court follow Biblical law or Finnish law? Can religious beliefs evolve over time? On more than one occasion, the senior judge of the Helsinki District Court halted this line of questioning, querying its relevance. Bemused, Juhana politely pointed out the prosecutor's theological illiteracy and the day eventually drew to a close.

The trial should have ended there, but such was the extent of the prosecutor's posturing to the media at the start of the day that a second court date was required, which was scheduled for February 14, Valentine's Day. Ironically, St. Valentine was reputedly martyred in 270 AD for falling afoul of the Roman state's position on marriage—a dictatorial state that demanded nothing less than the total conformity of its citizens. No doubt the irony was lost on the prosecutor.

A few weeks later, the District Court handed down its 28-page decision. In a unanimous ruling, all four charges were dismissed and the state was ordered to pay the legal fees of the defence. It was a resounding but short-lived victory. The prosecutor immediately announced her intention to appeal and filed her arguments the following month. And, in a case full of outrageous moments, one more was added to the list: the prosecutor specifically asked the Court of Appeal to forgo hearing from the defendants at the appeal stage. Not only are no witnesses and no victims needed in these cases; apparently the defendants are no longer needed either: Räsänen's words alone condemn her.

With huge public resources to throw at the case, there is no reason for the prosecutor to stop, and now the case will now drag on for another year or two—or more. One can only imagine what crimes are not being pursued while resources are poured into this case, and we are likely not even halfway through at this stage. Everyone expects the case will eventually head to the Supreme Court or beyond and, as with other 'hate speech' cases, the process becomes part of the punishment. That process includes subjecting people to hours-long police interrogations, dragging them through the courts for years, and forcing

them to procure huge sums of money for their own defence. It also involves wasting taxpayer money and reallocating scant resources away from actual crimes and towards thought crime. And this is happening across Europe.

Finland's 'hate speech' laws and its criminal justice system are similar to those of most other countries in Europe. Indeed, all European countries have vague and subjective 'hate speech' laws that, with the right police and prosecutor, could be weaponized against practically any person and any form of speech—particularly if the state is also given license to go back in time indefinitely. Indeed, most European countries are actively pursuing more censorship instead of less. What's more, the European Union itself is pushing hard to make 'hate speech' an EU crime, to go alongside such heinous acts as terrorism, human trafficking, and organized crime.

Hence, what's happening in Finland may well represent just the beginning of what's to come. If the logic of the Finnish prosecutor spreads elsewhere, we will see many other similar heresy trials, and basic Christian theology could be rendered unspeakable. Or to put it differently: if the Bible is on trial in Finland, it could go on trial in your country, too.