

Cult Controversies in France

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In recent years, Europe has been shaken up by a new phenomenon: fear of sects. This fear has been triggered off by the collective suicides, homicides and attacks perpetrated on the initiative of leaders of religious movements or movements claiming to be religious.

Western European states have been concerned about this phenomenon, and rightly so. The question was asked as to whether their policies on unconventional religions should be changed so as to prevent these tragedies taking place in their country. The responses have been varied.

Eleven out of the fifteen European Union member states considered that the "sects" did not harm the individual, the family, society or their democratic institutions to the point of having to create new institutions or organizations to combat their influence. In their view, just as in past years, problems posed by certain religious movements could be resolved by the existing legislative arsenal or where necessary, by resorting to normal legal methods. These countries have not as a result become a refuge for questionable religious movements or had an increase in any crimes or harmful activities carried out by them.

However, four other countries decided to take a new course of action. Austria simply created an information and documentation center about sects, placing it under the authority of the Federal Ministry of the Environment, Youth and the Family. A brochure containing information about sects was also widely distributed. This prevention campaign warned principally against eleven guru-led movements of oriental origin, three psychological groups, two groups claiming to spring from new revelations, three religions of Christian origin and four other groups under the category "Various".

Germany set up a parliamentary commission and published a report. Scientology was placed under surveillance but no legal action is currently being taken against the movement.

France set up a parliamentary inquiry commission which published a report containing a list of 172 dangerous and harmful sects. An observatory of sects was put into action, then later replaced by a more operational instrument: the Interministerial Mission to Fight Sects. A widespread climate of suspicion and fear had already been spawned by the media, leading to new acts of intolerance and religious discrimination unheard of before the setting-up of the anti-sect policy by the French authorities. The all-out war against sects by the Interministerial Mission reinforces this pervading phobia.

Belgium followed closely on France's heels: creation of a parliamentary inquiry commission, publication of a report annexing a list of 189 suspected sectarian movements, creation of an observatory of sects at the beginning of May along with an administrative co-ordination committee against sects, a sect prevention campaign led by the French community of Belgium on television and radio and by a massive distribution of an information brochure. The depraved effects noted in France are now spilling over into Belgium.

In France and especially the French-speaking part of Belgium, the authorities have chosen to reject any sort of dialogue with minority religions (unlike for example Sweden or Spain),

favoring the confrontational method, more often than not with the support of anti-sect associations. Ever since the beginning of the phenomenon, no dialogue has been entered into and there is no sign of a change in course. The Interministerial Mission to Fight Sects is the spearhead of the French policy.

European Union

Policies of the 15 Member States with Regard to the Sect Issue

Member States	Parliamentary Commission and Report on Sects	List of Sects	Observatory on Sects (or similar state agency)	Information or Prevention Campaign against Sects	State Agency of Fight against Sects
Austria	No	No	No	Mass distribution of a brochure	No
Belgium	Yes	Yes	Yes	Mass distribution of a brochure by the French Community of Belgium	Yes . Coordination cell of fight against sects
Denmark					
Finland					
France	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (in schoolbooks for civic classes in public schools)	Yes Inter-ministerial Mission of Fight against Sects
Germany	Yes		Scientology and a charismatic group under surveillance	Distribution of a brochure by the Ministries of Religious Affairs of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Thüringen	
Great Britain					
Greece					
Ireland					
Italy					
Luxemburg					
Netherlands					
Portugal					
Spain					
Sweden	Yes Conclusion: Legislative and penal arsenal is sufficient				

The Interministerial Mission

The Interministerial Mission was set up in 1998 to replace the observatory which was thought not operational enough. The mission is made up of two parts: the guidance committee, 19 individuals "selected for their ability and experience", and an operational group made up of members of the Ministries concerned. It is at the heart of this group that "information on the manoeuvres of sects is to be exchanged" and "actions to fight against sects are to be coordinated". Now the activity of these two structures has come to a standstill.

The guidance committee only met twice and within the Interministerial Mission there is a general outcry criticizing the way it works. An imbalance seems to have set in between the ministerial agents put at the disposal of the president of the Mission, Alain Vivien, and the so-called experts of fight against sects within the two other structures who find themselves with

not much to do. In addition, criticism of a more personal nature has been made, aimed at the way Alain Vivien carries out his job.

At the two recent OSCE conferences on religious freedom, held at Warsaw and Vienna in October 98 and March 99 respectively, the French policy of war on the so-called sects came under a lot of vivid criticism.

At Vienna, the French delegation was led by Mr Denis Barthélemy, secretary-general of the Mission. His reaction to the criticism leveled by the *International Helsinki Federation*, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* and others was animated and very aggressive. From the delegation's point of view, all the criticism emanated either directly or indirectly from the Scientologists. Instead of systematically answering the points raised, perhaps something they would have found too difficult to do, the delegation tried to discredit anyone who challenged the French policy to fight sects. The news agency *Agence France-Presse* was the only media representative to relay these ridiculous accusations. On the other hand the French newspapers said nothing about the criticism raised during the two international OSCE conferences where over 50 official delegations and tens of non-governmental organizations were present. In this regard, it could be said that the French public opinion is as misinformed about sects as the Serbian public opinion about the Kosovan war.

Along with these criticisms went proposals to open up talks. The Swiss delegation was in favor of dialogue between the authorities and religious organizations and the appointing of an ombudsman to deal with religious issues. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* also made suggestions in this direction but was greeted with a blunt refusal by the Interministerial Mission.

Unable to provide any acceptable arguments for the international community, the Interministerial Mission took a very defensive stance, twisting and manipulating the facts, even going to the point of making false statements.

On the 23rd April at the National Assembly in Paris, a European conference on sectarianism was held, and access was restricted to the movements and figures engaged in the fight against sects. Choosing to organize the conference in such a way reveals a real fear of having their ideas exposed, and of confronting in a public and upright way those who do not share their opinion, along with an inability to give any logical replies to their criticism.

Alain Vivien took advantage of that situation to further accuse the 172 sects listed by the parliamentary inquiry commission as being "associations with a totalitarian ideological structure, whose behaviour seriously encroaches on fundamental freedom and consequently, social equilibrium". This is the definition of a sect that France wants to see imposed. During that conference, Mr Vivien's oratory techniques mirrored the methods of the anti-sect milieu he is part of. His speech was littered with crowd-rousing techniques, errors, and occasions where he only gave half the facts, sometimes purposely twisting them, sometimes lying outright.

It is blatantly untrue to say that the French definition of a sect is part of Belgian law.

It is a lying accusation against the 172 "sects" to say that they do not want to become "worshipping" associations in line with the 1905 law, the only legal basis for tax advantages on manual donations. For several years now, it has been the French authorities themselves

who have refused this standing to Jehovah's Witnesses and other "worshipping" associations. How insidious, to suspect that the 172 "sects" are not "disposed to accept the transparency imposed by democratic institutions". Jehovah's Witnesses for example, are coming under close scrutiny by the tax authorities, even though they have never tried to thwart the work of any tax inspector.

It is an outright lie to say that in February 98 the Committee on Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs of the European parliament adopted a resolution limiting sectarian excesses carried on behind a mask of religion. That resolution was not approved by the plenary assembly of the Parliament and is therefore not an official document. What is more, the draft report on sects by Maria Berger was twice rejected and has since sunk into oblivion.

What a demagogic and manipulative approach to promote the draft report on sects by Mr Nastase, a report which was refused once by the parliamentary assembly of the European Council in September 1998, and hastily taken off the agenda on the day of the vote on April 29, 1999, as it was sure to be refused a second time.

According to Mr Vivien, 160 cases against sects are currently pending in courts. Such a statement has two implications. On the one hand, this means nothing because he gives no indication of the reasons for the legal proceedings, nor any statistics about sentences. On the other hand, this means everything: in spite of the open war on sects led by France and the considerable human and financial resources expended for this policy, sects allegedly live increasingly outside the law. This would seem to be a complete failure of the French policy of confrontation, as the results are worse than any other European country. But Mr Alain Vivien has already anticipated that objection: in his words, "France is perhaps among the member states that protect themselves the most against sects". However, we can wonder what the other member states of the European Union think about finding themselves quoted in such a self-satisfied and condescending judgement?

In the meantime, the Interministerial Mission continues its war on sects. As regards education first of all: 6,000 homeschooled students are suspected of being instructed by sects or with a sectarian slant, and steps to have them sent to school are being examined. To add to this, the fiscal harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses continues without letup. Following a new application of the general tax regulations, they are being asked for 60% of the manual donations they have received over the past years: a sum of 50 million dollars and their properties have been put under mortgage. This tax war is aimed at completely erasing the fourth largest religion in France from the religious scene. Up until a few months ago, only the Pentecostal evangelical church of Besançon and Mandarom shared their tragic situation. Now the 172 "sects" on the blacklist are also under scrutiny. They have been sent forms to fill out in which they must set out their financial, tax and property situation. These religious associations were registered under the 1901 law just like approximately 1,200,000 others. But now they are the only ones to have the State meddling in their internal affairs.

We can expect a worsening of the situation and the extension of the fiscal harassment to other associations linked with well-established religions. The October/December 1993 issue of "Administration" entitled "The State and Cults" makes the point that 95% of Muslim associations, 90% of Protestant and Jewish associations and nearly 100 diocesan Catholic associations, without counting the innumerable other Catholic associations such as the Friends of Monasteries or the organizers of the Worldwide Days of the Pope, should inevitably face tax investigation in the near future if the French State does not want to be accused of religious

discrimination. Not only religious but all types of associations are under the threat of the tax administration: 1,200,000 cultural, charitable and sporting associations would be affected if the French State wants to apply its logic thoroughly and avoid any discrimination.

Therefore the future for France is extremely grim, not only where religious freedom is concerned, but also for freedom of association and expression. And this is without speaking of the recent trends that in these last few years have been threatening other human rights.

Deviations

Since the publication of the French parliamentary report, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has received an increasing number of complaints from individuals adhering to one of the 172 so-called cults : defamation, slander, anonymous threats, breach of reputation, loss of jobs or promotions, dismissals, loss of visitation rights or child custody in divorce settlements, bomb threats in rented rooms, denial of room renting for religious ceremonies, etc. A few more detailed stories will help you understand the MacCarthyist climate that has been generated by the anticult policy in France.

Personal Settlement of Scores

In 1996, a small association called « *L'arbre du milieu* » that was helping maltreated and sexually abused children was included in the list of 172 cults publicized by the French parliamentary commission on cults. The source of information was the Intelligence Service. The starting point of this whole affair was a vengeance of an influential patient who involved an anticult movement in his personal settlement of scores. In this case, the founder of « *L'arbre du milieu* », Bernard Lempert, a well-known psychologist, lost his reputation, his patients and his sources of financing. In October 1998, the court of Rennes declared him non-guilty of being the guru of a cult. Jacques Guyard acknowledged that the movement « *L'arbre du milieu* » should not have been put on the list of cults but there does not exist any procedure to remove it from the said list.

Adherence to a Cult and Professional Prohibitions

There is now a tendency to substantiate the idea that adherence to a cult is incompatible with an occupation in the public sector, particularly in schools.

The principal of a school in Chomerac (Ardèche) was under fire in October 1998 because he was a member of the Mandarom, a blacklisted cult. A rumor was sufficient for a number of parents to withdraw their children from his school and to draw the attention of anticult movements and of the Ministry of Education. There was an official enquiry but he could not be reproached with any professional mistake or proselytism. He was just perceived as a potential danger by Jean-Pierre Brard, communist mayor of Montreuil (Paris) and member of the Observator on cults.

Since then, rumors have been circulating that Jehovah's Witnesses who are teachers are potentially dangerous for schoolchildren and should be put under scrutiny.

Consequently, so-called campaigns of information are being carried out by the public authorities in schools. For example, fourth grade students in junior high schools are subject to anti-cult propaganda and atrocity tales included in an official manual of Civic Education.

Loss of Professional Promotion

At mid-December 1998, an engineer working in a nuclear plant of EDF, the national electricity society, was refused a key position and transferred to another non-nuclear department of EDF because of his adherence to the Church of Scientology. The decision was backed by anticult movements working for the Interministerial Mission of Fight against Cults and by the socialist and communist trade unions. Although the engineer had not committed any professional mistake or had never tried to disseminate his beliefs, he was suspected of being used by the Church of Scientology to infiltrate the nuclear plant. The engineer had been denounced by several anonymous letters just when he was about to be given the leadership of a dozen workers.

Witch Hunt and Police Raids against Homes of The Family

In 1993, homes of The Family was the target of raids by the French police in Lyon and Marseilles and the alleged grounds that the kids were routinely prostituted. « Over 200 officers brandishing axes and automatic weapons entered the homes at dawn on June 9, 1993. 50 adults and 90 children were taken into custody. They handcuffed parents and dragged them down staircases and across a gravel driveway in full view of their children. A 15-year-old girl was handcuffed for four hours clad only in her underwear. Over the next two days, The Family members were subjected to intense interrogation during which time the police chief bluntly informed them that he hoped to destroy the « Children of God », to see to it that they lost their children, and to impirson them. Meanwhile, the young people were taken to dungeon-like detention centers, given little food, and grilled mercilessly though many did not understand French. In this case, the authorities were responding to charges leveled by the primary French anti-cult organization, the Association for the Defense of the Family and Individual (ADFI). For several years, ADFI had accused The Family of child abuse, prostitution, and various other unlawful activities. The authorities worked with ADFI, a government-supported agency, and the court appointed an ADFI-connected psychiatrist to interview the children. In spite of being isolated from their parents and the pressure placed upon them, the children denied that any abuse was occurring in their life. » (Gordon Melton, *Dai Bambini di Dio a The Family*, Leumann (Torino) : Elle Di Ci, 1997, p. 54).

In January 1999, six years after the raids, the Justice Court of Aix-en-Provence vindicated The Family. All defendants were found not guilty and acquitted.

Conclusions

All along the process meant to deal with problems caused by some cults, the French authorities have persistently rejected any form of dialogue with all the minority religions they have abusively called dangerous and harmful cults. They have generated a situation of total incommunicability which they have worsened by creating aggressive instruments of fight against so-called cults. This is leading to an increasing marginalization of France on this issue

in the democratic space of Western Europe and no signs of willingness to change this policy are visible.

June 3, 1999

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