

U.N. International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation to Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination

A critical look at teaching material used in France and in Belgium

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The objective of the conference is to design an international education strategy focused on the right to freedom of religion and belief among pupils of the age corresponding to primary or elementary and secondary educational levels. Religious tolerance lies at the heart of such a program.

This paper of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* will focus on the teaching material used in France and in Belgium, two Western democracies that have distinguished themselves by carrying out controversial policies opposed to the public manifestation of non-conventional beliefs.

In France, a parliamentary commission publicized a report blacklisting 173 sects (1995). A book (1) in which new religious movements are indiscriminately labelled as dangerous sects to be fought against is used as teaching material for fourth grade students in junior high schools. The authors of the book thank Alain Vivien, currently president of the governmental Interministerial Mission to Fight against Sects, for his assistance, and quote inter alia from Hayat El Mountacir, an activist of the French anti-sect association ADFI.

In Belgium, a parliamentary commission published a report listing 189 movements suspected of being harmful sects (1997). In 1999, the French Community, one of the federated entities of the Belgian state, published and massively distributed a brochure called “Guru, beware of you!” as a part of its prevention campaign against harmful or dangerous sects. This richly illustrated 38-page brochure was sent to all the francophone schools and is now extensively used as teaching material although it contains serious errors and biased information.

For example, it wrongly says that the Belgian parliamentary report on sects (660 pages) has listed “189 active sects”. The said report however mentions that the commission has examined “189 movements” (listed in an annex) but that not all of them are sects or are harmful. “Guru, beware of you!” targets more than 30 dangerous sects although none of them has ever been condemned by Belgian courts. Moreover, the Belgian parliament has never voted the report of the sect commission because most of its members did not agree with the methodology and the results of a deficient enquiry. Only the general conclusions and recommendations (19 pages) were adopted by the Parliament. This is silenced in “Guru, beware of you!”.

According to the brochure, religious sects should not be allowed to make new members while traditional religions should. It also comforts the cliché that “historical religions” are respectable while sects are not.

This a source of discrimination and intolerance that is not acceptable. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has received complaints from parents professing a minority religion (See a letter

from a JW in annex) because a number of teachers stigmatize their movement as a dangerous and harmful sect.

In the aftermath of the Belgian parliamentary report, the Ministry of Justice created an observatory on sects. Such an observatory should help school inspectors by giving a motivated advice on teaching material used in Belgian schools: “Guru, beware of you!” and TV programs on sects.

In Dutch-speaking public schools, religious or ethics classes are not compulsory while they are in French-speaking public schools. As JW children do not want to follow the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Islamic religious classes, they opt for ethics classes. However, most teachers are non-believers or even atheist and anti-religious activists. Their secular values are not consistent with the religious diversity of their classes and are often in conflict with JW moral values. Whereas they should remain neutral, they criticize both religions and new religious movements, use “Guru, beware of you!” and anti-sect literature from the media to “enlighten” children coming from a religious background and to try to move them away from the influence of their families. Complaints addressed by parents to the relevant educational authorities have remained fruitless.

Despite several requests, the exemption from religious or ethics classes has been refused in French-speaking public schools which are under the authority of the French Community.

Brochures similar to “Guru, beware of you!” and published by state agencies are also used in Germany and in Austrian schools. They are a source of concern for parents professing a minority religion.

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