

ISRAEL: FECRIS, ICVC and other anti-cult associations

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)*

HRWF (09.10.2018) – In 2012, HRWF published a book with the University of Dresden, *Freedom of Religion or Belief Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality, A Case Study: FECRIS*. Some of our main purposes were to prove that FECRIS and its affiliates

- had no academic background in religious studies;
- were stigmatizing people who had chosen to enjoy their right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief outside the traditional and historical religions which is protected by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- were spreading hate speech towards new religious movements (NRMs) and their members;
- were claiming that NRMs, labelled as cults without any scientific basis, were not religions and their members were not entitled to enjoy the benefits of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration although the successive UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief and various decisions of the European Court of Human Rights contended the opposite;
- were trying to protect a dominant religion or belief system in their own country, or had an anti-religious agenda;
- were misusing public money while disregarding their duty to neutrality and non-discrimination.

Our report on FECRIS' affiliates in Austria, France, Germany, Russia, and Serbia illustrated these arguments, and our

conclusion was that those anti-cult associations should not be morally and financially supported by state institutions.

Our recent study about the ICVC, FECRIS' correspondent in Israel, *The Israeli Center for Victims of Cults: Who is Who? Who is Behind it?* followed the same objectives and other anti-cult organizations will be investigated by HRWF in the near future.

HRWF reports on such issues are not academic studies; they are not written in attorneys' language but they are rather following the style of investigative journalism.

In a private letter addressed to us on 13 September 2018^[i], three scholars from MEIDA Center in Israel – Prof. Boaz Huss, Dr. Adam Klin Orin, and Dr. Rachel Werczberger – have questioned a number of points and interpretations in our report and have shared with us their divergent opinions.

Noteworthy is that the opinion of Professor Huss and his colleagues about the ICVC is not unanimous among Israeli scholars, including those who are or have been associated with the MEIDA Center. For example, in a recent article, Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro, of Zefat Academic College, and Sharon Warshawski, of Ashkelon Academic College, have denounced the ICVC as an association that is “prominent in promoting the antiscientific discourse” about “cults,” a discourse they regard as very dangerous for religious liberty and human rights in Israel.”^[ii]

We will now analyze here the main dissenting views of the signatories of the letter.

ICVC, a secular façade of ultra-orthodox anti-missionary group Yad L'Achim?

The signatories of the letter recognize that “there are

significant connections between ICVC and Yad L'Achim" but dispute HRWF's alleged representation of "ICVC as only a cover for Yad L'Achim."

As said before, HRWF's report is not an academic work whose objective would be to highlight all the influences inside the ICVC throughout its history. HRWF points at some controversial influences exerted by a questionable group, its lack of neutrality and expertise.

HRWF's report brings concrete arguments that the ultra-orthodox group Yad L'Achim has been heavily involved in the creation, the financing and the staffing of the ICVC.

According to the ICVC's financial reports, it was founded and largely funded for years by activists of Yad L'Achim. Nowadays, it is being managed by a Yad L'Achim actor, Rachel Liechtenstein, and for many years its auditing committee was headed by another Yad L'Achim actor, Galia Ginerman. The Center also holds joint lectures with known Yad L'Achim figures^[iii] while this movement was historically not used to cooperate with secular entities for obvious theological reasons. The so-called secular ICVC also appears in ultra-orthodox neighborhoods in Bnei Brak, Jerusalem and other places on pashkevils (such postings usually enjoy rabbinic endorsements) where it is presented by central orthodox institutions as an organization founded by Yad L'Achim. This shows that the ICVC is perceived as part and parcel of the ultra-religious establishment; otherwise their religious DNA would not accept such an unholy alliance.

From these and other facts, it can be deduced that for a long time the ICVC has enjoyed a close and tight cooperation with Yad L'Achim and that the one-way porosity between Yad L'Achim and the ICVC is obvious.

Concerning the management of the ICVC, we do not dispute the fact that some members and activists, including some who speak publicly for ICVC in conferences and other events, are secular humanists and have no sympathy for Yad L'Achim. Some secular anti-cult activists may temporarily find a comfortable home base in the ICVC for their activity but they are not the decision-makers of the ICVC policies and their role is either representative or therapeutic.

This is not a unique situation within FECRIS. In Eastern Europe, some of the activists who operate in the local FECRIS affiliate associations are secular humanists. However, in the whole region, persons and groups associated with the Russian Orthodox Church play a crucial role in fundraising and management activities.

Our conclusion remains that the ICVC wants to cultivate a secular appearance to extend its influence and opportunities for funding, but it is not neutral and it is functioning in the orbit of Yad L'Achim.

It is also suspicious that the ICVC did not take a position in controversies about large and powerful Orthodox groups widely accused in the Israeli media of "cult-like" behavior. One example is the Ger community, the largest Hasidic group in Israel. Controversies about this group reached the mainstream media in Israel, but the ICVC remained silent about them^[iv].

Yad L'Achim, a controversial movement

The signatories of the letter state that “it is important to note that Yad L’Achim is a small and controversial group which was established, and is predominantly run, by members of the Habad Movement, which is in itself a contested and controversial movement.”

According to the letter, HRWF’s report

- implies that “Yad L’Achim represents ultra-orthodox Judaism” but the report does not say this;
- “overemphasizes Yad L’Achim’s control over the ICVC” but the report never said that Yad L’Achim controls the ICVC;
- “implies that the ICVC targets only Jewish movements” but, again, this is not the case as Christian and other non-Jewish movements are also mentioned;
- “accuses the ICVC and Yad L’Achim of being agents of ultra-orthodox Judaism”: again, the report is falsely depicted as it never accused “the ICVC and Yad L’Achim of being agents of ultra-orthodox Judaism”. The report describes mechanisms of influence and instrumentalization converging in a certain direction based on the accumulation of concrete facts;
- is not endorsed by the signatories concerning the description of the modus operandi of Yad L’Achim in its fight against so-called cults. This is not different from the modus operandi that religious scholars and attorneys have described in other studies about anti-cult groups published by HRWF, such as “Freedom of Religion or Belief Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality, A Case Study: FECRIS”, and in other academic publications;
- accuses ultra-orthodox Judaism to “instrumentalize the main mechanisms of society to impose its sole legitimacy of Judaism, not only in the religious field but also in the shaping of domestic and foreign political policies”.

We maintain that ultra-orthodox Judaism is in competition with other branches of Judaism and shapes domestic and foreign political policies that are highly criticized inside and outside Israel.

In summary, these criticisms expressed by the signatories of the letter are based on distortions of the content of the report and sound like emotional over-reactions. Readers should go and read HRWF's report on its website (<http://hrwf.eu/forb/our-reports/>) and make their own opinion.

About the Haredim Jews

Haredim Jews are incidentally mentioned in a footnote because most readers of HRWF's report outside Jewish circles are expected to ignore anything about this group and only need some indications about their profile. The Haredims are not related to the objective of HRWF's report about the ICVC and, in this framework, they did not need any further treatment than a footnote as it is not an academic paper. Criticizing "the superficial and disparaging way" they are described – in footnote 19 – while "there is much available literature in English about the Haredim" is again disproportionate, epidermal, and emotional over-reaction. Moreover, we contest the footnote is disparaging as some of their characteristics and some incidents can be verified in the sources that we mentioned.

American and Israeli anti-cultists: a Jewish orthodox anti-cult conspiracy?

The signatories of the letter deem as irrelevant the inclusion of a number of disturbing details in the report that point at the lack of expertise of ICVC's public figures and their background. However, they are not in a position to say what is and what is not relevant in HRWF's report as they had not

understood the objective of HRWF as described in the report and, again, in the introduction of this paper.

Another characteristic of the signatories of the letter is that they repeatedly express severely distorted and biased interpretations of HRWF's narrative. One example, among others mentioned in the letter, concerns the American deprogrammer Rick Ross used as an expert by the ICVC. The fact that he is also presented as "a Jewish activist" in HRWF's report is criticized, but this collateral detail is taken out of context, which is:

"A study of Rick Ross' background shows that he is neither a scholar in religious studies nor a cult expert. He is a Jewish activist trying to fight missionary activities targeting the Jews and to reconvert, including through illegal means, Jews who changed their religion."

We referred to how Ross started his career and did not imply that he offers his deprogramming activities to Jewish families only. We are well aware that Ross' definition of a family that is the "victim of a cult" refers to any family prepared to pay his fees, irrespective of its religious persuasions.

HRWF's report also says, among many other things, in the long description of the profile of this controversial American deprogrammer (praised and used in Israel by the ICVC but criticized by other fellow deprogrammers in the US) that he organized the forceful deprogramming in sequestration conditions of dozens of converts to the Evangelical and Pentecostal faiths. On 18 January 1991, he organized the – violent – kidnapping and forced change of religion attempt (deprogramming) of Jason Scott, an 18-year-old member of a Pentecostal Church. This led to a multimillion-dollar judgment against him and the financial collapse of the renowned but now defunct anti-cult organization Cult Awareness Network (CAN) to which he was closely connected.

Among his other illegal activities, HRWF's report also says that he was previously prosecuted for attempted burglary, embezzlement of \$100,000 worth of jewelry, and kidnapping...

But the top of the biased interpretation of HRWF's report by the signatories of the letter is that it allegedly implies that there is a transnational anti-cult conspiracy organized by orthodox Jews. Such a thing was never said in HRWF's report and nothing is so far from the truth. It is pure imagination.

In conclusion, the ICVC should not be supported, both morally and financially, by state institutions and be considered a credible player by courts as

- the ICVC serves private religious interests and is therefore not a neutral organization;
- the ICVC spreads hate speech that stigmatizes certain religious minorities;
- the ICVC claims to have 'cult experts' but none of them are experts in religious studies;
- the ICVC uses concepts and theories such as "cult", mind control, brainwashing, or mental manipulation that have been denounced by religious studies scholars and the scientific establishment as unfounded.

The signatories of the letter have ignored and failed to recognize these conclusions of HRWF's report which were the main objective of its investigation.

Readers of the HRWF's report will judge for themselves what it says and does not say about FECRIS' correspondent in Israel on HRWF's website (<http://hrwf.eu/forb/our-reports/>) and will make their own opinion.

[i] A copy of the letter has apparently been sent to other religious studies scholars.

[ii] Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Sharon Warshawski, "Trance, Meditation and Brainwashing: The Israeli Use of

Hypnosis Law and New Religious Movements," *The Journal of CESNUR*, 2(4), July-August 2018, 61–96 (quote at page 65).

[iii] For example, Avraham Bitkin, a former Yad L'Achim national coordinator of volunteers, who worked in the same department in charge of anti-missionary activities where Ms Liechtenstein used to work as a secretary.

[iv] Yair Ettinger, "Ger Hasidim's Secret Rules on Male-female Relations Revealed by Ex-member," *Haaretz*, July 3, 2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-ger-hasid-r-reveals-sects-secret-rules-1.5404825>

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