

The commitment to secularism and against the presence of a crucifix in a public school leads to a dismissal of a teacher in the canton of Valais/Wallis (Switzerland) *Valentin Abgottspon: valentin@abgott.ch +41 78 671 08 03*

In Switzerland there exists a decision of the Federal Court in 1990 that a crucifix in a public school violates the requirement of religious neutrality and is thus to be removed at the latest if requested. Switzerland is heavily federally organized and there are big differences in how the relationship between church and state is embodied in the individual cantons (i.e. districts of Switzerland).

I myself have removed the crucifix that was towering over the black board in my classroom at the end of 2009 and thus established the religious neutrality of this public space myself. Beginning of May 2010 the Valais section of free-thinkers Switzerland was founded, I became its president and I publicly spoke out for the separation of church and state, especially in public schools. I have advocated a skeptical, scientific world view, and humanistic values, and claimed transparency in the system of church taxes, etc. (The system of church financing in the canton of Valais is in fact extremely scandalous.)

On August 11th, 2010 a meeting was held with the Department of Education, where I raised questions regarding religious instruction and prayer during school hours, mass, presence of the crucifix, the situation of non-catholic or non-believing teachers and pupils, etc. The cantonal law concerning public education prescribes that state schools are to prepare their pupils for "... their task as a human being and as a Christian ...", so – strictly speaking – the children of non-believing parents are also to be prepared for their task as Christian. This passage and the practices in many public schools in Valais clearly violate the Swiss Federal Constitution and the universal human rights, too. A local politician of a Christian party, which wanted to gain something out of this maneuver has subsequently made public that these questions were raised. Later I was asked to put up the crucifix in my classroom again. In fact, I refused to carry out this action. Twice the crucifix was put up overnight in my classroom again – against my express wishes. I twice removed it before class started and placed it in a closet. On October 8th, 2010 the school board handed me my immediate dismissal. The authorities operate with pretexts such as "destroyed trust" and the like, even though I have excellent references and I always performed my work as a teacher in an exemplary way.

The State Council (the executive branch of the canton) has not yet – nearly a whole year later ! – decided whether the dismissal was abusive. A legal opinion on the case does, however, demonstrate clearly that the dismissal was abusive and that I have fulfilled the fiduciary duty to my employer and that the situation at the school in Stalden has to be changed. It is scandalous that the authorities have tried and are still trying to make an example of it; it is to be condemned, that upstanding citizens, which raise critical issues and advocate for their rights are being threatened by their social and pecuniary death. I regard this case as one of the most serious disregards of secular principles in the recent history of Switzerland.

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