

# Faith no laughing matter, court says

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NEWARK, N.J. (RNS)—Making jokes and comments about a person's religion can create a "humiliating and painful environment" and be a form of on-the-job discrimination, New Jersey's highest court recently ruled.

The New Jersey Supreme Court said remarks about someone's faith—even as a form of ribbing—cannot be tolerated in the workplace.

Clarifying anti-discrimination laws, the court declared a person claiming religious-based harassment does not face a higher legal hurdle than people who claim they were discriminated against because of sex or race.

"It is necessary that our courts recognize that the religion-based harassing conduct that took place ... in this 'workplace culture' is as offensive as other forms of discriminatory, harassing conduct outlawed in this state," Justice Jaynee LaVecchia wrote for a unanimous court.

The ruling holds the borough of Haddonfield in Camden County accountable for discrimination claims made by a Jewish police officer whose coworkers made crass comments—claimed to be poor attempts at humor—about his ethnicity and pasted stickers of the flags of Israel and Germany on his locker.

The decision is an important victory for all workers enforcing the principle of equality, said Jon Green, who represented the state chapter of the National Employment Lawyers Association.

"There is no reason to make fun of people's religion or race or anything," said Attorney Clifford Van Syoc, who represented the officer.

Etzion Neuer, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League of New Jersey, added, "It sends a clear and unequivocal message that anti-Semitism has to be treated with the same degree of severity as racial harassment."

Others warned the decision would have a chilling effect.

"The court has raised the bar on the hostile work environment. Now you can't even joke in the workplace," attorney Mario Iavicoli said.