

How a teacher and a Virgin Mary statue drew attention to religious bias in the Irish education system

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A humanist teacher who objected to a statue of the virgin Mary being displayed at a state-funded school with a "religious ethos" in Ireland has lost a claim of discrimination at a Workplace Relations Commission hearing. (See full [judgment](#)).

In a confrontation with a caretaker, who had been given the job of placing the statue on display, the teacher said the statue was "unpalatable and offensive to him personally on the basis of his belief that the religious statue of the Virgin Mary is one associated with the repression of normal human sexuality".

When he removed the statue, he became involved in an altercation with the caretaker who, as a result, sustained minor injuries to his neck.

The teacher was given a verbal warning by the school (which was not identified at the Commission). He brought a claim of discrimination against the school, saying that the statue provoked deep unease and anxiety in him because of his deeply held beliefs.

But Enda Murphy, the adjudication officer in the case, rejected the teacher's claim for discrimination, harassment and victimisation. He said he did not believe the presence of the Mary altar "constituted a prohibition or disadvantage on him in terms of the manifestation or assertion of his beliefs as a humanist". The WRC ruling found the teacher was not discriminated against on the grounds of religion, said it was clear that "both parties engaged in conduct which was unprofessional" and that it was not unreasonable for a "faith school" to have such a statue.

Atheist Ireland, which campaigns for secular education in the country, said that the school is funded by the Government's Education Training Board (ETB) and does not have a religious patron but does have a "religious ethos", thereby imposing religion – mainly Catholic – on pupils. In an article on its website, Atheist Ireland [explains](#) the complexities of the school system where, despite state sponsorship and no religious patronage, Catholicism still dominates the ethos of the school.

Atheist Ireland states: "The state claims that the slow pace in addressing the problems of religion in schools is because the state has to convince the religious patron bodies, particularly the Catholic Church, to agree to changes. But ETB schools are directly run by state bodies, so there is no religious patron involved. The State is directly imposing a Catholic ethos on children of parents who are not Catholic. This type of ETB school is held up as an alternative to publicly funded schools with a religious patron... this confirms a pattern of the state directly imposing a religious ethos on children in schools that do not have a religious patron."

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "At first sight, this case has strong echoes of the kind of discrimination claims brought by evangelical Christians in England, but it is clear that those with a religion other than Christian or those with no religion at all, are at a distinct disadvantage in the Irish education system."

This article is a substantially revised version of the one published on 1 September 2017, in the light of further information becoming available.

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