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BELGIUM: Jehovah's Witnesses win important case in Belgium

Jehovah's Witnesses win important case in Belgium

A Belgian court finds "no grounds" to claim the organization fails to report allegations of child sexual abuse to police.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (25.10.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3GjeEfj> – An important decision has been rendered in Belgium on October 5, 2021, in favor of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The French-speaking

Tribunal of First Instance of Brussels has dismissed accusations against the Belgian organization of the Jehovah's Witnesses and individual members of the organization, who had been accused of not reporting to the police allegations of child sexual abuse in their congregations they had become aware of, thus violating Articles 422 bis and 442 quarter of the Criminal Code of Belgium, which make reporting mandatory.

The background of the case starts with a series of articles published in 2017 by the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* ("Truth"), which is connected with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Working together with an activist group called Reclaimed Voices, *Trouw* accused the Jehovah's Witnesses of covering up cases of sexual abuse. These unfounded accusations were repeated by anti-cult organizations and several media both in the Netherlands and in Belgium.

CIAOSN (Centre for information and advice on harmful cultic organizations) is a Belgian federal center keeping watch on "dangerous cults." It has been often compared to the French MIVILUDES, although in some instances, laudably, CIAOSN has been more open than MIVILUDES to discuss controversial issues with academic scholars of new religious movements who disagree with the anti-cult narrative.

However, to the best of my knowledge, this did not happen in 2018, when CIAOSN compiled a report on "how sexual abuses of minors are handled by the organization of the Jehovah's Witnesses," published on November 30. Additionally, at no point during the preparation of the CIAOSN Report was the national ecclesiastical office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium contacted by the authors, which also seems both methodologically incorrect and unfair.

CIAOSN stated in the document that, "In June 2018, CIAOSN received a notification according to which three of the 286 testimonies received by the Foundation 'Reclaimed Voices' in the Netherlands concern facts which have allegedly taken place

in Belgium.” It would seem that this was one of the elements that caused the production of the CIAOSN report.

However, on March 9, 2021, the Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers reported that, “A Dutch-speaking member of the board of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) contacted Reclaimed Voices in The Netherlands to check the credibility of this information and get more details about the three alleged cases of sexual abuse in Belgium. In his answer, the head of Reclaimed Voices in the Netherlands denied such a news made public in Belgium, saying in a private correspondence dated 10 February 2021: ‘The information in the report of the CIAOSN is not correct. On 29 March 2019, we sent an email to Ms. Kerstine Vanderput about this inaccuracy. At that time, it came to our attention that Koen Geens, Minister of Justice (CD&V), had said on Radio 1 in Belgium: ‘It is the CIAOSN itself which has gone to the Netherlands to find this information and has stated that among the 286 Dutch complaints there were three Belgian ones’. Something similar was said on television at ‘Van Gils & Guests.’ In the Dutch media, we have only testified about the situation in the Netherlands. The figures that were mentioned are only alleged victims of abuse in the Netherlands.”

How the data for the Netherlands were collected and compiled is highly questionable as well, but as far as Belgium is concerned the fact of the matter is that the three Belgian cases in the Reclaimed Voices list never existed.

Apart from the incorrect reference to three Belgian cases “found” in the Netherlands, CIAOSN mentioned that it had received other “direct or indirect” complaints, but most of its report did not deal with Belgium, there were no specific cases quoted, and most of the “information” offered came from press clippings.

Writing in *Bitter Winter*, American scholar Holly Folk commented that, “It is difficult to review the Belgian report,

because there is truly little in terms of original research or data about Belgium. It is not enough to say that compared to what it promised, the document is a disappointment. The report fails to meet even basic standards for social science research.”

Nonetheless, the report was taken seriously by the Belgian Parliament, which put together a “study group” on the issue and interacted with CIAOSN. And it was taken seriously by the Belgian judiciary, which opened a criminal procedure against the Jehovah’s Witnesses following the charges brought by CIAOSN. On April 21, 2021, the Prosecuting Judge issued a warrant for a search at the national headquarters of the Belgian Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Neither the search nor the investigation produced any evidence that the Belgian Jehovah’s Witnesses had ever protected members accused of sexual abuse of minors by not reporting them to the police in violation of the Belgian rule of mandatory reporting. In fact, the policy of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is that, in countries where reporting is mandatory and, if there is reason to believe that a child is in danger of abuse, even in countries where there is no obligation to report, allegations of sexual abuse of minors should be reported to the appropriate secular authorities. I have personally examined several instances in which this has happened in Belgium.

The Court of Brussels has now concluded that “there is no evidence” that the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Belgium violated the reporting obligation. There are only “unilateral declarations” of the complainant (CIAOSN) and of certain witnesses, “not confirmed by any other element of the investigation,” including the search. Scholars of new religious movements have repeatedly warned that accusations by disgruntled former members should of course be examined, but cannot be considered like established facts, and their attitudes and motivations should also be considered.

On June 18, 2021, the Belgian Jehovah's Witnesses sued the Belgian Ministry of Justice, considering it responsible for the CIAOSN, for defamation. A hearing on the defamation claim is scheduled for May 5, 2022.

Photo: Palais de Justice in Brussels. Credits.

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and of the executive board of University of California Press' *Nova Religio*. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

Further reading about FORB in Belgium on HRWF website

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