

The teacher who was fired for not putting up a crucifix

Valentin Abgottspon

On October 8th 2010, during the last lesson before autumn break, I was asked to leave the community room where all teachers and pupils were listening to a presentation. I went to the office with two members of the school board. It came as a shock to me when they handed me a letter of immediate dismissal. Until that moment, I had been a teacher at a state secondary school in Upper Valais (German speaking part of a southern canton/district in Switzerland), and up until a few months before the school board and the other authorities had always been very pleased with my work. They told me that the reason for my dismissal was because our mutual trust was disrupted. But in fact, this was a pretext: I was fired, because I wouldn't tolerate a crucifix in my classroom, because I asked the school to follow a decision from 1990 by the federal (national) court, asking for more secular state schools in Valais, and because I stood up for my human right not to believe in a god.

On May 1st 2010, I co-founded the local branch of the Free Thinkers Association of Switzerland. My canton (I sometimes jokingly refer to it as the 'Vaticanton Valais!') is quite conservative, especially the politicians. Most of the younger people in the bigger communities are quite open. But Catholicism is still rampant, so the fact that we have an organised group of non-believers in Valais made some waves. Before the 1st of May there were several letters about this to the editor of the local paper and a discussion in the traditional and the social media ensued. After the founding of the local section, the school president defended me in a community meeting, when she was asked questions about me by the citizens of Stalden, the village where I worked. She said she knew I was a freethinker, but that I behaved professionally, was a very good teacher and that my personal beliefs didn't matter.



A meeting with state authorities

During the summer break of 2010, I asked the Bureau of Education (Dienststelle für Unterrichtswesen) for a meeting. I specifically asked for this meeting in my capacity as a citizen and as president of the Free Thinkers Association of Valais, not in my capacity as an employee of the state, i.e. teacher at a state school. The interactions with the authorities are well documented. I met with an assistant of the minister of the Bureau and a lawyer on August 11 in the cantonal capitol of Sion. Quite a lot of things about this meeting were surreal. The lawyer didn't behave like a state representative but like a lobbyist for the Roman Catholic Church. Several times he referred to a passage in the cantonal education law from 1962 that made it compulsory for schools and their teachers to prepare their pupils for their task as human beings and Christians. This passage later was deemed to be unconstitutional by a law professor. (The passage has to be deleted in the ongoing revision of the current education laws. If this passage is not suppressed, Freethinkers surely will take legal action.)

The meeting was unproductive. The bureau didn't want to inform school boards about implementing secular



Mr. Abgottspon was one of seven nominees for the prestigious Prix Courage

In May 2010 Valentin Abgottspon co-founded the Valais chapter of Freethinkers Association of Switzerland with the goal of fighting for more separation of Church and State in this conservative canton. He is and remains an advocate for human rights, freedom of speech and separation of Church and State and was elected Vice-President of Freethinkers Association of Switzerland in May 2013.

principles; several times they said: “The situation is okay, no one is complaining or asking questions”, while I was in their office, complaining and asking questions! At the end of the meeting the assistant of the minister became quite unprofessional and said, “Now that we know what your life stance looks like, we will have to ask your school board if you are fit to fulfil Article 3 of the school law [duty to prepare pupils for their role as Christians]. We will send a letter of inquiry to your school president.”

I felt a little bit threatened by this. To make it easy for my school board to give a precise answer to the inquiry of the Bureau of Education, I sent a letter to the school principal in which I asked for three things: 1) Take down the crucifix in the teacher’s lounge and the room where I supervise pupils during the mid-day break. 2) I won’t accompany pupils to Catholic Church Service during or outside school hours anymore 3) I won’t choose Altar Boys/Girls anymore. (It was expected from me, in my role as class teacher, that I choose the pupils and the role they would play in Catholic Church Service.)

It’s important to know that I had taken down the crucifix in my own classroom already a year before this. I had told the other teachers and the school principal about it, and they didn’t have any objections. Thus I hoped my school would be able to give the true answer, “No, Mr. Abgottspon doesn’t prepare his pupils for their role as Christians.”

The school’s reaction to this letter was quite interesting. They claimed I lacked respect and then ordered me to put up the crucifix in my classroom. They even set an ultimatum. Later, their lawyer claimed that they never asked me to tolerate religious symbols or to partake in a religious ritual. An opinion that the cantonal government also repeated, without checking the facts.



The crucifix used in the classroom

Twice, someone put up the crucifix in my classroom overnight. But as a good secularist, I took it down both times to reinstate the religious neutrality of the room before the beginning of class. It wasn’t a miracle, by the way: I later learned that it was the school president who put up the crucifix overnight, she perhaps felt that I wasn’t willing to put it up myself but would perhaps accept it, once it was up there.



The legal and cultural situation in Switzerland

In Switzerland, we have a 1990 decision by the federal/national court concerning crucifixes or religious symbols in state schools. A teacher from canton Ticino objected to the presence of the crucifix at his state school and after several intermediate court decisions, the federal court ruled that the presence of a religious symbol like the (clearly Catholic) crucifix wasn’t in accordance with the state’s obligation to religious neutrality. The court said that, at the least, if any person asks for the removal of religious symbols in state schools, they would have to be removed.

The canton of Valais is clearly in violation of this principle. Not only did the school authorities refuse to keep state facilities religiously neutral by default, they actively prevented making them neutral even when citizens asked for it. I think this is the worst possible outcome in an otherwise secular country like Switzerland. If the canton doesn’t make schools present an environment that is as neutral as possible (by taking down all religious symbols), then it’s up to the initiative of citizens to ask for a situation that conforms to human rights standards and court decisions. It might not be a big risk in a city to ask the school authorities to conform to the decision of the federal court, but in smaller communities, the whole family (and not only the parents) have to bear the consequences of this seemingly non-traditional demand. They all too easily become outcasts and, depending on their source of revenue, might also feel economic repercussions. State authorities have to realise that state neutrality is a requirement per se.

It can’t be left to the citizens to ask for equal treatment, women’s right to vote, non-discrimination or fairness in court. It has to be the default that those rights are available to all. So it has to be where religious neutrality by the secular state is concerned. One should not have to ask for it.

Freedom of Thought and Expression

What we can learn from my case

After my dismissal, the uproar in Switzerland and European media outlets was quite large. The conservative politicians that fired me didn't foresee that it would become such a big story. Stories like this can shine a light on the areas in which we still have to fight for more secularism. I think it is important that countries like Switzerland and cantons like Valais also 'set their house in order'. There are no major human rights violations on a large scale and regular basis here – compared to other

regions of the world, that is. But all the same, I consider it our duty to be a good example for others. We have to abolish the blasphemy laws, we have to separate the state from churches and other religious groups. Religious groups shouldn't have more rights than any other group.

It was an interesting ride and I learned a lot of things. I got to know many interesting, skilled, amazing and compassionate people and to work on interesting projects. There remains a lot of work to do. Let's get on with it!

The Right to Believe and *Not* Believe: How America Promotes Religious Freedom at Home and Abroad

Maggie Ardiente

Many of us, myself included, are active in the Humanist movement because, at one point in our lives, we were perceived negatively by someone after describing ourselves as a Humanist, atheist or nonbeliever. Maybe someone asked inappropriate questions like, "How do you know right from wrong?" or "If you don't believe in God, what's your purpose in life?" For me, I wanted to devote my work toward ending the negative stigma of not believing in god and promote that we, too, have morals and values that contribute to the greater good of humanity.

Though Humanism has been around for decades, it's only in recent years that Humanists and atheists have experienced great strides in our communities' recognition by our top leaders. President Barack Obama famously

referenced us in his 2008 inaugural speech (and several times after): "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers." Today, nearly one in five Americans are religiously unaffiliated – while the majority of them do not identify as atheist, 88 per cent are not "seeking" to join a traditional religious faith, which makes this group likely to be more in line with Humanist values. Yet, we still have a long way to go toward achieving full equality and respect for nonbelievers in the United States.

A 2011 study conducted by Will Gervais of the University of British Columbia examined anti-atheist prejudice in the United States and globally. First, atheists are severely underrepresented – most do not report their atheism to prevent suffering from social stigma, discrimination, and even persecution in some countries. Second, despite the growing number of religiously unaffiliated individuals over the years, negative perceptions of atheists remain the same.

A University of Minnesota poll found atheists to be the most distrusted of minorities and associated atheism with criminal behavior, extreme materialism, and elitism. The majority of Americans also believe that atheists do not agree with their



Maggie speaking at the U.S. Capitol on a panel of NGOs discussing religious freedom in our respective communities; I was the sole panelist representing humanists and atheists

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