

## **The Union of Freethinkers of Finland and Humanist Association of Finland**

FOR UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW - UPR

### **Discrimination against non-religious persons in Finland**

Non-religious persons still face some general as well as specific discrimination on human rights concerning religion or belief in Finland. Laws and public services are not equal, fair and neutral in that sense; both the Evangelical Lutheran and the Orthodox Church have unfair privileges. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion are not realized in kindergartens, schools and the army.

The separation between state and the state-churches is not at all completed. Section 76 of the Constitution formalises the establishment of two state churches and gives privilege to churches with Church Law. The Parliament can legislate Church Law changes only if the Church itself makes an initiative proposal. Instead of the Parliament, the Finnish Patent and Registration Office can look and check the rules of churches in similar manner to other religious communities, third sector associations and foundations.

The Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox Churches have unfair privileges, they receive revenue from member fees by the state tax organization. The church tax is connected to local municipal tax and tax deductions. All others - associations, unions and religious communities - collect their member fees by themselves.

The church tax system is also unfair since a person who has resigned the church membership, is obliged to pay Church tax until end of the year even if he left church on January.

Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox Churches have unfair privilege in compulsory basic education schools. Own religion subject teaching is obligatory for children who are members of Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox Church. Although in Finnish schools there are religiously neutral ethics or life stance education (elämäkatsomustieto) as a subject, it is prohibited to children who are members of these churches. Parents cannot choose this subject for their children. Instead of that, parents of children who are not church members, can choose between Evangelical Lutheran religion and ethics as a subject. The system is not symmetric.

In General upper secondary education schools the Evangelical Lutheran and the Orthodox Churches have also this unfair privilege to have their own religion subject teaching, which is obligatory for young students who are members of the Evangelical Lutheran or the Orthodox Church. These students can decide all other choices in their studies, but they are not allowed to choose religiously neutral ethics or life stance education (elämäkatsomustieto) as a subject instead of Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox religion. Instead of that, students who are not church members, can choose between Evangelical Lutheran religion subject and ethics subject (obligatory two courses). The system is not symmetric. Students under 18 years cannot decide to leave church membership

independently but only if both parents give permission. We see that this is against the Convention on The Rights of the Childs (Articla 12 and 14). Students are capable of forming their own views in accordance with the age and maturity, because they can do all other decisions.

We see also, that official registration of religious status of children in the Population Registration Centre is against childrens' rights and Convention on The Rights of the Childs (Art 14 and others). Of course churches can have their own child member registers, mutta official juridical status with tax duty and restriction in school and study choises are not right for children. Age of juridical status should be connected to the right of leaving the Evangelical Lutheran and the Orthodox Churches.

School legislation and curriculums have developed in Finland so, that church service and religious morning assembly do not belong the tasks of schools. Education in schools should not be religiously covenant. Although of that many schools still take some confessional church services and religious morning assemblys in their official program during school year. The National Body of Education gives permission and instructions to arrange these religious ceremonies and even grace before lunch.

Religious ceremonies should not be part of the annual program of schools. If there still are those ceremonies during school year day program, it is better to get alternative program during them. The right solution is not a nice alternative program during religious ceremony, but to stop the old tradition to arrange religious services during school day. The European Court of Human Rights has decided, that there is the right of personal privacy concerning expression of religion or belief of family. This is not yet in practice and true in Finland, because of this tradition and "unofficial curriculum", schools arrange religious ceremonies. School authorities should give renewed instructions.

In the Finnish Defense Forces there is a public parade ceremony before march-past, and part of it is religious ceremony. Those who do not want take part on this religious ceremony get directions to leave parade form just before religious ceremony. This must be done under tv-cameras and large audience. This is in practice religious pressure to participate also in this confessional religious ceremony, and the right of personal privacy concerning expression of religion or belief do not come true.

There still exists in the Finnish Crime Law the punishment of blasphemy. The sentence can be fine or six months in prison (Chapter 17, § 10). It's a shame also because it gives weapons to defend also much harder punishments for blasphemy to rulers of several countries.

The basic princip promoting the Freedom of thought, conscience and religion also in Finnish foreign policy should be a secular state.

The Evangelical-Lutheran State Church has a monopoly on services of undertaking for funerals, maintained by state budget support.

Ministeries and authorities in Finland should use more hearing on non-governemental organisations on non-religious people. Sometimes we are asked to give statements, but often we are not asked.

The Freedom on Thought 2015 Report, which is published by International Humanist and Ethic Union, has given grade "Systematic Discrimination" in its evaluation on Finland. (<http://iheu.org/freedom-of-thought-report-2015/s> (page 433-435).

According to the most recent Finnish government statistics, the largest belief group in Finland belongs to the Evangelical-Lutheran State Church which boasts 72,9 % of the population as

members. 1.1% of the population identify with the second state religion, the Christian Orthodox Church. By far the second largest bloc are those who don't identify with any religion, 24.3 %.

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