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'Blasphemy law' worries religious liberty proponents

Proposed legislation may restrict freedoms of expression

ANN (26.05.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.05.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A proposed law criminalizing the criticism of religion in Ireland may defy international standards of freedom of speech and indicate a troubling trend toward more state control over religious matters, religious liberty experts say.

Members of the Oireachtas (Parliament) Committee on Justice are considering an amendment to the country's Defamation Bill that will effectively ban "blasphemous libel," making it a fineable offense to publish or utter such speech.

The article would update an older defamation of religion law present in the country's constitution. Such laws, while long "dormant" in Europe, are regaining favor, said John Graz, director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the Seventh-day Adventist world church.

Earlier this year, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a [resolution](#) on so-called "defamation of religion" laws. While designed to protect minority religious groups, such laws can backfire against individual expression, Graz said. "Respect and dialogue should be the way to deal with religious issues and calm tensions," he added.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has warned the Irish government that blasphemy law defies international standards of freedom of speech, the Irish Times reported last week.

The OSCE is the world's largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization, with 56 member nations. The ad-hoc United Nation's agency's duties include upholding principles such as fair elections, press freedom and human rights.

Religious adverts ban to be relaxed

The strict broadcasting rules have led to promotions of children's books being outlawed

The Sunday Times (09.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (14.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - TBroadcasting legislation on religious advertising is to be relaxed to avoid further embarrassing bans on promotions for first holy communion presents and cribs.

Eamon Ryan, the communications minister, plans to allow organisations such as Veritas, a religious bookshop, to advertise on radio. The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland (BCI), which polices the independent-radio sector, has banned a series of planned Veritas advertising campaigns in recent years.

Government sources say Ryan is keen to retain provisions of the existing law that prevent churches or quasi-religious groups from using the airwaves to recruit members. But he will introduce legal changes when the broadcasting bill comes back to the Dail at report stage this month to "ensure proportionality in applying the law".

If the Oireachtas adopts the changes, the minister will direct the BCI and its successor, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), to accommodate the spirit of the change in a new code of practice on advertising.

At Christmas, Veritas was refused permission for an ad on RTE and four local stations for "different and thoughtful gifts", which included books for children.

RTE also fell foul of the rules when it ran a Veritas advert last year. A member of the public, Peter McCarthy, objected to the use of phrases such as "inspirational" and "spiritual" in respect of gifts for children making their first communion, and said they amounted to the promotion of particular aspects and sacraments of a specific religion.

His complaint to the Broadcast Complaints Commission was upheld, triggering protests by government and opposition members in both the Dail and Seanad last year.

Veritas says it has held "constructive discussions" with officials from the department of communications about the ban in recent weeks. A spokeswoman said: "In these difficult commercial times, we need to advertise all the more, so any change in this area would be welcome."

The government has also moved to accommodate popular Catholic opinion by amending the charities bill to prohibit the sale of bogus Mass cards. John Curran, the junior minister for community affairs, brought forward an amendment to outlaw the sale of Mass cards that had not been authorised by a bishop.
