

## **`Religious expression in the workplace`.**

**Athlone Chamber of Commerce, Radisson Hotel, Athlone**

**11a.m. December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008.**

On the face of it religious expression in the workplace has yet to throw up a major controversy in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland. But, the potential for this to happen remains.

Even in the past week we have seen an example of how it might happen. Is it possible that cribs, crosses, statues, holy pictures, May altars etc may some day be banned in our workplaces, including our schools.? There are indications they may.

As you may be aware it emerged last Thursday that the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland has banned a Christmas radio advertisement for the Catholic Church-owned Veritas chain of shop from being broadcast.

The wording of the advertisement read:

*"Cake and crackers, Santa and stockings, turkey and tinsel, Mistletoe and mince pies, and presents and puddings.*

*Christmas: aren't we forgetting something? This Christmas, why not give a gift that means more?*

*Veritas has a range of different and thoughtful gifts, for children and adults alike. From books and music to candles and artwork, there is something for everyone to enjoy and treasure.*

*So to give a gift that means more, drop into your local Veritas shop or log on to [www.veritas.ie](http://www.veritas.ie)"*

The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland decided that the lines "Christmas: aren't we forgetting something?"; "Why not give a gift that means more?"; and "So to give a gift that means more"

offended Section 41 of the Broadcasting Act. It also found that asking people to visit the website [www.veritas.ie](http://www.veritas.ie) was "unacceptable" under the Act. Both were directed towards a religious end, it said.

Before Christmas last year, the Broadcasting Commission decided that Veritas had to remove the word "crib" from a radio advertisement before it could be broadcast. And last September the Broadcasting Complaints Commission upheld a complaint against a Veritas radio advertisement broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 last April for similar reasons. The advertisement promoted gifts for children making their Holy Communion or who were about to be confirmed. It also encouraged listeners to visit the Veritas' website.

In that case, and to be explicitly clear on where the Broadcasting Complaints Commission was coming from, it said it was of the opinion that an advertisement placed by an organisation which describes its function as being to serve the needs of the Irish Catholic Church; which promotes a wide variety of religious gifts some of which are associated particularly with the Catholic Church; which describes those gifts by reference to 'what Holy Communion and Confirmation are really about'; and which encourages the listener to visit the organisation's website, is an advertisement directed towards a religious end.

To most reasonable Irish people that exposition of its position is as relevant to ordinary life as the arguments of those medieval theologians who could not agree on the number of angels which might comfortably fit on the tip of a needle. But it does betray a potentially dangerous intolerance.

A letter in yesterday's Irish Times from a Michael Coady in Carrick on Suir described this latest Veritas ban as "an eruption of Secularist Taliban Tendency within the commission. Given such a tendency, shouldn't consistency actually require a ban on the use of the word 'Christmas' itself?", he asked, reasonably.

Indeed the absurdity of that ban where most people are concerned is illustrated by the reaction to it, which seems to have united a very diverse set of opinions indeed. These range from the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin's description of it as "bizarre" through to that of the retired and widely respected former professor of Moral Theology at Maynooth Fr Enda McDonagh, who said it was "rediculous", to that of avowed atheist and founder member of the

Irish Humanist Association Dick Spicer, who felt the BCC was now ``operating from a dogmatic secular position.”

In a country where the natural desire is to disagree or where, as Brendan Behan once said, the first item on the agenda of any new organization is `the split', it takes rare genius indeed to unite everyone against you in one fell swoop. But that is where rigid, politically correct interpretations of the law can lead in Ireland. I am glad to say so.

Banning such advertisements strikes most reasonable Irish people as intolerant. It is an unwelcome reminder of those times when such literal interpretations of its own doctrine saw the Catholic Church become an intolerant tyrant in so many areas of Irish life in the past and at considerable cost to our dead generations. Such intolerance was not acceptable then and it is not acceptable now, whatever the source.

It is why, I would hope, that our denominational schools remain as open and tolerant to children of other Christian backgrounds and other faiths as they have proven to be since the arrival of the dear departed Celtic Tiger.

It is why I would hope situations may continue such as that at the primary school at home in Ballaghaderreen where, though one in six of the children are Muslim, they can still have their cribs and crosses and May altars with even those same Muslim children competing to take part in the Nativity play at this time every year.

It is why I would hope that Muslim schools such as those in Dublin and soon-to-be more further afield can display their crescent and other religious symbols freely, while also accommodating children of Christian and other faiths. And where, incidentally, all their teachers are Christian. This mix, whatever about the match factor, can only be good.

Similarly in hospitals, where already Christian symbols which may offend Muslim patients are frequently removed temporarily, though as often as not there is rarely a Muslim request that this be done. In such instances all that is required is a little sensitivity.

The HSE it must be said, has been particularly good in this area, supplying its nursing and medical staff with guidelines where the care of Muslim patients are concerned.

But one area where there has been controversy in recent years has been over the wearing of headgear.

Last year there was the debate over whether a Sikh member of the Garda reserve should be allowed wear his turban after a decision by the Garda authorities that he could not do so while on duty. The gardai rejected claims that its decision to ban the turban from its official uniform was religiously or racially motivated.

Then Garda Commissioner Noel Conroy said the decision to adopt a uniform dress code aimed at retaining an "image of impartiality" while providing a service to all citizens. He said the Garda sought the advice of UK police forces and met representatives of the approximately 1,000-strong Sikh community in Ireland before deciding that Sikh gardaí in Ireland would not wear a turban.

The issue forced the Garda to say it would review the wearing of ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday, of crucifixes and of pioneer pins with the official uniform. "All religious items are being reviewed," a spokesman said at the time. He also indicated that the decision to ban the turban may be liable to change in the future.

The then Minister for Foreign Affairs Dermot Ahern supported the Garda's decision, insisting that foreign nationals who arrived in Ireland needed to "assimilate" into Irish culture and society. And there the matter has rested since.

More recently, last May, we had Nicholas Sweetman, principal of Gorey Community School in Co Wexford, call for official direction which would bring an end to the practice of schools imposing divergent policies on the wearing of the hijab by Muslim girls in schools. It provoked a national debate. As you are aware the hijab is a square of fabric folded into a triangle, placed over the head and fastened under the chin.

Wearing the hijab is a religious requirement for all Muslim women who have reached the age of puberty in accordance with rules and laws outlined in the Koran. Not all Muslim chose to wear it. That is a matter for them.

At the time Fine Gael's education spokesman Brian Hayes said "there is enough segregation in Ireland without adding this to it. Segregating in this way is not helpful to Muslims and not

helpful to anybody." Though he made a distinction between State-run VEC schools and those run by religious orders - which decide their own rules.

Labour's Ruari Quinn said no longer supported multiculturalism but was now a firm believer in integration. "I do not think that multiculturalism has worked in Denmark and Holland," he said. The challenges of absorbing immigrants in society had been exacerbated by the advent of cheap flights, and the widespread use of telephone and the internet, he added.

"It has meant that people can live in one place and can remain in another place," he said. "This has been part of the problem in France and part of the problem in other countries. "We have absorbed 10 per cent of the population in a very short period of time. If we want to avoid the problems associated with other countries, we have to be as integrationist as possible."

I could not help then but wonder whether Ruari had considered the experiences of our own people abroad where we were allowed our own Catholic churches and schools, our Irish dancing, our own pubs etc. in England and America, and the sky didn't fall. Look at London. Look at New York. Despite some race issue in the main multi-cultural tolerance has worked in both cities. We Irish should know.

The Department of Education adopted a more sober approach to the issue than our Opposition spokesmen. The Minister for Education Batt O'Keefe asked the Minister of State for Integration Conor Lenihan to consider the question of school dress codes and diversity in the context of an intercultural education strategy. He did so, consulting over 4,000 school principals.

In a statement issued jointly on September 22<sup>nd</sup> last both Ministers O'Keefe and Lenihan said the current policy of allowing State schools to decide their own uniform rules was "reasonable, works and should be maintained".

While insisting that no school uniform policy should exclude students of a particular religious background from seeking a place or continuing in a school, they did not recommend that clothing which obscures the face and acts as an "artificial barrier between pupil and teacher" be worn in class. "Such clothing hinders proper communication." This was clearly a reference to the burkha. The decision was welcomed by all the teacher unions as simply sensible.

Meanwhile an Irish Times opinion poll last June was very revealing. It found that almost half of us believed that wearing the hijabs by Muslim students should be allowed in State schools. But while 48 per cent agreed with that, 39 per cent did not and 13 per cent had no opinion. A breakdown of the figures showed that a clear majority of younger people agreed with the wearing of hijabs, and that older people were more likely to be opposed.

To me what was bewildering in that was that many of those same older people would have been taught by nuns who were covered from head to toe in black, with a bit of white thrown in here and there, while others among them would have been taught by Christian brothers and/or priests in black soutanes and Roman collars. Also, they are of a generation whose women once always wore a hat or scarf to the church and whose men often wore a cap or hat there, which was removed at the consecration.

But there is one area where this matter of religion in the workplace could yet become a major issue. The vast majority of our primary schools are run on denominational/faith lines, yet it is also clear, particularly from the Irish National Teachers Organisation, that a rapidly growing number of those same teachers either do not practice any religion or have none or both.

What happens if the boards of management of those schools insist that their teachers be practicing Catholics/Protestants/Muslims/Jews? Similarly, in a State where one in five births are to single mothers, what of teachers whose motherhood status or lifestyle or both is not compatible with the teachings of the religious body which runs the school where they work?

More blatantly, all of our Churches have succeeded in persuading the Government to secure a derogation from EU equality legislation where gay people are concerned. It means that those same Churches are now free to discriminate legally against employing gay teachers on the grounds that their lifestyle is incompatible with Christian teaching.

It is only a matter of time before that is challenged. When that happens it is likely to provoke yet another ugly debate between the Churches and those who would identify such discrimination as incompatible with human rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But for now we have enough on our plate – what with the pork crisis, the Lisbon Treaty referendum mark II crisis, and above all the collapsing economy crisis to be getting on with.

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof! We have more than enough to be getting on with.

Thank you.

Patsy McGarry