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FRANCE: How MIVILUDES and French anti-cultists invented a “cult”

FRANCE: “Église de Philadelphie”: How MIVILUDES and French anti-cultists invented a “cult”

In 2011, the wife and four children of a French aristocrat were murdered. Anti-cultists tried to connect the crime with “cults.” Their legal case has now collapsed.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (06.01.2023) – <https://bit.ly/3CvCCUa> – The French anti-cult establishment tried to promote itself “to the detriment of deeply religious people who have no deviance prohibited by the law.” Stéphane Goldenstein, the lawyer representing Geneviève and Christine Dupont de Ligonnès, tells Bitter Winter that “my clients are the scapegoats for a cause that is not their own.” The fact that the case against them has now been dismissed “comes to rehabilitate them in their dignities but the damage is done... ‘Slander boldly, something always sticks,’ as Francis Bacon rightly wrote.”

What is happening in France is another scandal hitting the MIVILUDES, the French Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances (dérives sectaires: note that the French “secte” and its derivative words should be translated into English as “cult” and not as “sect”), a unique French anti-cult agency that is part of the government itself.

The case against what the MIVILUDES calls the “Philadelphia Church” (Église de Philadelphie) was dismissed by the district attorney office of Versailles on January 3. This revealed a hardly believable story where the MIVILUDES and others tried to surf on the notoriety of an unsolved homicide case to further their propaganda against “cults.”

On April 21, 2011, the police discovered in Nantes, France, the body of Agnès Hodanger, the wife of the French aristocrat Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès, and of their four children. Xavier was named by the police as the main suspect for the murders, but he disappeared and has not been seen ever since. Although not well-known abroad, the affair has been the subject of hundreds of articles and several books and TV documentaries in France.

The Dupont de Ligonnès are a conservative Catholic family. Xavier’s mother, Geneviève, and his sister Christine did not

endear themselves to the authorities by continuing to claim that Xavier's guilt had not been proven, and other possibilities for the murder should have been considered. In general, French media do not like conservative or traditionalist Catholicism either.

Geneviève and Christine operate a conservative Catholic prayer group, which is also interested in private revelations Geneviève claims to receive from God and Jesus. There are thousands of similar Catholic communities in the world, hundreds in France, as described *inter alia* by historian Jean-Pierre Chantin in his recent book "Catholiques malgré Rome" (Paris: Cerf, 2022).

The name "Philadelphia Church" may sound strange and even "American" (aren't most "cults" American?) in a country like France where Biblical literacy is low, but in fact dozens of Christian groups throughout the world use the name "Philadelphia," referring to a city not in Pennsylvania but in present-day Turkey where one of the earliest churches was established. The church of Philadelphia is mentioned in the Book of Revelation 1:11. Although Revelation 1 was one of the texts they studied, the Duponts deny that their group was ever named "Church of Philadelphia."

In 2019, disgruntled ex-members of the Dupont de Ligonnès community—again, such ex-members do exist in most religious groups—contacted the MIVILUDES claiming they had found "cultic deviances" there. Not being particularly skilled in the sociology of religions, which would have told them that crises often reinforce religious groups, the MIVILUDES commented that it was surprising that the community, which had been founded before the 2011 homicides, had not disbanded after the notorious case.

Not surprisingly, the MIVILUDES found that "cultic deviances" were at work, and sent the case to the office of the District Attorney of Versailles, which opened an investigation based on

the French anti-cult About-Picard law of 2001, which created a strange crime of abusing of a state of weakness created through psychological techniques (yet another incarnation of the discredited theory of brainwashing, without using this name).

Enter the then French Minister Delegate for Citizenship at the Ministry of Interior, Marlène Schiappa, who had decided to jump on the anti-cult bandwagon for her own political purposes. The controversial politician gave several interviews where she denounced the "Philadelphia Church" as a dangerous "cult" that the police should investigate and the MIVILUDES should "alert the public opinion" about.

And the public opinion was duly alerted. Marie Drilhon, the president of the local branch in the Yvelines region of the main French anti-cult organization, UNADFI, explained that, "We are aware of much more dangerous and widespread movements in terms of recruitment, about which we must be more alert. However, this highly publicized story can help us to revamp the public vigilance against the cults."

The cat was thus out of the bag. Perhaps there was no dangerous "cult" but because of the association with the 2011 murders the story will be "highly publicized" and will support the anti-cult propaganda, not to mention UNADFI's claims that it needed more money to fight the "cults."

Attorney Stéphane Goldenstein told Bitter Winter that "what disturbs me mostly in this case is that law-abiding citizens are harassed for their religious beliefs." Goldenstein explains that "Geneviève's revelations have never been approved by the Catholic Church, but they have not been formally condemned either. Some priests read them and found them quite surprising. She claims she receives them through a sort of automatic writing and they are in an antique language." Not a believer in the revelations himself, Goldenstein insists that "there is nothing illegal there, nor

do they include the prophecies about the end of the world some media mentioned.”

Goldenstein remembers that Xavier too was part of Catholic circles nostalgic of pre-Vatican-II times, and because of this Georges Fenech, who was at that time president of the MIVILUDES, “tried to create the image of a crime that had religious motivations and was born in a climate of ‘cultic deviances.’”

“It seems to me that the situation of a family who has suffered a lot, concludes Goldenstein, has been exploited for publicity purposes. In the process, their religious liberty was violated.”

The police and the prosecutor have now determined that there are no “cultic deviances.” A couple of French Catholics gathered friends to pray and study private revelations and the Bible. A quick look at the Internet would persuade the MIVILUDES that there are hundreds of similar prayer groups in France. Their values may not always be those of the French République, particularly when they are led by old aristocrats, but what they do is not illegal.

What happened is, simply, a shameful attempt to exploit a sensational murder to fuel the French campaign against “cults.”

Photo: Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès (screenshot) and the Nantes home where the bodies of his wife and children were found in 2011 (credits).

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