

Repression of Minority and Non-conventional Religions in Western Europe Human Rights Implications

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The European continent is multicultural, multilingual and multireligious. Religious diversity really exists within the borders of the Member States of the European Union. However, the variety of their national histories, which is a richness in itself, poses some problems. In many cases, a specific religion has been closely linked to the edification of modern Nation-States and pretends to enjoy or effectively enjoys some privileged status legally, politically and socially. Consequently, most European countries have a two-tiered or multi-tiered system in which religions have different statuses and in which citizens are not treated in the same way and even suffer from various forms of institutionalized inequalities and discrimination on the basis of their religious or philosophical beliefs.

The most obvious shift is indeniably between on the one hand religions which the State recognizes and therefore legitimizes with some sort of quality label and on the other hand second-rank religions which are not recognized, exclusively non historical minority religions, also called "sects" or "cults", which do not enjoy the State quality label. The criteria for establishing various categories of religions are often disputable and sometimes non-existent.

The categorization of religions leads to a categorization of State financing systems which are discriminatory: a number of religions are financed by the State, though unequally, while others are not. In the wide variety of financing systems in force in Western Europe, taxpayers may not be allowed to finance their own religion and may to various degrees have to finance religions - and sometimes also secular humanist movements that they do not adhere to, that may be hostile to their own religion or whose doctrines they may be opposed to.

The categorization of religions also leads to a very heterogeneous sub-category which gathers together unpopular religious groups, called "cults" presented as "harmful or even dangerous". Mass homicides-suicides and crimes committed by a number of cults around the world in the nineties have triggered off an indiscriminate witch-hunt against hundreds of minority religions and against their adherents by anticult movements and the media all over Europe and by the parliaments of France, Belgium, Germany and Austria.

Governmental Control of Sects in the 15 Member States of the European Union

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 are not experiencing 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. In the aftermath, the state agency for the protection of the Constitution asked to have Scientology put under surveillance but no legal action has since then been taken against the movement. According to the latest news, the talk in that agency is of ending that surveillance.

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 last move was a discriminatory investigation into the fiscal, financial and patrimonial situation of the sole 172 sects. 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 movements suspected of being harmful sects, 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 along with a massive distribution of an information brochure. The depraved effects noted in France are now spilling over into Belgium.

In **Switzerland**, which is not part of the European Union, the National Council published a report on “Cults and Indoctrinating Movements” on July 1, 1999. Before that, local cantons had already created a coordination agency to harmonize their policies against the activities of sects.

In France and in the French-speaking parts of Belgium and Switzerland, the authorities have chosen to reject any sort of dialogue with minority religions, 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.

Human Rights Implications

Since the publication of the French parliamentary report, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has received an increasing number of complaints from French and Belgian individuals adhering to one of the blacklisted 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 not 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 that 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) came 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 no professional mistake or proselytism could be established. He was just perceived as a potential danger by Jean-Pierre Brard, communist mayor of Montreuil (Paris) and member of the Observatory 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 information campaigns 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 to Fight against Cults and by the socialist and communist trade unions. Although the engineer had not committed any professional mistake nor had ever 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 imprison 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.

Reporting about the Sect Report of the Council of Europe

On June 22, 1999, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly unanimously adopted a recommendation which gives priority to the prevention of dangerous sects. "Major legislation on sects is undesirable", the Assembly reiterated in a debate organised during its summer session.

The official press release published by the Council of Europe was the primary source of information for the media around the world. It read:

The recommendation adopted following the debate, referred to the risk that any legislation passed in this area might well interfere with the freedom of conscience and religion guaranteed by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Nonetheless, the serious incidents of recent years did warrant greater control of groups referred to as sects - which the Assembly did not define further. Their activities should be carried out in keeping with the principles underlying democratic societies.

Therefore, it was seen as vital to have access to reliable, objective information on these groups, information which would be directed in particular at teenagers within the school curriculum and at the children of followers of groups of a religious, esoteric or spiritual nature.

Consequently, the Assembly called on the governments of the member States:

- 1. to support the setting up of national or regional independent sect information centres;*
- 2. to include information on the history and philosophy of major schools of thought and religion in the general school curriculum;*
- 3. to use criminal and civil law procedures against any illegal practices carried out by these groups;*
- 4. to encourage the setting up of non-governmental organisations to protect victims; but also*
- 5. to take firm steps against any discrimination or marginalisation of minority groups and to encourage a spirit of tolerance and understanding towards religious groups.*

The Assembly also requested that the Ministerial Committee of the Council of Europe set up a European Observatory on groups of a religious, esoteric or spiritual nature, to facilitate an exchange of information between different national centres. It added that the Council of Europe should also take action to promote the setting up of information centres in central and eastern European countries.

These recommendations are the basis on which the media has constructed their own presentation of the Council of Europe's report, silencing the independent character of the sect information centres and point 5 while stressing and even distorting the support to be given to anti-cult associations.

However, among the unanimous condemnations made by the parliamentary assembly were:

- the use of the word "sect";
- any distinction between a "sect" and a religion;
- the government's involvement in the theological debate about whether to label groups "religions" or not;
- the state recognition of only certain religions;
- the state supervision of sect observatories;
- the spreading of information about certain people/groups before those people/groups concerned have had a chance to challenge it;
- the lack of tolerance and dialogue;
- and any form of discrimination, marginalisation and value judgements towards beliefs and minority groups.

Several of these points were not mentioned by the official press release of the Council of Europe and almost all of them were silenced by press agencies and the media.

The Sect-Hunt in Western Europe - Who is behind it and where is it heading?

A number of countries are fighting against "sects" while others have chosen to stay neutral. This split cannot be explained by the policy of some governments to separate religion and state. France and the Netherlands, to name only two countries, have radically different policies in this regard although there is such a separation. Also Sweden has taken a very liberal attitude although the Lutheran Church is closely linked to the state. In the light of events of previous years it would seem however that certain conditions favor the emergence of anti-sect state policies:

- a historical monopoly of one or two religions;
- society's increasing secularism in the wake of the progress of secular humanism and the regression of established religions;
- the presence of several relays for established religions and/or secular humanism in Parliament, governmental or social institutions and the media;
- a historical tradition of centralism, a reluctance to accept diversity whether cultural, linguistic, religious or ethnic;
- converging interests from different dominant belief systems despite their divergences or even their conflicting history;
- the existence of anti-sect movements.

Just one of these conditions can sometimes be enough to set off an anti-sect movement, but normally it takes a combination of several conditions along with their cumulated effects. Moreover, contagion is spreading internationally on the rails of converging interests from the various dominant belief systems in other states.

The anti-sect movement started in France where militant "laïcité" - one form of secular humanism - has been hostile to religion incarnated by the Catholic Church ever since the Revolution. In French-speaking Europe, francophone Belgium and the canton of Geneva have followed hot on the heels of France, thanks to the political, social and media relays of secular humanism. In Germany and Austria, the relays have been the established religions. Already in other countries, such as Hungary, signs are appearing that the state is also ready to enter the anti-sect war.

The anti-sect war carried on by certain countries attacks three main outward expressions, judged to be dangerous or harmful: doctrines, practices and teachings concerning health, and alternative teaching methods.

In its fight against non-conventional sect doctrines, the government can count on the support of the established churches along with secular humanism in all its forms. Natural allies against alternative or complementary therapies are the Medical Doctors' Association and professionals involved in the traditional psychology market, as the government will defend their interests. The public and denominational schools, both with a vision of man and society, will defend their own interests when it comes to alternative teaching methods. Accusations spread about sects are well known: mental destabilisation, bodily harm, sexual abuse, family breakups, indoctrination of children, threats to public order, fraud etc. The judiciary, the IRS and other administrations are implicated in the anti-sect fight, and new organisations specifically set up to fight sects have been added. To justify their existence, they have no choice but to stoke the fires further, causing the situation to race out of control.

In that huge clock with so many cogs, the anti-sect movements are just reflecting the surrounding ideology, owing their audience and power to the role which some want them to play. As for the real or supposed sect victims, they only became "interesting" when they could be used as tools against sects. Before the sect-hunt was launched by certain states, these two participants played only an insignificant role in Europe.

The perverse effects of the sect-hunt led by some European countries are clearly visible, even though the main instigators refuse to acknowledge them; rumour campaigns, denunciations, abusive police raids followed by massive separations of children from their parents (The Family), job or promotion loss, loss of custody or visiting rights in divorce cases, administrative and fiscal harassment, defacing of places of worship, assaults, bomb alerts ...

In a growing number of European countries, the anti-sect train along with its initiatives and measures gathers speed. In the wake of a return or evolution towards philosophical and religious conformity, it is feared that certain states would be tempted to go beyond a sect-hunt, taking back control of society with the aid of its change-opposing pillars.

Currently, anyone who is not "ideologically correct" in some areas has his freedom of thought and expression threatened. In the future, anyone who is not "ideologically correct" in any area may be exposed to public condemnation if deviations go on extending.

Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life
Trinity College, Hartford
September 26-27, 1999