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## **BELGIUM: (II) About the Recommendation of the Cult Observatory on “cult victims”**

**BELGIUM: Some reflections about the Recommendation of the Federal Cult Observatory on “cult victims” (II)**

**Version en français I**

**Version en français II**

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (12.07.2023) – On June 26, the Federal Observatory on Cults (CIAOSN/ IACSSO), officially known as the “Center for Information and Advice on Harmful Cultic Organizations” and created by the law of June 2, 1998 (amended by the law of April 12, 2004), published a number of “Recommendations concerning help for victims of sectarian influence”.

### *Victims of “cults” or religions?*

The Cult Observatory is not in charge of providing psycho-social or legal assistance to victims of cults. It does, however, direct enquirers to the appropriate support services and provides general legal information. The abuses and sufferings described are very diverse in nature, says the Observatory.

According to the Observatory, victims are people who declare that they are suffering or have suffered from cultic manipulation or the consequences of cultic manipulation of someone close to them.

The Observatory points out in the text of its Recommendation that “the notion of victims is in reality broader than that given by legal definitions. Alongside direct victims (former followers, etc.), there are also collateral victims (parents, children, friends, relatives, etc.) and silent victims (former followers who do not denounce the facts but who are suffering, children, etc.)”. It is also careful to take certain

oratorical precautions and not to endorse the state of a person claiming to be a victim.

On the judicial front, “legal assistants can only intervene and provide help if a criminal complaint is lodged, which is rarely the case in the cultic context,” states the Observatory. However, the concept of “cult” does not exist by law, and “the cultic context” even less so.

It’s true that in all areas of human relations (family, marital, hierarchical, professional, sports, school, religious...), victims find it difficult to lodge a criminal complaint for a variety of psychological or other reasons.

However, in the religious context, and in particular in the Roman Catholic Church, the number of victims of documented and proven sexual abuse cases which are or were liable to criminal punishment is countless worldwide. At the time these abuses were committed, the real victims remained silent, and thousands refrained from pressing charges. Singling out and stigmatizing so-called “cults” outside the general religious context can only give a truncated view of reality. Cults” do not exist in law.

***Who has to pay for the victims? The State, and therefore taxpayers?***

All over the world, there are and have been victims of various kinds of religious, spiritual or philosophical groups. The state does not provide any financial support for the

psychological care of the said victims.

The Catholic Church has unilaterally and finally decided to purify its ranks, identify and document alleged cases of abuse, deal with complaints in courts or in other contexts, and intervene financially to cover damages caused by members of its clergy. Legal action leading to fines, financial compensation of proven victims by the judiciary or prison sentences may also be necessary.

In our democracies, the legal channels are the safest. The first help to be given to people claiming to be victims is legal: helping them to lodge a complaint and then trust the justice system to establish the facts, confirm or not the status of victims, and include in its judgments adequate financial compensation for any psychological damage.

This is the only credible way to determine whether there has been a violation of the law by a particular religious group, whether there have been victims and whether they should be compensated.

The Cult Observatory is a center for information and advice. It can therefore legitimately issue an opinion and make a recommendation to the competent Belgian authorities. However, it has lost credibility since its opinion concerning alleged sexual abuses of minors committed within the Jehovah's Witness movement and supposedly hidden by the religious hierarchy was totally disavowed by a Belgian court for lack of evidence in 2022.

## ***An advice from the Cult Observatory caught at fault by the Belgian justice system***

In October 2018, the Cult Observatory published a report on alleged sexual abuse of minors committed within the Jehovah's Witness community and asked the Belgian Federal Parliament to investigate the matter.

The Observatory said it had received various testimonies from people claiming to have been sexually abused, which led to a series of raids on Jehovah's Witness places of worship and homes.

These accusations of sexual abuse were strongly contested by the religious community. The Jehovah's Witnesses felt that this was damaging to them and their reputation, and took the case to court.

In June 2022, the Brussels Court of First Instance ruled in favor of the Jehovah's Witnesses and condemned the Observatory.

The judgment stated that the Observatory "committed a fault in drafting and distributing the report entitled 'Report on the treatment of sexual abuse of minors within the Jehovah's Witness organization'."

The Brussels Court of First Instance also ordered the Belgian State to publish the judgment on the Observatory's homepage for six months.

The court's decision was welcomed by Jehovah's Witnesses, who had denounced a "particularly infamous rumor" targeting their community of some 45,000 members and sympathizers in Belgium.

***The Cult Observatory recommends public funding for organizations with little credibility or transparency***

The Observatory states that one of its main partners on the French-speaking side, the *Service d'Aide aux Victimes d'Emprise et de Comportements Sectaires* (SAVECS) of the *Planning familial Marconi* (Brussels), has "helped and counseled people who declare that they suffer or have suffered from cultic manipulation or the consequences of cultic manipulation of a loved one," but that it has closed its doors for budgetary reasons.

On the Dutch-speaking side, the Observatory says it works in collaboration with the non-profit organization *Studie en Adviesgroep Sekten* (SAS-Sekten), but the association's volunteers are no longer able to handle requests for assistance, which remain unanswered.

The Observatory praises the expertise and professionalism of these two associations.

However, preliminary research on these two organizations raises reservations about their transparency, and consequently about the reliability of the Observatory's opinion.

The SAVECS website contains no annual activity report, nor does it mention any information concerning the victim support cases handled by them (number of cases, nature, religious or philosophical movements concerned, etc.).

The *Centre de Consultations et de Planning Familial Marconi* is also silent on the question of help for cult victims. The *Centre Marconi* carries out the following activities: medical consultations; contraception, pregnancy monitoring, AIDS, STDs; psychological consultations: individuals, couples and families; social consultations; legal consultations; physiotherapy. It also offers "a service to help victims of cultic influence and behavior – **SAVECS** -: psychological listening and consultation, prevention, discussion groups". Helping the victims of sects therefore appears to be very peripheral to its mandate.

SAS-Sekten is an organization set up in 1999 in the wake of the Belgian parliamentary report on cults, which has a page on the Flemish Region's official website informing the region's inhabitants about the existing social assistance services. Although help for cult victims is listed as the first item of its mandate, there is no activity report on this subject either. Again, a total lack of transparency and a huge gap between what is stated and what is maybe achieved.

SAS-Sekten's current visible figure is a former Jehovah's

Witness who took the movement to court on charges of discrimination and incitement to hatred. In 2022, he lost the appeal, his charges were being declared unfounded.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* considers that public funding of such groups, as recommended by the Cult Observatory, is not credible and that another solution must be found.

### ***France's bad example, not to be followed***

On 6 June 2023, French media reported that the distribution of public funds to dubious associations had led to the resignation of the president of France's Cult Observatory (MIVILUDES) against the backdrop of the Marianne Fund scandal, of which he was the manager under the authority of his minister, Marlène Schiappa.

On October 16, 2020, a secondary school teacher, Samuel Paty, was beheaded by an 18-year-old Muslim extremist for showing his students cartoons of Mohammed published by "Charlie Hebdo." Following the French government's initiative, the Marianne Fund had then been launched by Minister Marlène Schiappa (Initial budget of 2.5 million EUR). The aim was to finance associations fighting against Muslim fundamentalism and separatism. Subsequently, Minister Schiappa argued that cults were no less separatist and fundamentalist, and that anti-cult associations should be financed from this fund. Some of them close to MIVILUDES had then been "prioritized" and had "benefitted of privileges", which was welcome given their financial difficulties. On 31 May 2023, the General Inspection of the Administration (IGA) issued a first report on what is



known in France as the scandal of the Marianne Fund.

Complaints have been lodged against several French anti-cult associations.

The Belgian state and taxpayers should not be used to bail out the finances of non-transparent associations.

*Photo: Belgian Federal Parliament (Credit: Agefotostock)*

[Further reading about FORB in Belgium on HRWF website](#)

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