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COMMENT

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Secretary, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights  
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*Comment on the sixth periodic report by the Government of Finland on the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*

#### VIOLATION OF ARTICLE 13 (3) AND ARTICLE 2 (2) OF THE COVENANT IN FINLAND

The Union of Freethinkers in Finland (Vapaa-ajattelijain Liitto ry), a cultural and human rights association for nonreligious people, is making this submission in response to the sixth periodic report by the Government of Finland on the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. That report makes no mention of the practices in Finnish schools and daycare centers which, in our opinion, clearly violate the freedom of religion of children and their families. The report is, therefore, misleading.

The Finnish Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and prohibits discrimination against people, but the implementing laws and regulations are insufficient to ensure compliance with the Constitution with respect to religion. Our members' numerous complaints to state and local authorities have failed to produce any meaningful response. We believe the vagueness of the implementing laws and regulations, coupled with a disinclination to change longstanding behavior, has produced this impasse. We hope that bringing the problem to the Committee's attention will help to move Finnish practices in this area into closer compliance with the Constitution.

The problem can be divided broadly into two categories: 1) compulsory religious education in Finnish primary and secondary schools and 2) religious activities in those schools as well as in daycare centers.

##### *1) Religious education*

The Lutheran religion is a compulsory subject in Finnish primary and secondary schools for those pupils who are members of this church. Pupils, who are not member of Lutheran Church or any other religious society, have right to get teaching of nonreligious subject "Life Stance Education" and they (parents) have also possibility to choose Lutheran religion subject instead of that nonreligious subject. We would observe that a large proportion of the families who are members of this Lutheran Church are members because of tradition or to

support the Church's charitable activities, not because of religious conviction. They should have also free right to choose between Lutheran religion subject and nonreligious subject "Life Stance Education", but they have not.

To justify the compulsory study of the Lutheran religion, school authorities claim the teaching is secular/informational. Our careful review of the textbooks used, especially in the lower grades, and interviews with parents, however, clearly refute that claim. The religious instruction encourages pupils to be believers. The youngest pupils are taught to pray; they are taught to look to God and Jesus for comfort; they are taught Bible stories as unquestioned historical fact. Indeed, the possibility of not being religious or choosing not to identify oneself as part of an organized religion, is not even mentioned. All of this is acceptable in the opinion of the Finnish authorities because it falls short of conducting actual religious worship.

## *2) Religious activities*

In addition to religion lessons, nearly all daycare centers and schools in Finland organize other types of religious activities - all designed to immerse the children in the Lutheran religion beginning at a very young age. Children in daycare are regularly taken to church. Church employees often visit daycare centers and organize religious functions for the children. Similarly, schools take pupils to church services and have regular morning assemblies - in the auditorium or via loudspeaker - with priests or church youth workers as guest speakers. Many schools and daycare centers have children say grace before meals - not an objectionable practice in itself - but when led by the teachers (as is often the case) it assumes an aura of expected behavior.

School authorities will point out that parents can request their child to be exempt from the types of activity described in the preceding paragraph. But especially in a society like Finland, where there is great social pressure to conform, such exemption places a significant strain on the child. Furthermore, it reveals that the conviction of the family differs from that of the majority. Such revelation itself runs counter to the concept of freedom of religion.

We hope our submission will be of use to the Committee in its deliberations and would be pleased to consult further with you if it would be helpful.

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