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# Girl banned from wearing chastity ring takes case to British court, arguing religious freedom

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LONDON — A teenage girl banned from wearing a chastity ring in class took her case to Britain's High Court on Friday, arguing that her school had violated her religious freedom.

Lydia Playfoot, a 16-year-old student at Millais School in Horsham, about 40 miles south of London, wears the ring as a sign of her commitment to abstain from sex until marriage. Many Christian teenagers worldwide wear the chastity rings, which were inspired by "The Silver Ring Thing," an abstinence program launched in the United States in 1996.

The school said the ring fell outside its uniform policy, which makes exceptions for Muslims wearing head scarves and Sikhs wearing steel bracelets. Headmaster Leon Nettley said chastity rings do not form an integral part of the Christian faith.

That violated Playfoot's freedom of religion, her lawyer Paul Diamond argued before the court.

"Secular authorities and institutions cannot be arbiters of religious faith," he said.

In a written submission to the hearing, Lydia said her school did not afford equal rights to Christians as it did to other faiths.

"At my school, Muslims are allowed to wear headscarves and other faiths can wear bangles and other types of jewelry, and it feels like Christians are being discriminated against," she told British Broadcasting Corp. radio's Today Program.

Nettley denied the charge.

The ring "is not a Christian symbol, and is not required to be worn by any branch within Christianity," he said in his own written statement.

The Silver Ring Thing program received more than \$1 million from the U.S. government for its abstinence education work until funding was discontinued in 2006.

Lydia's ring is a thin silver band engraved with verses from the New Testament exhorting Christians to avoid sexual immorality.

Speaking before the hearing, Lydia's father Philip said the family's three-year fight against the school's policy highlighted the growing secularization of British society.

"Lydia really is in many ways a microcosm of something much bigger that's happening in our culture, where in the (United Kingdom), Christians' views and values are being sidelined," he said. "You're basically being told, 'You can believe what you like, but don't let it impact into the public sphere.'"

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