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**A BRIEF OVERVIEW
OF THE ATTITUDES
OF WESTERN EUROPEAN STATES
TOWARDS
NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS**

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In the 1990s, some Western European countries established state agencies or state-sponsored information centres to deal with “cults” (*sectes*, *Sekten*, *Psychokulten*, etc.). Why did such an intriguing development occur? Did it mean that some newly apparent groups were presenting specific challenges and features requiring urgent state intervention (although some of the groups monitored by such agencies or centres had been active for decades)? Did the nearly simultaneous creation of these centres imply similar perceptions of the issue of cults across European states, even though most countries did not establish such centres, despite the presence of the targeted groups on their territories?

This phenomenon deserves attention, in order to understand the dynamics leading to concerns about some groups, especially in an historical context where state neutrality in religious matters has become increasingly emphasized.

This article will focus on Western Europe. Developments that are worth monitoring have also occurred in post-communist European countries, but this would require further research. North America will also be omitted, except in the section that discusses the roots of the phenomenon, as well as when dealing with North American influences in Europe. Finally, it will not be possible to pay attention to developments in countries such as Israel, China and Japan.

Regarding Western Europe, the article will not attempt to offer a detailed country-by-country approach, but will nevertheless provide an overview, while simultaneously trying to identify trends and discernible periods into which the phenomenon that forms the subject matter of this article can be broadly divided. It will deal only with the attitudes of European states, but another important issue worth considering that is not discussed in this article would be cult-related decisions made by European courts at various levels.

Background: new religious movements and concerned relatives

Until the early 1970s, non-mainstream religious movements were primarily either a matter of curiosity, seen as bizarre, or a topic for church apologetics: some faithful or clergy of historical churches in the West were concerned about perceived sheep-stealing by Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, and other groups, and would detail the doctrinal errors of these competitors. In

some cases, such work included valuable documentary material as well as criticism of the beliefs of these groups. In a country such as Germany, the *Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen* (Protestant Centre for Religious and Ideological Issues, or EZW) was founded as early as 1960¹ and was a successor to earlier work between the two world wars, as well as to efforts by individuals, such as Kurt Hutten (1901-1979), who as early as 1950 had published the first edition of what would for years become a standard work: *Seher, Grübler, Enthusiasten. Das Buch der traditionellen Sekten und religiösen Sonderbewegungen*. In France, a member of the Dominican Order, Fr. Henri-Charles Chéry (1902-1977), published *L'Offensive des Sectes* in 1954, with subsequent updated and enlarged editions. The focus of such books of the 1950s was mostly on Christian non-conformity.

At that time, democratic states paid little attention to sects, cults and new religious movements (NRMs); more precisely, while occasionally a movement became controversial, that specific movement was then targeted, and not a range of unrelated movements. For instance, there were raids on the Church of Scientology² or associated groups by the US Food and Drug Administration in 1958 and 1963. In Australia's State of Victoria, following several years of controversies, a Board of Inquiry on the Church of Scientology was established by the Victoria government and a report was published in 1965 which stated that "Scientology is evil; its techniques evil; its practice a serious threat to the community, medically, morally and socially; and its adherents sadly deluded and often mentally ill":³

If there should be detected in this Report a note of unrelieved denunciation of scientology, it is because the evidence has shown its theories to be fantastic and impossible, its principles perverted and ill-founded, and its techniques debased and harmful. Scientology is a delusional belief system, based on fiction and fallacies and propagated by falsehood and deception. While making an appeal to the public as a worthy system whereby ability, intelligence and personality may be improved, it employs techniques which further its real purpose of

¹ Reinhard Hempelmann, "EZW 40 Years Old", 2000, <http://www.ekd.de/english/1692-2990.html> [accessed 27 October 2016].

² See Roy Wallis, *The Road to Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, chap. 7: "Relations with State and Society", pp. 190-198.

³ Kevin V. Anderson, *Report of the Board of Enquiry into Scientology*, 1965, p. 1, <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~dst/Cowen/audit/andrhome.html> [accessed 27 October 2016].

securing domination over and mental enslavement of its adherents. It involves the administration by persons without any training in medicine or psychology of quasi-psychological treatment, which is harmful medically, morally and socially.⁴

This inquiry led to a temporary banning of Scientology in the State of Victoria, later joined by South Australia and Western Australia (these bans were lifted a few years later). In 1969, an inquiry was conducted in New Zealand,⁵ while inquiries were launched in the same year in South Africa⁶ and the United Kingdom.⁷ While topics that would be found in later controversies surrounding other NRMs emerged in criticism found in some of these reports,⁸ they dealt only with Scientology.

The 1960s were marked by several important changes. This was a time of turbulence, especially among the younger generation, reflected in radical political activism, the flourishing of counter-culture and manifestations such as the hippie movement, and a turning towards the East after disillusionment with what was seen as a profit-oriented, materialistic West. New movements flourished that were quite different from the classical model of Christian sects. Gurus from India became fashionable. The Beatles visited Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917-2008), but his — externally somewhat Westernized — Transcendental Meditation was only one among many other neo-Hindu

⁴ Ibid., p. 161.

⁵ New Zealand Commission of Inquiry into the Hubbard Scientology Organisation in New Zealand, *Hubbard Scientology Organisation in New Zealand and Any Associated Scientology Organisation or Bodies in New Zealand: Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1969.

⁶ Commission of Enquiry into Scientology, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Scientology for 1972, 1973*.

⁷ John Foster, *Enquiry into the Practice and Effects of Scientology*, 1971.

⁸ Several authors have provided evidence of recurring themes in criticism of fringe religious movements over time, including my own research on polemics against the Salvation Army when it reached Switzerland in the 1880s; see J.-F. Mayer, *Une honteuse exploitation des esprits et des porte-monnaie? Les polémiques contre l'Armée du Salut en Suisse en 1883 et leurs étranges similitudes avec les arguments utilisés aujourd'hui contre les "nouvelles sectes"*, Fribourg: Les Trois Nornes, 1985; "Religiöse Polemiken gegen die Heilsarmee in der Schweiz des 19. Jahrhunderts. Kurzgefasste Überprüfung der gebräuchlichsten Argumente gegen die Heilsarmee in der Schweiz von 1883 und ihrer Ähnlichkeiten mit den heute gegen die NRB gebrauchten", in Johannes Neumann and Michael W. Fischer (eds), *Toleranz und Repression. Zur Lage religiöser Minderheiten in modernen Gesellschaften*, Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 1987, pp. 198-212; "Les polémiques contre l'Armée du Salut à Genève en 1883", in Frédéric Amsler and Sarah Scholl (eds), *L'Apprentissage du Pluralisme religieux: le cas genevois au XIXe siècle*, Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2013, pp. 215-235.

teachings. Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977) travelled to the United States and founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) there in 1966, with enthusiastic young converts chanting “Hare Krishna” to perplexed audiences in the streets of US cities, and soon European ones too. New movements did not only come from India: as early as 1959, the Korean-born Unification Church had reached North American shores, although it remained quite obscure during its first decade there;⁹ this would change in the 1970s, and what would become known as the “Moonies”¹⁰ would then become representatives of an emblematic “cult”. Some movements from Japan were spreading too, while the Jesus Revolution offered to hippies a radical understanding of the Christian faith: the Children of God became an extreme case, and the movement still exists today under its new name, The Family.

It was a time of religious quests, but also of widespread aspirations to establish ideal communities, with a number of these groups actually leading communitarian lives. Moreover — and here we come to the real starting point of our story — many of the people who joined such groups did not at all match the typical profile of converts to fringe religious groups. A number had been receiving higher education, sometimes at the best colleges and universities, and had suddenly given up their studies to sit at the feet of Hindu gurus or to do fundraising on behalf of a Korean messiah. New devotees also included a number of activists who had previously been involved in social protests and student unrest:¹¹ a spectacular example was Rennie Davis (b. 1941), a prominent anti-Vietnam War leader, who became a follower of a child spiritual master, Guru Maharaj Ji (b. 1957), and a preacher for his Divine Light Mission.

To say the least, many parents were not particularly pleased to watch their children undergo such radical reorientations, even more so because many of the converts did not only leave behind university, studies and hopes for a bright middle-class future, but even cut or drastically reduced links to their families, since they had more important and urgent tasks to fulfil (e.g. saving the

⁹ By chance, however, a sociologist researched this unknown group, providing a still-valuable study of the initial efforts of the Unification Church to spread in the United States; see John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult: A Study of Conversion, Proselytization, and Maintenance of Faith*, New York: Irvington, 1981 (first published 1966).

¹⁰ Known as such after its founder and leader, Sun Myung Moon.

¹¹ Cf. Stephen A. Kent, *From Slogans to Mantras: Social Protest and Religious Conversion in the Late Vietnam War Era*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

world or other such grandiose projects). To make matters worse, some of the new breed of spiritual leaders did not always seem to outsiders to be the kind of people one should trust.

How could such strange things happen, the parents wondered? First in North America, and soon after in Europe, relatives of converts to some high-demand groups felt that sinister forces were at work: they noticed changes in their children's personalities and found it difficult to believe that they could have so suddenly embraced such very strange beliefs, while forsaking all their previous interests and relationships. In the minds of concerned relatives, there was little doubt: these young people had become enmeshed in the nets of spiritual predators, who had brainwashed them and converted them into subservient tools. Something clearly had to be done, and very soon relatives discovered other people reporting similar experiences. Quite naturally, they started cooperating.

Thus the first "anti-cult" association was born in 1972 in San Diego, California. It was formed by parents whose progeny had joined the Children of God, and was called The Parents' Committee to Free Our Sons and Daughters From the Children of God Organization (FREECOG). Very soon, however, parents who were attempting to make sense of what was happening to their sons or daughters in various groups became aware that, despite differences in the beliefs and outlook of these groups, the issues these parents were facing were quite similar:

establishing an anti-cult group, irrespective of its narrow focus, served as a veritable beacon for a multitude of parents whose offspring had joined various other exotic, unconventional religious groups and who suffered the same confusion and fear. Given their own specific concerns, the leaders of FREECOG had initially resisted involvement with families seeking information on sons or daughters who had joined others "cults" Over time, however, the similarities they perceived in the stories they were told by exasperated parents became disturbing and difficult to ignore. Families contacted FREECOG with tales of "overnight" conversions to unconventional religions, estrangement of youths from their biological families that seemed deliberately encouraged by various groups, and accounts of exploitation of young converts by charismatic leaders ranging from sexual abuse to virtual slave labor. Gradually, the leaders of

FREECOG came to the conclusion that the Children of God represented only one example of a broader religious phenomenon sweeping the nation.¹²

Local groups concerned about “destructive movements” or “cults” started to appear at various places, later coalescing into national organizations as early as 1974.

In Europe, parents underwent similar experiences and started to launch their own organizations, initially often on a quite modest scale. In France, the *Association pour la défense des familles et de l'individu* (ADFI) was founded in Rennes, Brittany, in late 1974. In Germany, the *Elterninitiative zur Hilfe gegen seelische Abhängigkeit und religiösen Extremismus e.V.* was founded in Munich in 1975.¹³ In the same year, *Family Action Information and Rescue* was organized in the United Kingdom, while in Belgium, the *Association de la défense de l'individu et de la famille* was founded in 1976. In the Netherlands, the *Samenwerkende Ouders Sekteleden* (Associated Parents of Cult Members) was launched in 1979. Networking was crucial (for sharing information, but also for locating young converts who belonged to highly mobile groups): exchanges of ideas and information across the Atlantic started quite early, and a common understanding of perceived techniques of mind control was thus shaped.¹⁴ Some of the first theoretical papers produced by the French ADFI to explain the techniques allegedly used by cults were actually translations of US publications.¹⁵

The birth of such associations during the first half of the 1970s was an important step: for the first time, associations critical of a variety of fringe religious movements were being built on a secular basis. The primary purpose was not to denounce the doctrines of “cults” as false (although anti-cult activists did indeed consider them to be far-fetched), but to focus only on what these

¹² Anson D. Shupe and David G. Bromley, *The New Vigilantes: Deprogrammers, Anti-Cultists, and the New Religions*, Beverly Hills/London: Sage, 1980, p. 91. See also David G. Bromley and Anson Shupe, “Anti-cultism in the United States: Origins, Ideology and Organizational Development”, *Social Compass*, 42(2), June 1995, pp. 221-236.

¹³ See *20 Jahre Elterninitiative zur Hilfe gegen seelische Abhängigkeit und religiösen Extremismus*, Munich, 1995.

¹⁴ See Étienne Ollion, “La secte sécularisée: étude d'un processus de requalification conceptuelle”, *Genèses*, 78, March 2010, pp. 25-47 (pp. 36-37).

¹⁵ Two articles, both published in Rennes in July 1978: “La manipulation de la folie” (14 pages) and “Sectes destructrices” (7 pages), translated from John Clark, “Destructive Cults: Defined and Held Accountable”, 1976.

movements were doing and to expose them as a social danger, beside the more immediate goal of “rescuing” members.

Of course, initial interactions occurred with mainstream churches and some clergy: in France, for instance, the Paris branch of the ADFI first met in parish halls,¹⁶ while in Germany, some Lutheran pastors closely cooperated with anti-cult activists. Even today, some critics of cults either in mainstream churches or in evangelical circles cooperate with secular anti-cultists. But while the agendas of the religious and secular anti-cultists sometimes overlapped, they were actually quite different. The approach of the new secular anti-cult groups was not doctrinal: they denounced the threat that cults presented to the well-being of converts and the loss of individual freedom suffered by members of such groups. From the very beginning, therefore, the roots were put down of a discourse disconnecting cults from religion (since being a religion could offer cults benefits associated with, for instance, freedom of religion) and presenting them as groups acting under the cover of religion rather than being genuine religions in the positive meaning of the term.

The 1980s: Jonestown and the first wave of state reactions

Initially, anti-cult groups did not find much support from governments. These groups felt that the authorities were not helping them properly and were not prepared to intervene in order to “save our children” (even less so because most of these children were legally adults, and thus deemed to be able to make their own decisions, even if they broke away from their families in the process). Thus, in the early 1970s, first in the United States and later in Europe, the practice of deprogramming started, i.e. forcibly removing cult members from their movements, keeping them under constant guard, and hiring experts (who often were soon themselves former cult members) who presented them with evidence against cults and helped them to think “properly” again. Cult members were supposed to have been brainwashed and kept under such pressure by the cult that they were never given the opportunity to reconsider their commitment. There were a number of deprogrammings in the 1970s and 1980s,¹⁷ a percentage of which were successful from the viewpoint of the deprogrammers,

¹⁶ É. Ollion, “La secte sécularisée”, pp. 31-32.

¹⁷ They were less frequent in Europe than in North America, however.

while others did not turn out as expected, and some deprogrammers even landed in jail. Legally, whatever the reasons for it, a deprogramming process is ultimately a form of kidnapping and sequestration. The practice has virtually disappeared from the West, although cases have continued to occur in Japan in recent years.

Critics of cults found a receptive audience among members of the media. Tragic stories of parents reporting the sudden disappearance of bright young people who were being turned into zombies made good headlines, and many readers would sympathize with the plight of the relatives of such young people. Thus a media image of evil cults started to emerge,¹⁸ in contrast to early reports, which had often been rather amused or even positive. Over the years, the media image of cults would undoubtedly have an impact on the perception of NRMs in political circles: everyone knows how much attention politicians pay to what is reported in the media!

Beside the spread of an increasingly negative media image of cults, some dramatic events gave added credibility to the lobbying of still relatively weak anti-cult groups. In November 1978, more than 900 people lost their lives in Jonestown, Guyana, where US members of a movement called the Peoples Temple had gone to settle. It was a mixture of mass suicides and murders: among the victims was US Democratic Congressman Leo Ryan (1925-1978), who had gone to Jonestown to investigate allegations against the Peoples Temple. The impact of the events in Jonestown was enormous. Although anti-cult activists had paid considerable attention to the Peoples Temple, the fact that a “cult” had done something like this came as confirmation of their worst fears and warnings. The media became more open than ever to negative interpretations of the cult phenomenon.

We will not focus here on debates around Jonestown in the United States, especially since there were no federal-level long-term consequences, despite

¹⁸ According to Beckford’s observations on the British situation in the early 1980s: “Many parents who had been reasonably satisfied with the accounts given of this movement [the Unification Church] by their children were suddenly disturbed by the competing accounts supplied by the mass media. In fact, most of them subsequently made contact with other ‘affected’ families only as a direct result of corresponding with journalists and with the people who had been featured in their stories. Indeed, journalists have played a major part in helping to fuel anti-cult campaigns and to keep them ‘in the news’, if not in the headlines”; James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to New Religious Movements*, London/New York: Tavistock, 1985, p. 232.

some initial proposals for action following the Jonestown event.¹⁹ In the discussion that follows we will therefore examine the European scene.²⁰

While there had not been much political support for anti-cult concerns until the Jonestown events, it had not been completely absent. In France, the ADFI received its first subsidy from the Ministry of Health in 1977 and a second one the following year, which allowed it to hire two part-time employees.²¹

Jonestown was a turning point, and marked the start of Western European states' direct interest in the issue of NRMs.²² But which narrative would they follow? Various resources were available to them:

- *theological interpretations* of **sects**, defined as heretical, erroneous beliefs by historical Christian churches that sometimes enjoyed a privileged relationship with European states;
- *sociological interpretations* of the phenomenon, derived from the works of Max Weber (1864-1920) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), based on the church/sect dichotomous ideal types, later refined by Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) with the additional type of the “denomination”,

¹⁹ “[I]n the wake of Jonestown, anticult bills appeared in Massachusetts, Illinois, Minnesota, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Texas, Maryland, Oregon and, most importantly, New York. These bills varied widely in their sophistication and support. Most were defeated at the hearing stage as civil libertarians, representatives of mainline churches, and experts on NRMs mobilized against the legislation. The one exception was New York The 1980 New York legislation, generally known as the Lasher bill ..., would have amended the mental health codes for allowing parents widespread powers of conservatorship for purposes of deprogramming their offspring, specifically adult offspring, who had joined one of the NRMs. The bill passed the assembly twice but was vetoed by the governor on both occasions. By the time of the second veto, it had become obvious that such legislation was not going anywhere nationally, and further efforts that were taking a significant amount of anticult resources were abandoned”; J. Gordon Melton, “Critiquing Cults: An Historical Perspective”, in Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcraft (eds), *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America, Vol. 1: History and Controversies*, Westport/London: Greenwood Press, 2006, pp. 126-142 (pp. 133-134).

²⁰ For a scholarly assessment of the controversies until the early 1980s, see J. Beckford, *Cult Controversies*.

²¹ Several other sponsors, including the City of Paris, would follow; see *BULLES. Bulletin de liaison pour l'étude des sectes*, No. 0, Spring 1983, pp. 36-37.

²² The connection with the events in Guyana is explicit in the historical section of the French agency currently in charge of cult issues, MIVILUDES (of which more later): “L'inquiétude à propos des sectes apparaît en Europe à l'occasion du drame survenu en 1978 à Georgetown [sic; actually Jonestown], au Guyana, avec la mort de 923 membres du Temple du Peuple. Cette affaire, par son ampleur et ses conséquences, bien au-delà du Guyana, a légitimé, en France, la nécessité d'une initiative politique en la matière”; <http://www.derives-sectes.gouv.fr/missions/historique> [accessed 27 October 2016].

while contemporary sociologists had also started working on what they increasingly came to call **new religious movements**;²³ and

- *anti-cultist interpretations of destructive cults*; these interpretations claimed that Western societies were affected by a new social problem requiring determined intervention and countermeasures, with an emphasis on the phenomenon not as an issue of religion, but of human rights. The media increasingly adopted this discourse.

Interpretive emphases would not be the same in all European countries, and some would mix elements from various sources. Governments could not use the first source of interpretation referred to above, since no European government was inclined to enter into theological debates, and in any case most states felt they had to adopt a more-or-less neutral position vis-à-vis citizens' religious beliefs (which remains the case today). In terms of the other two approaches, one should not be too simplistic and claim that there was a sociological "camp", even if this occasionally seemed to be the case. While it is true that many sociologists of religion have supported a rather liberal approach and criticized the use of theories such as brainwashing to explain members' commitment to NRMs, a few sociologists support anti-cult groups or have developed a critical discourse on some controversial movements. Moreover, beside sociologists, over the years some academics from other disciplinary backgrounds have written on NRMs; for instance, people with a legal or psychological training. Many of them have been critical of NRMs, which may partly have to do with these academics' use of different tools of analysis and consideration of different sources (for instance, psychologists would be more likely to encounter people feeling themselves to be victims of cults than happy members). This also shows how different disciplinary backgrounds influence the way in which we perceive social groups of any kind. The debate should not therefore be seen as one of "academics vs. non-academics".

The late 1970s saw the first publication of official reports on NRMs, either by state agencies or parliamentary commissions. The first such report probably appeared in Germany, and was published in February 1980. It used in its title

²³ A multilingual bibliography published in 1983 lists only one title prior to 1970; see James A. Beckford and James T. Richardson, "A Bibliography of Social Scientific Studies of New Religious Movements", *Social Compass*, 30(1), 1983, pp. 111-135.

the expression *Jugendreligionen* (“youth religions”), which had been popularized by a Lutheran pastor, Friedrich-Wilhelm Haack (1935-1991).²⁴ Haack had founded the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Religion und Weltanschauungsfragen* as early as the mid-1960s and had also been instrumental in creating the first group of concerned relatives in Germany. The 23-page report²⁵ was prepared by the Federal Ministry for Youth, Family and Health, following a request from the Board of Petitions of the national Parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany (Bundestag). In March 1979, the Bundestag had asked the government to elaborate a global concept in order to face the challenges of “youth religions”, as well as to protect and support concerned people.

The report was careful to make clear that the groups under consideration were very different from one another. Briefly described were the Unification Church, the Children of God, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Divine Light Mission, Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, Rajneesh and Ananda Marga. The report summarized the issues raised by the activities of these groups and explained that it was difficult to decide at that time whether these activities were likely to change. In terms of practical measures, the report made it clear that a ban on such movements was out of the question; however, existing laws could be used to counter specific “negative activities”. Regarding the issue of youth protection, little could be done, since most converts were adults. The report stated that there were suspicions that several members had gone through an “indoctrination process” that could cause possible psychological damage. There were, however, limited options for state agencies to intervene, although the report would help to spread “factual information” (“*sachliche Informationen*”) in order to warn potential converts; this could be done through close cooperation with concerned relatives and other partners: the report stressed that this was already being done. From 1980, the *Aktion für geistige und psychische Freiheit – Bundesgemeinschaft von Elterninitiativen* received subsidies from the Federal Government in order to intensify its efforts. Rehabilitation measures for former cult members would

²⁴ Friedrich-Wilhelm Haack, *Jugendreligionen. Ursachen, Trends, Reaktionen*, Munich: Claudius/Pfeiffer, 1979.

²⁵ *Jugendreligionen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Bonn: Bundesminister für Jugend, Familie und Gesundheit, 1980.

also be supported through subsidies to an initiative of the *Bund der Deutschen Katholischen Jugend*.

While attempting to remain relatively balanced in the post-Jonestown context, the German report raised some sensitive issues vis-à-vis the state's neutrality: could the state disseminate literature and warnings on specific NRMs? Publications were challenged in the courts, which had to decide if these publications were compatible with state neutrality. Insofar as such publications provided factual information, they were deemed to be acceptable. Finally, in 2002, the Constitutional Court affirmed the state's right to discuss (and even criticize) religions, their aims and activities, while exercising restraint and being prohibited from spreading defamatory, discriminatory or distorting representations of religious communities.²⁶

In France,²⁷ an initial National Assembly request for a commission of inquiry had been turned down in 1978, since the Legal Commission had suggested the setting up of a commission on information. This commission apparently worked until 1981, but without issuing any public document or statement. It was discontinued after the pre-election dissolution of the National Assembly in 1981. The new Socialist government in France intended to take some kind of steps, but in a different form. The time was ripe: Roger Ikor (1912-1986), a well-known French author with a rationalist, secular background, had just published a book entitled *Je porte plainte*²⁸ after his son, who was a follower of Zen macrobiotic practices, had committed suicide. A banner on the book conveyed a clear message: "*Contre les sectes*". In the same year Ikor founded the *Centre contre les manipulations mentales* (which still exists today) in parallel with the ADFI and some minor players on the French anti-cult scene.

In September 1982, Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy entrusted a Socialist member of Parliament (MP), Alain Vivien (b. 1938), who had expressed

²⁶ Brigitte Schoen, "New Religions in Germany: The Publicity of the Public Square", in Philip C. Lucas and Thomas Robbins (eds), *New Religious Movements in the Twenty-first Century: Legal, Political, and Social Challenges in Global Perspective*, New York/London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 85-95.

²⁷ Brigitte Basdevant-Gaudemet, "Les pouvoirs publics face aux sectes en France", in Francis Messner (ed.), *Les "Sectes" et le Droit en France*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999, pp. 191-196.

²⁸ Roger Ikor, *Je porte plainte*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1981. Later, Ikor wrote another anti-cult book: *La Tête du Poisson. Les sectes, un mal de civilisation*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1983.

concerns about sects for several years, with the job of preparing a report.²⁹ Completed in 1983, the report was published in 1985.³⁰ It was a book-length document, starting with comments on the contemporary situation of quests for meaning. It deliberately omitted any discussion of “Christian dissent”, i.e. groups derived from Protestantism, and focused on Eastern groups, syncretic and esoteric groups, racist and fascist groups, and various other groups. A total of 116 groups were covered, with slightly more than 30,000 followers, since most members of minor religious groups would have belonged to Christian movements at that time; however, the report stated that up to half-a-million French citizens might be affected by “*le phénomène sectaire*”. It is worth noticing that the report mentioned the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which was undoubtedly a religious group, Vivien stated, but some of their attitudes could be seen as a cause for concern (especially the issue of their rejection of blood transfusions).³¹

The report made various proposals, such as those for establishing an inter-ministerial body to monitor developments, providing information in a balanced way (cooperation with anti-cult groups was suggested for this purpose), promoting an open *laïcité* (secularity), going beyond national borders (i.e. encouraging cult-watching groups to coordinate their activities with those in other countries), informing the general public (through targeted activities by the media), instituting mediating processes that could help families (for instance, by instituting temporary conservatorships allowing a member of a group to leave it for a few weeks in order to reconsider his/her membership,³² thus discouraging the practice of deprogramming), etc.

The Vivien report listed a more extensive sample of groups than the German report of 1980, but in other ways it was still very much a product of the controversies of the 1970s. It saw private anti-cult initiatives as legitimate partners, not unlike the German report. But the mention of Jehovah’s Witnesses shows that a more extensive understanding of the field to be covered was brewing.

²⁹ In 1982, Jean Ravail, a French civil servant, had written a report, but it was never made public, although Vivien quotes a few lines from the document in his own report.

³⁰ Alain Vivien, *Les Sectes en France: expressions de la liberté morale ou facteurs de manipulation? Rapport au Premier ministre*, Paris: La Documentation Française, 1985.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³² Among the documents included at the end of the report, the full text is given of the Lasher bill in New York; see *ibid.*, pp. 126-134.

However, not all reports were on similar lines. The best illustration was the Dutch report released in 1984, following three years of research by a parliamentary committee.³³ It used the expression “new religious movements” instead of “sects” or “cults”, and its research had included discussions not only with critics of NRMs, but also with such movements’ leaders and members. Sites of the movements under consideration had also been visited. The report identified neither coercion in recruitment nor the NRMs themselves as constituting a threat to the mental health of their members.

The report ... was described by the media as a “study in disillusionment”. NRMs were not depicted according to their image in public opinion as sinister organizations driven by a hunger for power. Nevertheless, danger was the study’s underlying principle: the collective suicide of the People’s Temple sect in the jungle in Guyana and The Netherlands’ serious concern about active movements, such as Scientology, the Moonies, Hare Krishna and Bhagwan. The commission expressed serious criticism and did not avoid confrontation. The commission also established an objective and sound empirical basis for the recommended policy.

...

The information clearly portrays the main NRMs in the Netherlands during the early 1980s. The overall picture was diverse but not disconcerting: the research did not corroborate the presumed danger. To the politicians involved, the findings certainly came as a surprise.³⁴

Anti-cult groups had less success in the Netherlands than in some other countries, despite a similar initial impetus, and NRMs ceased to be a significant social issue. Government involvement was “marginal and moderate”. “Nevertheless, in the few cases that raised concerns about children’s welfare, authorities were quick to respond.”³⁵ Richard Singelenberg emphasizes that one should be careful before merely attributing this situation to an alleged Dutch

³³ Tobias A.M. Wittveen, *Overheid en Nieuwe Religieuze Bewegingen*, Den Haag: Staatsuitgeverij, 1984.

³⁴ Tobias Witteveen and Sophie van Bijsterveld, “New Religious Movements and the Law in the Netherlands”, in European Consortium for Church-State Research (ed.), *New Religious Movements and the Law in the European Union*, Milano: Giuffrè Editore, 1999, pp. 257-271 (pp. 260-261).

³⁵ Richard Singelenberg, “Foredoomed to Failure: The Anti-cult Movement in the Netherlands”, in James T. Richardson (ed.), *Regulating Religion: Case Studies from around the Globe*, New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2004, pp. 213-219 (pp. 216-217).

tolerance: in the 2000s, vigorous concerns about Islam and anti-Islamic discourses emerged in the Netherlands.³⁶ It is possible, therefore, that reactions to religious movements have more to do with different perceptions and assessments of threats.

Insofar as is known to this author, during the 1980s only one other official document appeared at the national level in Europe: a short parliamentary report in Spain in 1989 that offered an overview of the situation and recommended vigilance, but within the existing legal framework.³⁷

The 1990s and later: the Solar Temple and the second wave of state reactions

This should not give the wrong impression that nothing was happening. As will briefly be mentioned later, there were initiatives at the level of European institutions during that period. Moreover, negative media reports on “cults”, as well as sustained activities by anti-cult groups and activists in several countries, continued.

Most importantly, an extension of the field covered by criticism of cults was taking place. Originally, anti-cult groups had felt that they were dealing with a new type of movement.³⁸ Over time, however, there was a process of widening, rather like concentric circles. It appeared that similar criticism could be directed at older religious movements (and there is hardly any religious movement in which no resentful former member or sceptical relative can be

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 217-218.

³⁷ “Dictamen y Propuestas de Resolución aprobadas por la Comisión de Estudio y repercusiones de las Sectas en España”, *Boletín Oficial de las Cortes Generales. Congreso de los Diputados. III Legislatura*, Series E, No. 174, 10 March 1989, pp. 4803-4808, http://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L3/CONG/BOCG/E/E_174.PDF [accessed 27 October 2016].

³⁸ Interestingly, the French ADFI initially considered that both old and new movements belonged to the same category of sects, but identified a specific feature of the new movements characterized by power, resources, intensity and psychological impact: “Pourquoi, à notre époque, de tels remous autour d’un phénomène qui, après tout, existe depuis deux millénaires? Parce que les mouvements créés ces vingt dernières années présentent des caractéristiques qui ont de quoi inquiéter: une puissance financière énorme, un recrutement acharné, des modifications suspectes dans le comportement des nouvelles recrues, une emprise absolue des leaders, dont on peut craindre qu’elle n’entraîne une soumission des adeptes jusqu’à la mort”; *BULLES. Bulletin de liaison pour l’étude des sectes*, No. 0, Spring 1983, p. 6.

found), but also to some non-religious movements (e.g. some fringe political groups or psychotherapeutic practices), and some groups in mainline churches. Increasingly, the issue was no longer whether a group was or was not a cult, but whether a group exhibited features of “cultic behaviour”. Such deviations could be observed in a wide range of settings, cult critics stated.

Concerns about NRMs were considerably boosted by dramatic events in the 1990s: the Order of the Solar Temple murders and suicides in Switzerland and Québec (1994), in France (1995) and in Québec again (1997). These events had not taken place in a faraway jungle, but mainly in Europe, and had mostly involved European citizens. The repetition of such events added to their impact, especially the second “transit” in Vercors, France. Media coverage was huge. Moreover, this took place in a decade during which several other violent events associated with fringe religious movements occurred overseas. This started with the siege of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, in 1993, which resulted in the death of 83 members of the movement and four federal agents. There was also the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by members of the Japanese movement Aum Shinrikyo in 1995: the subsequent investigation revealed several other cases of attacks and murders carried out by the group. Finally, there were the fears about Y2K,³⁹ including not only technological challenges, but also the perception that some apocalyptic groups might commit suicide or take other violent action at the start of the new millennium. This possibility even put several security agencies on alert.

Thus the stage was set for the next act of the cult controversies, with the events related to the Solar Temple playing a central role, similar to the Peoples Temple in 1978, but with a stronger impact due to the controversies that had accumulated since the 1970s.

Once again, the consequences were not the same in all countries. Reports were produced, but they did not all result in new public policies. It would take too much space to describe the contents of all these reports in detail, so the remarks that follow are limited to an overview.

France came first. In June 1995, the French National Assembly voted to establish a commission of inquiry headed by MPs Alain Gest and Jacques Guyard. The report was ready in late 1995, coinciding with the second “transit” of members of the Order of the Solar Temple in France, which gave the report an

³⁹ I.e., the arrival of the new millennium.

even stronger impact when it was made public in January 1996.⁴⁰ Like all reports of this kind, the Gest-Guyard report admitted that it was not possible to find an acceptable legal definition of a “secte”, but stressed that “*dérives sectaires*” could be observed; the commission thus stated that a group should be defined as a *secte* according to the level of danger it constituted.⁴¹ The report listed 172 *sectes*, including groups that had never made the headlines and were unknown even among most experts, as well as movements already present well before the cult controversies emerged: the Jehovah’s Witnesses were described as the largest *secte* in France. The list would become a major point of criticism of the report.⁴² Alleged dangers to members and society at large were listed, while legal measures that could be used to counteract the influence and activities of *sectes* were also listed. The report made several suggestions, in part similar to those made by Vivien ten years earlier: one was for the creation of an inter-ministerial observatory.

This time, however, the proposed observatory became a reality: the *Observatoire interministériel sur les sectes* was established in May 1996. It started work in November of the same year. In 1998, the *Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sectes* (MILS) replaced it. Finally, the *Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires* (MIVILUDES) succeeded the MILS.

In addition to material produced by MIVILUDES, there have been other important developments in the French state-sponsored monitoring of NRMs: the 1999 parliamentary report on *Les Sectes et l’Argent*; the 2006 parliamentary report on *sectes* and children; and, finally, the 2013 parliamentary report of the French Senate, *Rapport fait au nom de la commission d’enquête sur l’influence des mouvements à caractère sectaire dans le domaine de la santé*. Unfortunately, there is no space to examine the contents of these various reports.

⁴⁰ Pauline Côté, “La politique religieuse des États: considérations sur l’émergence et la formulation de lois portant sur les sectes en France et en Belgique”, in Pauline Côté and T. Jeremy Gunn (eds), *The New Religious Question: State Regulation or State Interference?*, Brussels: Peter Lang, 2006, pp. 285-342 (p. 306).

⁴¹ Alain Gest and Jacques Guyard, *Les Sectes en France*, Paris: Assemblée Nationale, 1996, p. 13.

⁴² Today, the French state explicitly refuses to publish a list of sects, since it could be discriminatory and would have to be constantly updated; <http://www.derives-sectes.gouv.fr/faq> [accessed 26 October 2016].

In addition, in 2001, the French National Assembly adopted the About-Picard law “*LOI no 2001-504 du 12 juin 2001 tendant à renforcer la prévention et la répression des mouvements sectaires portant atteinte aux droits de l’homme et aux libertés fondamentales*”, thus breaking with the idea that no specific legal measure was required. Although the word “*secte*” does not appear in the text of the law itself, the subject is clearly indicated by the use of the adjective “*sectaire*” in its title.⁴³ The law targets crimes such as the “abuse of ignorance and weakness”: it had originally been planned to introduce the crime of “mind manipulation”, but this proved to be based on uncertain grounds. It also foresees the possibility of dissolving groups that “exploited the psychological or physical subjection of people”.

While it is true that the intensity of the fight against cults in France has varied, Danièle Hervieu-Léger observes a remarkable continuity in the discourse on the subject across governments and political parties.⁴⁴ There were some indications of possible adjustments to and a softening of French cult-related policy in 2008, but no significant long-term changes have occurred.⁴⁵ France has also on occasion acted as a kind of advocate for anti-cult approaches abroad, both within and beyond Europe.

Belgium followed some of France’s steps.⁴⁶ *Laïcité* is strong in Belgium, but several religious groups also enjoy state support, thus making it a case that cannot be simply equated with its neighbour. The case of the Solar Temple had an impact in Belgium: one of the movement’s leading figures was a Belgian

⁴³ See Patrice Rolland, “La loi du 12 juin 2001 contre les mouvements sectaires portant atteinte aux droits de l’homme. Anatomie d’un débat législatif”, *Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions*, 121, January-March 2003, pp. 149-166.

⁴⁴ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “France’s Obsession with the ‘Sectarian Threat’”, in P.C. Lucas and T. Robbins, *New Religious Movements in the Twenty-first Century*, pp. 62-73 (p. 72).

⁴⁵ Christophe Macone, “Les différentes réponses de l’État français aux dérives des groupes sectaires”, *Criminologie*, 41(2), Autumn-Winter 2008, pp. 185-212 (pp. 208-209). In 2011, the Ministry of Justice called for the continuation of efforts to fight the *dérives sectaires*; it also stressed the need to cooperate with partners such as the ADFI, confirming the privileged role given to anti-cult associations in France in terms of NRM-related issues. One should, however, be careful not to see French policy as heterogeneous: not all civil servants follow the same approaches; see Véronique Altglas, “French Cult Controversy at the Turn of the New Millennium: Escalation, Dissensions, and New Forms of Mobilisations across the Battlefield”, in Eileen Barker (ed.), *The Centrality of Religion in Social Life: Essays in Honour of James A. Beckford*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2008, pp. 55-68 (see especially pp. 61-63).

⁴⁶ See Henri de Cordes, *L’État belge face aux dérives sectaires*, Brussels: CRISP, 2006 (*Courrier hebdomadaire*, No. 1908).

citizen. But Benjamin Mine warns against reducing the Belgian initiatives to mere consequences of the case of the Solar Temple.⁴⁷ In fact, a proposal for a parliamentary inquiry had been submitted as early as February 1993, and was related to recommendations from the Council of Europe. Media reports and the lobbying by associations supporting “victims of cults” helped pave the way for a new proposal by other MPs in 1995, leading to the creation of a commission of inquiry in 1996 and the publication of a huge report (constituting two volumes and more than 650 pages) in 1997.⁴⁸ In contrast to the French 1995 report, the summaries of the interviews with members, opponents, and experts were made public and included in the report.

The report made recommendations, several of which were similar to those found in other national reports (the dissemination of information, international cooperation, etc.), but also including new laws for punishing the abuse of vulnerable people and the act of encouraging people to commit suicide. It also recommended the creation of an independent observatory.

This centre was created in 1998, under the name of *Centre d'information et d'avis sur les organisations sectaires nuisibles* (Centre for Information and Advice on Harmful Sectarian Organizations, or CIAOSN), funded by the Belgian Ministry of Justice. Its primary task is to gather and disseminate information, and it only deals with groups; i.e. controversial independent therapists would not be part of its mission.⁴⁹

The new law punishing the abuse of vulnerable people⁵⁰ finally became a reality quite late, in 2011. Similarly to the French About-Picard law of ten years earlier, the Belgian law targets “mind manipulation”. It can be applied to religious groups, but also to healers or even commercial salespeople pressuring

⁴⁷ Benjamin Mine, “L'émergence d'un problème: l'objet politique 'secte' en Belgique”, *Criminologie*, 41(2), Autumn-Winter 2008, pp. 157-183.

⁴⁸ A. Duquesne and L. Willems, *Enquête parlementaire visant à élaborer une politique en vue de lutter contre les pratiques illégales des sectes et le danger qu'elles représentent pour la société et pour les personnes, particulièrement les mineurs d'âge*, Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 1997.

⁴⁹ Eric Brasseur, “Le CIAOSN: pas de grille de lecture préalable”, in Nathalie Luca, *Quelles régulations pour les nouveaux mouvements religieux et les dérives sectaires dans l'Union européenne?*, Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 2011, pp. 83-91 (p. 85).

⁵⁰ *Loi modifiant et complétant le Code pénal en vue d'incriminer l'abus de la situation de faiblesse des personnes et d'étendre la protection pénale des personnes vulnérables contre la maltraitance*, promulgated 26 November 2011.

weak-minded customers.⁵¹ As in the French law, perpetrators of such crimes can be jailed and fined.

In **Luxembourg**, the Legal Commission of the Parliament explicitly referred to the French and Belgian laws to justify the addition of a similar dispensation (actually a replica of the French law) to its own penal code in 2013.⁵² While the word “cult” (or anything similar) is not mentioned anywhere in the law, the report of the Legal Commission to Parliament explicitly mentioned people being in a state of physical or psychological submission as a consequence of their belonging to a *secte* as one of the kinds of situations (among others) where the state can intervene to protect vulnerable people.⁵³

In **Germany**, the Bundestag established a commission of inquiry in 1996 into “so-called sects and psychogroups”. It “marked the culmination of a public debate ... that goes back to the early 1970s”, with special focus on the Church of Scientology,⁵⁴ but even before the report was completed, the conference of the ministers of the interior of the German *Länder* (states) had decided to put Scientology under surveillance. Published in 1998,⁵⁵ the report was the result of political compromises, since all the country’s political parties and experts selected by each of them were part of the commission. Scholarly contributions played a role in the results: “The commission not only drew on social scientific research, but ordered a number of research projects the results of which could not be ignored.”⁵⁶ The report made some recommendations, welcomed the surveillance of Scientology, but also stated that, while conflict situations could occur, NRMs did not generally pose dangers to the state, society or individuals. The report also recommended that the use of the term “*Sekten*” should be avoided, since it evokes negative connotations.

⁵¹ Antoine Clevers, “Une loi pour aider les victimes des sectes”, *La Dernière Heure*, 1 June 2011.

⁵² “Loi du 21 février 2013 portant incrimination de l’abus de faiblesse”, *Mémorial: Journal officiel du Grand Duché de Luxembourg*, A-No. 35, 1 March 2013, p. 536.

⁵³ For full details, see

<http://www.chd.lu/wps/portal/public/RoleEtendu?action=doDocpaDetails&id=6444A>.

⁵⁴ Hubert Seiwert, “The German Enquete Commission on Sects: Political Conflicts and Compromises”, in J.T. Richardson, *Regulating Religion*, pp. 85-101 (p. 86).

⁵⁵ *Endbericht der Enquete-Kommission “Sogenannte Sekten und Psychogruppen”*, 1998, <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/13/109/1310950.pdf> [accessed 18 February 2014].

⁵⁶ B. Schoen, “New Religions in Germany”, p. 90. The research reports were also published: *Neue religiöse und ideologische Gemeinschaften und Psychogruppen. Forschungsprojekte und Gutachten der Enquete-Kommission “Sogenannte Sekten und Psychogruppen”*, Hamm: Hoeneck, 1998.

Due to its serious consideration of scholarly research, but also to a variety of opinions among the experts and political parties involved, the German report stood in marked contrast to its French and Belgian counterparts. On the other hand, the report made clear that the focus on Scientology did not mean a universal toleration of all movements. At the federal level and in a majority of the *Länder*, the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, or BfV) — i.e. the domestic security agency — is monitoring Scientology. In November 2013, it became known that there were plans either to reduce or to entirely abandon such surveillance. For the time being, however, the BfV's annual report includes a section on the Scientology organization, together with espionage, terrorism, left- and right-wing extremism, and radical Islamism (the most recent report, covering 2015, was published in June 2016). Scientology is perceived as being inimical to some key principles of the post-war German constitutional order as a movement infringing on human rights and aspiring to establish a totalitarian system.⁵⁷ Beside various complaints against the movement, the BfV had commissioned or conducted analyses of Scientology documents that led it to perceive Scientology's short-term projects for transforming German society as realistic threats, which other experts would rather see as utopian aspirations. Obviously, this has much to do with sensitivities inherited from German history.

Beside the federal BfV, its counterpart organizations in some *Länder* remain active in the surveillance of and preventive activities regarding Scientology, as one can see when visiting the section on Scientology on the

⁵⁷ “Aus einer Vielzahl von Publikationen der SO ergibt sich ... dass in einer nach ihren Vorstellungen gestalteten Gesellschaft wesentliche Grund- und Menschenrechte wie die Menschenwürde, das Recht auf freie Entfaltung der Persönlichkeit und das Recht auf Gleichbehandlung abgeschafft bzw. eingeschränkt würden. ... Zudem strebt die SO eine Gesellschaft ohne allgemeine und gleiche Wahlen an. ‘Wahre Demokratie’ ist nach Hubbards Lehre nur in einer Nation von ‘Clears’ möglich. Seine Schriften enthalten Passagen, in denen die Abschaffung von Prinzipien der freiheitlichen demokratischen Grundordnung zugunsten des Aufbaus einer neuen Zivilisation gefordert wird. Hubbard beschreibt die scientologische Zivilisation u. a. als Rechtsordnung, in der die Existenz des Einzelnen – gar das Lebensrecht selbst – vom willkürlichen Ermessen der SO abhängt. Demnach stehen Grund- und Freiheitsrechte nur den Personen zu, die nach einer Auslese aus Sicht der Organisation zu den ‘Ehrlichen’ gehören. Die SO lehnt das demokratische Rechtssystem ab und will es langfristig durch ihren eigenen Gesetzeskodex ersetzen”; *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2012*, Berlin: Bundesministerium des Innern, 2013, pp. 420-421.

website of the Bavarian *Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz*,⁵⁸ which includes a 60-page brochure on “the Scientology system”.⁵⁹

Germany did not create a federal centre for the monitoring of NRMs. However, a few *Länder* not only support private groups, but have established official agencies for dealing with NRMs, e.g. *Leitstelle für Sektenfragen* (Berlin, established in 2008⁶⁰), *Informations- und Dokumentationszentrum Sekten/Psychokulte* (North Rhine-Westphalia, established in 1984⁶¹), and *Informationsstelle Psychokulten und Psychosekten* and *Scientology-Krisenberatungsstelle* (Bavaria⁶²). An overview on the backgrounds and current situation of efforts conducted in some *Länder* would be a welcome research project.

In **Switzerland**, (rare) parliamentary questions had been asked on sects – for instance, one in 1988 – and warnings by the Section for Consular Protection of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to young Swiss travellers to the United States in the 1980s about the risks of being approached by “Moonies”. At the local level, InfoSekta was launched in Zurich in 1990 and, while remaining a private initiative, continues to this day to receive subsidies from the Canton and City of Zurich. But it was only after the Solar Temple events and the German debates around Scientology that the political milieu started to change with regard to sects.

This first occurred in the Canton of Geneva, after the December 1995 “transit” of Solar Temple followers in Vercors, France, because several of the victims had come from the Geneva area. In January 1996, Gérard Ramseyer, then-head of the canton’s Department of Justice and Police of the canton, asked a lawyer to form a study group and submit a report assessing the legal options that could be used against sects, and possible extensions to these laws. The

⁵⁸ http://www.verfassungsschutz.bayern.de/weitere_aufgaben/scientology/ [accessed 27 October 2016].

⁵⁹ *Das Scientology System: Fragen und Antworten*, 2010, http://www.verfassungsschutz.bayern.de/mam/sonstige_aufgaben/content/so_2010_ansicht_bf_fin_18.11.10.pdf [accessed 27 October 2016].

⁶⁰ The Berlin Senate published reports on *Sekten* in 1997 and 2002.

⁶¹ Also, the private association Verein Sekten-Info Nordrhein-Westfalen e.V. is financed to a large extent by the *Land* and the city of Essen.

⁶² “*Sekten/Okkultismus*” are also listed among the issues in terms of which the Bavarian Police offers prevention and support services.

result was a book-length report⁶³ containing several recommendations, including one for the establishment of an independent information centre. While the suggested legal changes proved to be trickier than expected and were finally abandoned, the information centre materialized after preparatory work conducted by a working group comprising representatives of several cantons in 1997-1998. Financially supported by four cantons (largely Geneva), the *Centre d'information sur les croyances* (CIC) opened its doors in Geneva in May 2002.⁶⁴ It focuses entirely on information: reports on groups or beliefs that are prepared in answer to requests usually attempt to present information from a variety of sources and viewpoints, both favourable or critical, including academic research. The CIC also pays attention to possible deviations. Neutrality is emphasized.⁶⁵ The CIC interacts with state agencies and private organizations dealing with NRMs in various countries. Due to misunderstandings occasionally arising in other countries, it should be emphasized that the CIC is not a national institution, but functions at the cantonal level.

At the federal level, in 1996 the Consultative Commission for State Security decided to research the issue of Scientology. A report was completed in 1997 and published in July 1998.⁶⁶ According to its conclusions, some aspects of Scientology did indeed justify concern, but there were insufficient grounds for justifying German-style surveillance.

⁶³ *Audit sur les Dérives sectaires: Rapport du groupe d'experts genevois*, Geneva: Éditions Suzanne Hurter, 1997.

⁶⁴ Its employees do not have the status of civil servants. Academics are recruited, some of whom have training in religious studies.

⁶⁵ "Le CIC a choisi de privilégier une approche neutre des questions religieuses controversées. Cette approche ne va cependant pas de soi. La neutralité fait réagir des usagers, souvent hostiles aux nouvelles religiosités, qui préféreraient obtenir du CIC un jugement négatif sur un groupe et une attitude plus répressive. Le CIC fait régulièrement l'expérience qu'une approche sans jugement de valeur est souvent assimilée à un avis favorable. Ne pas prendre position est en effet considéré par certains usagers comme une forme de soutien tacite aux groupes controversés. De manière générale, l'approche du CIC bouscule les valeurs fortement christianocentrées de notre société et remet en question le monopole des Églises catholiques et protestantes"; François Bellanger and Brigitte Knobel, "L'information sur les mouvements religieux controversés dans le contexte suisse de neutralité confessionnelle", in N. Luca, *Quelles régulations pour les nouveaux mouvements religieux et les dérives sectaires dans l'Union européenne?*, pp. 101-113 (p. 112).

⁶⁶ *La Scientologie en Suisse. Rapport préparé à l'intention de la Commission consultative en matière de protection de l'État*, Berne: Département Fédéral de Justice et Police, 1998 (the report was also published in German). A follow-up report was published in 2000: *Scientology und Sekten in der Schweiz*.

At the federal parliamentary level, in 1997 a standing commission of the National Council (the lower chamber of the Swiss Parliament) prepared a report that was published in July 1999.⁶⁷ It recommended that the Federal Government should develop a policy on sect-related issues, promote information campaigns, set up an information centre, encourage research and ensure that legal measures were better enforced. Not surprisingly, considering the framework of state-church relations in Switzerland, the Federal Government responded in June 2000 that it had no intention of developing a federal policy on sects. This remains the situation to this day, although there is a network known as *Vereinnahmende religiöse Bewegungen/Mouvements endoctrinants* within the Swiss Federal administration, but merely for consultative purposes in case of need.

In **Italy**, the Department of Public Security of the Ministry of the Interior produced a report in February 1998,⁶⁸ but it offered primarily an overview, not a policy proposal. The Senate shelved a draft law on mind control in 2005, although technically the discussion can be restarted at some point in the future.⁶⁹

In 1998, a report was also published in **Sweden** as a special government study under the auspices of the Department of Health and Social Affairs.⁷⁰ Entitled *In Good Faith: Society and the New Spirituality*, it contained a quite extensive overview of global debates on and initiatives regarding NRMs, and took a moderate approach, as evidenced by its summary:

Regardless of our personal approach these movements will operate in our society; it is therefore extremely important that society promotes a dialogue rather than polarization and thus a risk of stigmatization of what seems to us strange and odd. The research that is available, here at home and abroad, shows that if a movement perceives the community as hostile, it can lead to movement to isolate herself [sic] from the outside world. Isolation from society is a risk factor. One important way to prevent undesirable developments is increased

⁶⁷ “Sectes” ou mouvements endoctrinants en Suisse. *La nécessité de l’action de l’État ou: vers une politique fédérale en matière de sectes*, 1999 (the report was also published in German and Italian).

⁶⁸ *Sette religiose e nuovi movimenti magici in Italia*, 1998.

⁶⁹ http://www.cesnur.org/2005/brainwash_11.htm [accessed 27 October 2016].

⁷⁰ *I God Tro — Samhället och nyandligheten*, Stockholm: Socialdepartementet, 1998, <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/108/a/23246> [accessed 27 October 2016].

knowledge of various religious movements. It is also important to have a better understanding of what religious freedom means and what it entails.⁷¹

Finally, one should mention the case of **Austria**, which strangely is rarely mentioned in research on state and social reactions to NRMs, although the country has been active in this field for years. No parliamentary report has been issued, but a law was passed that established a centre to deal with the issue of sects in 1998 (*Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen*).⁷² There is also an official agency in Lower Austria (*Landesstelle für Sektenfragen*), besides private information or advice centres, as well as church-related ones.⁷³

In addition, one should mention — without having the space to discuss them, even briefly — the existence of several reports or statements at the European level, published either by the European Parliament or the Council of Europe, that have also contributed to debates or provided impetus at the national level.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *Bundesgesetz über die Einrichtung einer Dokumentations- und Informationsstelle für Sektenfragen (Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen)*, 1998.

⁷³ In the early 2000s, there were no less than 35 public and private *Informations- und Beratungsstellen* in Austria; see Peter Schulte, “‘Fair und tolerant sein’: zur gegenwärtigen Situation von Informations- und Beratungsstellen in Bezug auf so gennante Sekten und Psychogruppen in Österreich. Ein Bericht”, *Spirita Online: Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft*, 2003 (unfortunately, this online journal, which was still accessible in 2014, has closed down). Some of these centres have since disappeared.

⁷⁴ In an article published in 2006, Silvio Ferrari provided the following list of European reports: European Council, Recommendation 1178 (1992), *Sects and New Religious Movements*; European Parliament, “Resolution on Sects”, 29 February 1996; Conseil de l’Europe, “Recommandation 1412 (1999) concernant les activités illégales des sectes”; Richard Cottrell, *The Activity of Certain New Religions within the European Community*, Strasbourg: European Parliament, 1984; John Hunt, *Report on Sects and New Religious Movements*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, 1991; Maria Berger, *Draft Report on Cults in the European Union*, Strasbourg: European Parliament, 1997; Adrian Nastase, *Illegal Activities of Sects*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, 1998; see Silvio Ferrari, “[New Religious Movements in Western Europe](#)”, *Religioscope*, Research and Analyses, No. 9, October 2006, p. 3.

General comments and observations

If we summarize the current situation, beside a few centres receiving local or regional subsidies, three Western European countries — Austria, Belgium⁷⁵ and France — have established agencies or centres for monitoring NRMs; these institutions are the outcomes of state initiatives at the national level.⁷⁶ Despite the successive waves of concerns about “cults”, most European countries do not have state agencies dealing with cult-related issues. In some cases, this has not prevented targeted measures against a specific movement, as evidenced by the years of surveillance of Scientology by German security agencies.

State-sponsored institutions dealing with cults are supposed to be neutral observers — which was one of the reasons for their founding. What happens in reality is nuanced and should certainly not be over-simplified. In practice, representatives of some official or state-supported agencies are seen more often at conferences of people with shared anti-cult assumptions than at academic conferences attracting sociologists of religion and other scholars conducting fieldwork. This has not prevented some members of these agencies’ staff from gaining considerable knowledge through years of work. One should understand that from the start the very roots of such agencies made it difficult for them to be really “neutral” (whatever meaning is ascribed to this word), since they were supposed to help solve a social problem, to support people seen as victims and to deal with deviations. Social scientists studying NRMs usually work from a quite different starting point.

As James Beckford remarks — and as our overview confirms — “the nature of the ‘cult problem’ clearly varies with the social, political, and cultural conditions prevailing in each country”.⁷⁷ The role of some public figures or some specific events also plays a part — particularly those dealing with some very real, specific issues. We cannot reduce differences between countries to one single factor. No doubt, the way a particular state manages both religions in

⁷⁵ While the Belgian CIAOSN is an independent public service, the Belgian Parliament appoints the 16 members of its board.

⁷⁶ The British government has supported the INFORM centre since the 1990s, but from the start this was a private initiative and not the product of a state decision. The same can be said of anti-cult groups that receive state subsidies in some countries.

⁷⁷ J. Beckford, *Cult Controversies*, p. 271.

particular and civil society in general⁷⁸ has an impact on the way it reacts to NRMs: the case of France is the most obvious one in this regard.⁷⁹ It is true that the modern French state's relationship with religion has tended to be more conflictual and ideological than in many other European countries.⁸⁰ A number of fervent supporters of French secular principles feel that monitoring cults and intervening in this debate is a way for the state to protect and promote French *laïcité*. The powerful "myth" of *laïcité* is certainly one of the reasons why the French Republic has sometimes become an international advocate of vigilance regarding "cultic deviations", in the same way that the cherished US myth of freedom motivates the United States to become an apostle of international freedom and disagree with the French on cult-related issues: such rhetoric matters.⁸¹

Nathalie Luca has argued for an interpretation of reactions against NRMs as a perception that they could undermine trends towards secularization in Europe by placing religion above society once more.⁸² While this partly fits the French case,⁸³ it does not necessarily apply to all national contexts, although it definitely offers a stimulating starting point for reflecting on wider reactions.

⁷⁸ "The French system of integration, aiming at the universal while erasing particular affiliations, conceives citizenship as being opposed to minorities and intermediate bodies (states, orders, churches, corporations, etc.). ... The state is the regulator of the whole of society"; Sabrina Pastorelli, "Public Policies towards New Religions: The French and the Italian Cases Compared", in François Foret and Xavier Itçaina (eds), *Politics of Religion in Western Europe: Modernities in Conflict?*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2012, pp. 224-240 (pp. 228-229)

⁷⁹ A number of other remarks could actually be made with regard to the French case. As early as 1985, Beckford had identified the French inclination to set cult-related issues "in a wider context of conspiracy" (*Cult Controversies*, p. 265). Subsequent decades have confirmed such inclinations in many cases (and this probably goes beyond the issue of NRMs). Each time an NRM receives some kind of support (e.g. a favourable court decision; a US intervention on behalf of international religious freedom), one can hear and read comments hinting at "infiltration" and other alleged conspiratorial activities.

⁸⁰ Jean-Paul Willaime, "Europe et religions", in N. Luca, *Quelles régulations pour les nouveaux mouvements religieux et les dérives sectaires dans l'Union européenne?*, pp. 13-24 (pp. 17-18).

⁸¹ See T. Jeremy Gunn, "Managing Religion through Founding Myths", in P. Côté and T.J. Gunn, *The New Religious Question*, pp. 33-47.

⁸² Nathalie Luca, "L'Europe face aux sectes", in N. Luca, *Quelles régulations pour les nouveaux mouvements religieux et les dérives sectaires dans l'Union européenne?*, pp. 25-35 (pp. 26-27).

⁸³ However, another author has warned against reducing the French policy to a secular (or secular-Catholic) reaction against minority religions, since more and more targets are now located outside the religious field (coaches, psychotherapists, etc.); see Étienne Ollion, "The French 'War on Cults' Revisited: Three Remarks on an On-going Controversy", in David M. Kirkham (ed.), *State Responses to Minority Religions*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, pp. 121-135 (p. 135).

Indeed, secularized societies have greater difficulty in understanding radical religious engagements. In the background, there is an unacknowledged assumption that there are respectable (or acceptable) forms of religion, either liberal or moderately conservative ones, that can be contrasted with potentially dangerous forms of religion: cults, fundamentalist movements, radical beliefs, etc. Today, such views are widespread in Europe and necessarily have an impact — whether those involved are conscious of it or not — on the attitudes of states.

Dealing with the new pluralism has certainly also driven reactions, especially in countries where such pluralism is not taken for granted. While people joining NRMs remain relatively few in comparison to the global population, the sheer number of active religious or quasi-religious groups has exploded over the past fifty or so years: directories of religious groups have grown thicker in each edition. With so many new groups being added to the landscape, the likelihood that some would exhibit deviant or perplexing behaviour has also grown.

We have seen that there were two waves of reactions by Western European states — in the 1980s and 1990s. Developments in some countries during the past 15 years have been a continuation of these initial waves rather than a new impetus. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, except for the deaths of hundreds of members of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda in 2000 (unfortunately, when news of this kind comes from Africa, it does not have the same impact as similar events in the West would), there have been no further major, dramatic “cult tragedies”. With the exception of Scientology, which remains quite controversial, most NRMs that were at the top of the list from the 1970s to the 1990s have lost much visibility, and several well-known cult leaders have died: their movements now have a lower profile or have partly reformed themselves (with ISKCON being one of the most significant instances of such internal reforms). There are still tensions within families as a consequence of spiritual quests and reorientations, but they are less associated with clearly identifiable groups. The Western European environment has become more individualistic: the appeal of radical forms of communitarian life has declined, especially at a time when most young people are primarily concerned with getting a job and keeping it. Certainly, the repeated warnings about the dangers associated with recruitment into “cults”

have made some people more cautious when encountering missionaries of various persuasions.

Most of all, Westerners no longer experience the same fears: we live in the post-9/11⁸⁴ environment. Islamic radicalism looks like a much more serious threat than do small religious movements. Security agencies invest more time in monitoring Salafi mosques or jihadist websites than the followers of Hindu gurus or Japanese new religions.⁸⁵ Some religious groups still require attention, but they are no longer the same ones.

Elements of continuity are obvious. Soon after the 9/11 attacks, some anti-cult groups suggested that jihadism might be another form of “cultic deviation”, although this was not a path chosen by the majority of them. More recently, as we see young Muslims leaving Western cities to join Islamist groups in Middle East war zones, relatives or acquaintances of these young people have spontaneously explained that they had been brainwashed: this often seemed to them to be the only “rational” explanation for such radical departures. This has quite naturally been grafted onto a “cult brainwashing” narrative. The metaphor of mind control offers an attractive model to explain various situations. Despite initial reluctance by some cult critics to venture into that field, we are seeing what to some extent looks like a new incarnation of the cult controversies around jihadism, with deradicalization becoming a new keyword (as well as a new industry).

It has been correctly observed that cult controversies have often taken place at an “emotional, media-driven” level rather than on a “rational, scientific plane”.⁸⁶ However, European politicians cannot entirely be accused of this: how could one be expected to respond in a “cold”, rational way to devastated parents reporting alleged abuses inflicted on their (adult) children? In addition to persistent lobbying by concerned relatives and “victims” (i.e. former group members) relayed by media reports of shocking cases, these politicians have

⁸⁴ The shorthand term for the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001.

⁸⁵ In the late 1990s, at the American Academy of Religion — the largest gathering of scholars of religion in the world — FBI agents attended a number of sessions devoted to NRMs. Scholars working on radical NRMs were invited to speak at the FBI academy: the traumatic impact of Waco was still strong. From 2001, attention switched to sessions on contemporary Islamist movements.

⁸⁶ Helmut Ortner, *Religion und Staat. Säkularität und religiöse Neutralität*, Vienna: Verlag Österreich, 2000, p. 248.

had to confront some instances of mass murders or suicides that seemed to justify the fears expressed by critics of cults.

Moreover, defending cults does not harvest votes, particularly in light of the strength of public opinion regarding sects. For example, in 1998, an Austrian MP stated that, since nearly nine out of ten Austrian citizens consider “destructive cults” or “pseudo-religious communities” to be dangerous or very dangerous, it was the duty of the state to intervene.⁸⁷ Similarly, according to a survey conducted in France in 2003, 53 per cent of French citizens felt that the state should not intervene in religious affairs, but 92 per cent said they supported the banning of *sectes*.⁸⁸ According to another, more recent survey (2010), 66 per cent see *sectes* as a threat to democracy and 44 per cent think that the state is not doing enough to deal with this threat.⁸⁹

However, the fact that groups identified as cults do not get much sympathy (although their existence is accepted as part of religious freedom) is not a sufficient explanation of the European approach to these groups. While the explanatory model of manipulative, dubious cults has been and remains widespread, only a minority of states tend to adopt it, while the others do not elaborate an explicit policy in this area.

While differences among the attitudes of various states are clear, we should also remember the presence of trends that are supportive of shared approaches, such as decisions taken by the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The latter’s decisions have recognized that state interventions can be legitimate — even necessary — but it has also reminded states of the need to abide by the principle of state neutrality in religious affairs.⁹⁰ ECHR decisions have contributed to the implementation of similar standards in the practices of European states regarding NRMs. In 2011 and 2013, the ECHR decided that France had violated the rights of four religious movements (including the Jehovah’s Witnesses) with regard to taxation issues (the taxation of donations received by the movements). Such decisions are

⁸⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 284.

⁸⁸ Quoted by Blandine Chélini-Pont, “Opinion et gestion publique de la diversité religieuse en France (1996-2004)”, in P. Côté and T.J. Gunn, *The New Religious Question*, pp. 49-91 (p. 60).

⁸⁹ Quoted by Hervé Machi, “The French System against Sectarian Deviations”, in D.M. Kirkham, *State Responses to Minority Religions*, pp. 115-119 (p. 119).

⁹⁰ See Louis-Léon Christians, “Les politiques publiques d’information face aux dérives sectaires: enjeux et balises juridiques en Europe”, in N. Luca, *Quelles régulations pour les nouveaux mouvements religieux et les dérives sectaires dans l’Union européenne?*, pp. 37-53.

received with irritation by supporters of hardline policies against cults,⁹¹ but will over time contribute to some level of standardization. Sabrina Pastorelli has rightly observed that

The EU system can represent a lever for new social movements, allowing them to legitimate social and political alternatives. ... Some minority religious movements actively lobby European institutions such as the EU Commission and conduct judicial activities at both the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice. In order to achieve legitimacy, social recognition and respectability, minority religious movements, considered as controversial at national EU member-state level, see the EU system as a strategic place for claiming their rights and position. The EU arena seems in fact to provide more room for these new movements than the more rigid systems for the management of religious diversity of some member states.⁹²

The debates on NRMs in North America and Europe have had an impact beyond their borders. A well-known case has been China's attempt to connect its fight against Falun Gong and other "evil cults"⁹³ with the Western cult controversies, thus hoping to endow it with greater legitimacy. In Iran, the authorities have attempted to use advice from US anti-cult literature to re-educate detained followers of the Mujahidin-i Khalq. In Singapore, security agencies have used the same kind of literature for jihadist rehabilitation purposes.

As James Lewis has observed, "the minority religions lose their chance for a fair hearing as soon as the label 'cult' is applied".⁹⁴ The shift from "cults" or "sectes" to "cultic deviations" has been an attempt to resolve the dilemma and deal with the tricky issues presented by such a vocabulary without a clear legal basis when it is being used by supposedly "neutral" states. It fits the model according to which only questionable behaviour is targeted, but it fails to really solve the problem. The talk is indeed not merely about deviations, but about *sectaires*, thus qualifying a very specific type of alleged deviations that most people associate with a specific type of group. It is therefore not as neutral as it

⁹¹ See, for instance, comments by former French MP (and ADFI president) Catherine Picard: "Ces groupes savent que quoi qu'ils fassent, quelques dérives sectaires qu'ils s'autorisent, la Cour européenne leur donne raison", *L'Express*, 31 January 2013 [accessed 15 February 2014].

⁹² S. Pastorelli, "Public Policies", p. 235.

⁹³ See Ping Xiong, "China's Responses to Minority Religions", in D.M. Kirkham, *State Responses to Minority Religions*, pp. 199-214.

⁹⁴ James R. Lewis, *Cults: A Reference and Guide*, 3rd ed., Sheffield: Equinox, 2012, p. 37.

claims to be. Moreover, this shift has contributed to wider applications of the label “cultic deviations” to a variety of groups and individuals.⁹⁵ The cult controversies of the past decades have thus even led to the modification and possibly the extension of the meaning of words such as “secte” or “cult”. Together with other types of religious groups (e.g. Muslim communities), NRMs have also been the subject of new questions about what religion is, what religious freedom allows, and the place and role of religious organizations in an increasingly pluralistic contemporary Europe.

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⁹⁵ According to the MIVILUDES’s website, only a minority of deviations can be attributed to religious movements; see <http://www.derives-sectes.gouv.fr/faq> [accessed 18 February 2014]. Such a statement obviously also tends to dissociate the fight against *dérives sectaires* from the issue of religious freedom. Any state knows that religion-related topics are a potential minefield: disconnecting the issue of “cultic deviations” from religion allows them to avoid such a trap. Similarly, current debates on jihadism often claim to dissociate it from “true” Islam.