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## **FECRIS and affiliates: Defamation is in their DNA**

### ***Defamation cases condemned by European courts in Austria, France, Germany, and Spain***

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (08.07.2021) - CAP-LC (Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience), an NGO with special consultative status at the United Nations' ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council), has filed a [written statement to the 47<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations' Human Rights Council](#) published on 21 June 2021 which denounces the defamation policy, the incitement to stigmatization and hatred towards certain religious and belief groups by FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects) and its member associations.

This umbrella organization based in France and mainly financed by French public powers (over 90% of its budget) was created in Paris on 30 June 1994 on request of the French anti-cult association UNADFI.

Instead of publishing objective information about religious and belief groups they derogatorily label as "cults" (in French, *sectes*), FECRIS and its affiliates are used to spreading distorted or fake news and defamation. However, it has still kept its ECOSOC status since 2005 despite the fact that courts in a number of EU countries have condemned several of their disparaging statements. See hereafter [a non-exhaustive list of cases that were taken to court](#) in languages that were accessible to the author but it is just the tip of the iceberg of their defamatory statements that were never prosecuted.

## Austria

### ***In the dock in 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2004 and 2005: Former vice-president of FECRIS***

F.G., the third president of FECRIS (2005-2009) and board member of Austrian FECRIS' affiliate GSK (Gesellschaft gegen Sekten und Kultgefahren) has been convicted a number of times for defamation against the [Brunstad Christian Church](#) (known in Austria as "the Norwegian church" or "Smith's Friends") in 1996, 1997, 1998 (twice), 2000 (twice), 2004 and [2005](#). This unrepentant recidivist was repeatedly condemned to pay fines, to refrain from attacking that Church, to remove defamatory accusations from GSK's website and also to publish court decisions in his disadvantage.

F.G., a retired engineer, is a committed Catholic. He disagreed with his daughter W.G. joining the Smith's Friends and getting married with one of its members. On 27 May 1999, she registered a testimony at a notary in which she denied the allegations of her father against this movement.

Source: [Freedom of Religion or Belief Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality, A Case Study: FECRIS, pp 324-327](#) and [Kurzinformation über die Gerichtsprozesse der Norweger Bewegung.](#)

## France

### ***In the dock in 1997: President of ADFI Nord, FECRIS affiliate***

On 15 January 1997, the Douai Court of Appeal convicted the president of ADFI Nord for defamation regarding the Association of the Jehovah's Witnesses in France. She was condemned to pay the symbolic amount of 1 FF. ([Cour d'Appel de Douai, 4e Chambre – Dossier Nr 96/02832 – Arrêt 15.01.1997](#)).

### ***In the Dock in 2001: President of UNADFI, FECRIS affiliate***

In a case of defamation against a member of the Church of Scientology, the President of UNADFI was condemned to pay a fine of 762,24 EUR and additionally 1524,49 EUR as financial compensation for moral damage to the victim. ([Tribunal de Grande Instance de Paris, 17<sup>e</sup> Chambre – Dossier Nr 0014523016 – Jugement 20.11.2001](#))

On 5 February 2003, the Paris Court of Appeal confirmed this judgment. ([Cour d'appel de Paris, 11e chambre/Section A - Dossier Nr 01/03757 – Arrêt 05.02.2003](#))

### ***In the dock in 2002: Vice-president of GEMPPI, FECRIS affiliate***

On 29 March 2002, the Regional Court of Marseille (TGI) found defamatory the statements regarding the Association of Jehovah's Witnesses that were made by J.C. during a conference he held in Marseille. He accused the association of Jehovah's Witnesses of fraud, illegally employing unregistered staff for years, and using a hare-brained translation of the Bible. These statements were reproduced in *La Provence* of 28 January 2001 and were not denied by J.C.

The Court found J.C. guilty of the offence of libel towards the Association of Jehovah's Witnesses for the following statement "There is a fraud involving the employment of individuals who are not registered with the URSSAF which has been going on for years."

He was ordered to pay a fine of 450 EUR as punishment, the symbolic sum of 1 EUR to the Association and the amount of 600 EUR under section 475 (1) of the Code of Criminal Procedure.

It is noteworthy that J.C. was the vice-president of GEMPPPI, president of ADFI and member of MIVILUDES' orientation council. He is a Professor at the French Institute of Muslim Civilization in Lyon. He was also the regional head of the Institute for the training of teachers of religion in Dijon.

**[\(Tribunal de Grande Instance de Marseille, 8<sup>e</sup> chambre – Dossier Nr 2972/02 – Jugement correctionnel 29.03.2002\) – English translation](#)**

***In the dock in 2007: Former MP and President of UNADFI, FECRIS affiliate***

On 18 July 2007, the Court of Appeal of Rouen condemned C.P., accused of repeated defamation in the media, to the payment of 1500 EUR (+ 800 EUR for the implementation of Article 475-1 of the Criminal Procedure Code) to the central association of Jehovah's Witnesses in France and 750 EUR (+300 EUR for the implementation of Article 475-1 of the Criminal Procedure Code) to each of the seven local associations of Jehovah's Witnesses as financial compensation for moral damage. **[\(Cour d'appel de Rouen, chambre correctionnelle - Dossier Nr 07/00341 – Arrêt 18.07.2007\)](#)**

***In the dock in 2007: President of UNADFI, FECRIS affiliate***

On 3 April 2007, the Court of Cassation found defamatory the statements which were made by C.P., then member of Parliament and president of UNADFI, and by A.F., member of the MILS (the predecessor of MIVILUDES) in their book "Sects, Democracy and Globalization" (Sectes, démocratie et mondialisation) published in 2002. In that book, the philosophical movement AMORC (Rosicrucian Order) was accused, among other things, of pursuing personal interests, of supporting racist theories and threatening freedoms, of being structured like a mafia and of functioning like a criminal organization. In its decision, the Court of Cassation quashed and nullified the decision of the Court of Appeal of Paris 22 March 2006. The case was sent back to the Court of Appeal but the authors of the book concluded a deal with AMORC. On 7 May 2008, they signed [a declaration](#) by which they recognized that their statements about AMORC had been defamatory as the Court of Cassation had ruled. They concluded by saying that in the light of new information gathered since the publication of their book they had agreed AMORC was not a cult-like organization. **[\(Cour de Cassation, chambre civile 1 – Pourvoi Nr 06-15226 – Cour decision: 03.04.2007\)](#)**

***In the dock in 2015 and 2017: UNADFI, FECRIS affiliate***

In November 2015, UNADFI was convicted by the Court of Appeal of Paris for 'abuse of legal process,' for having persisted in bad faith as a plaintiff against the Church of Scientology and two private persons. UNADFI had to pay 3,000 EUR to each of the parties and 4,000 EUR on the basis of article 700 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. **[\(Cour d'appel de Paris, Pôle 2, Chambre 2, - Dossier Nr 14/09557 – Arrêt 20.11.2015\)](#)**

This conviction was upheld by the Court of Cassation on 12 January 2017. ([Cour de Cassation, 2e chambre civile – Dossier Nr 10019 F - Arrêt 12.01.2017](#))

## Germany

### *In the dock in 2001: AGPF/ SEKTEN-INFO ESSEN, FECRIS affiliates*

In a final judgment issued on 19 December 2001 by the Munich State Court, Ms. H-M C. founder of Sect-info Essen, was ordered to stop repeating or spreading a wide variety of untruths about Takar Singh (an Eastern religious group) or else she would be fined up to 500,000 DM and, if not paid, be sentenced to jail for up to 6 months. These included allegations such as accusing a person of being a criminal, of torturing children or of rape. The sale of the book they were distributing about the group was also forbidden. The title was "The new prophets" (German: Die Neuen Heilsbringer: Auswege oder Wege ins Aus?) (**Munich I Landgericht/ Land Court, civil chamber 9 - Case Nr. Az: 908736/99 – Entscheidung/ Court decision: 19.01.2001**)

Source: [Freedom of Religion or Belief Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality, A Case Study: FECRIS](#), pp 191-192

### *In the dock in 2020: FECRIS*

On 27 November 2020, the District Court of Hamburg condemned FECRIS for defaming the general movement of Jehovah's Witnesses in public statements made in the framework of its conferences from 2009 to 2017 that were posted later on its website. See [Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany v. FECRIS \(File ref. 324 O 434/18\)](#) about a long list of 32 claimed defamatory statements: 17 were fully justified and one was partially justified by the Court.

Since the Jehovah's Witnesses had claimed that 32 FECRIS statements were defamatory, and the court found 17 of them defamatory, one partially defamatory, and 14 non-defamatory, FECRIS declared that it had "won" the case on 14 points. While keeping silent about the 17 other points declared defamatory by the court, FECRIS gave the false impression in a [press release](#) that the Court of Hamburg had validated the 14 statements it had considered non-defamatory as true. This late press release (30 May 2021) was just a reaction to a report about FECRIS' condemnation published by Bitter Winter. ([Hamburg Landgericht/ Land Court – File Ref. 324 O 434/18 – Entscheidung/ Court decision: 27.11.2020](#))

More about this case in Germany in [HRWF's database of news](#).

## Spain

### *In the dock in 1999 (European Court): Pro Juventud, FECRIS affiliate*

Pro Juventud, now AIS – Pro Juventud, a Spanish FECRIS affiliate, has been found by the European Court of Human Rights in the 1999 case [Ribera Blume and others versus Spain](#) to bear "direct and immediate responsibility" in a case of kidnapping, imprisonment and deprogramming attempt of members of a religious group in conditions of illegal deprivation of freedom and detention. Forced change of religion is forbidden by international law. ([European Court of Human Rights – File 37680/97 – Court decision: 14.10.1999](#))

## Conclusions

During more than 25 years, FECRIS and its affiliates have been spreading defamatory statements about religious and belief groups in printed form, in the media and in parliamentary hearings. Before joining FECRIS, a number of associations and their leaders had already been condemned in defamation cases by courts in Sweden, Switzerland and other countries ([Freedom of Religion or Belief Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality, A Case Study: FECRIS, page 192](#))

The examples of court decisions listed in this article show that it is in their DNA to stigmatize religious or belief groups that their founding members and board members do not like for personal reasons or through personal experience. Such obstinacy in defaming and stigmatizing a number of non-mainline groups in the media has negatively and sometimes dramatically impacted the lives of those who have freely chosen to follow their teachings but this is part of their right to freedom of conscience, thought and belief.

If similar defamatory statements targeted atheist organizations or the faith of Jews or Muslims with the same virulence, this would trigger an outcry in the political class and the media, and rightly so. The followers of non-mainline religious groups just want to enjoy the same right to freedom of conscience, thought and belief.

FECRIS and its affiliates have not only been condemned by courts. Their unethical practices have been repeatedly condemned at the OSCE and in 2020 by [USCIRF \(US Commission on International Religious Freedom\)](#).

It is time for public powers to stop financing FECRIS and its affiliates, to keep them at distance and to rely on credible academic sources and experts.

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## FECRIS denounced at the United Nations' Human Rights Council

***CAP-LC filed a written statement detailing the defamation cases FECRIS and its affiliated organizations lost, and asking France to stop supporting them.***

*by Massimo Introvigne*



*Palais des Nations in Geneva, where the UN Human Rights Council meets (credits).*

Bitter Winter (28.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3Agkafp> - Readers of *Bitter Winter* are familiar with FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), an umbrella organization created in 1994 to put together anti-cult associations in several European (and some non-European) countries. We criticized FECRIS inter alia for supporting China's horrific persecution of Falun Gong and other religious movements. FECRIS promotes the anti-cult ideology, recognized in 2020 by a USCIRF (U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom) document as a major threat for freedom of religion or belief.

CAP-LC (Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience), an NGO with special consultative status at the United Nations' ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council), the same status enjoyed by FECRIS, has now filed a written statement to the 47<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations' Human Rights Council, which was published on 21 June, and asks France to stop its support of FECRIS.

CAP-LC is concerned with the reorganization of the French governmental anti-cult mission MIVILUDES, now under the supervision of the Minister Delegate for Citizenship at the Ministry of the Interior, Marlène Schiappa. She has increased MIVILUDES' present budget ten-fold, to euro 1 million euro per year, CAP-LC reports, and has announced "that this million will be allocated to initiatives that would be run by anti-cult associations, namely CCMM and UNADFI," both FECRIS affiliates.

CAP-LC notes that CCMM and UNADFI refer to themselves as NGOs but are in fact GONGOs (Governmental Non-Government Associations), since 90% of their funding comes from the French government. Representatives of both FECRIS affiliates have been included in the newly appointed Orientation Committee of the MIVILUDES. FECRIS is registered in France and is also directly funded by the French government. (...)

Read full article [here](#)

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## **FECRIS' fake news and defamation condemned by European courts**

CAP-LC (Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience), an NGO with special consultative status at the United Nations' ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) has filed a written statement to the 47<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations' Human Rights Council published on 21 June which denounces the incitement to stigmatization and hatred towards certain religious and belief groups by FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects).

This umbrella organization based in France and mainly financed by French public powers (over 90% of its budget) was created in 1994 to put together anti-cult associations in several European (and some non-European) countries. It still has its ECOSOC status despite the fact that courts in several EU countries have condemned several of its defamatory statements. A few examples:

### *CAP-LC' statement*

The problem, CAP-LC affirms, is that, rather than objective information about groups they derogatorily label as "cults" (in French, *sectes*), FECRIS and its affiliates consistently spread fake news and defamation. This, CAP-LC says, is not only the opinion of human rights activists, as FECRIS, its affiliated organizations, and their leaders have been frequently convicted for defamation.

### Austria

"The former vice-president of FECRIS and Board Member of Austrian FECRIS group GSK has been convicted for defamation a number of times" against the Brunstad Christian Church (known in Austria as "the Norwegian church").

### Spain

CAP-LC also reports that Pro Juventud, now AIS, a Spanish FECRIS affiliate, has been found by the European Court of Human Right in the 1999 case *Ribera Blume and others versus Spain* to bear "direct and immediate responsibility" in a case of deprogramming, involving the kidnapping and imprisonment of members of a religious group with the purpose of "de-converting" them from their religion, a practice which has been sanctioned as a serious crime by courts in several countries of the world.

### Switzerland

Two members of SADK, a Swiss FECRIS affiliate, CAP-LC notes, were also involved in a 1990 case of deprogramming of a member of the Hare Krishna movement in Switzerland, which led to criminal convictions.

### Germany

"In a final judgement on 19th December 2001 by the Munich State Court, CAP-LC goes on to report, the founder of Sect-info Essen – German FECRIS group was ordered to stop telling or spreading a wide variety of falsehoods about Takar Singh ([the leader of] an Eastern religious group) otherwise they would be fined up to 500,000 DM and if not paid, would be sentenced to jail for up to 6 months."

CAP-LC also mentions the landmark decision by the District Court of Hamburg of November 27, 2020, which found FECRIS itself, rather than its affiliates only, directly guilty of 18 counts of "untrue factual allegations against the Jehovah's Witnesses."

France

The French UNADFI and its local affiliates (ADFI) also had several conviction for defamation, CAP-LC says. "On 15 January 1997, the Douai Court of Appeal convicted the president of ADFI Nord, for defamation regarding the Cultural Association of the Jehovah's Witnesses in France.

On 29 March 2002, the Marseille Criminal Court condemned a well-known member of UNADFI and FECRIS, for defamation regarding the association of Jehovah's Witnesses.

On 20 November 2001, the Paris Criminal Court condemned the president of UNADFI, for public defamation regarding a member of the Church of Scientology. On 5 February 2003, the Paris Court of Appeal confirmed this judgment.

In November 2015, UNADFI was convicted by the Court of Appeal of Paris for 'abuse of legal process,' for having joined, and persisted unlawfully and in bad faith as a plaintiff against the Church, while UNADFI knew perfectly well that this action was inadmissible, its sole purpose being to 'harm the Church and to illegally influence the judicial proceedings in progress.' This conviction was upheld by the Court of Cassation on January 12, 2017."

CAP-LC also mentions that on March 27, 1992, the Federal Supreme Administrative Court of Germany stated that because of its "malicious criticism" of religious movements a local FECRIS affiliate cannot be financially supported by the government.

CAP-LC reminds France of the conclusions of the USCRIF report, and asks the French government to exclude representatives of the local FECRIS affiliate organizations from the Orientation Council of the MIVILUDES, and stop funding both FECRIS and its French affiliates.

CAP-LC also mentions the landmark decision by the District Court of Hamburg of November 27, 2020, which found FECRIS itself, rather than its affiliates only, directly guilty of 18 counts of "untrue factual allegations against the Jehovah's Witnesses."

This decision, which I reviewed in *Bitter Winter*, deserves a final footnote. FECRIS had wisely kept silent about the Hamburg decision. Only after my review in *Bitter Winter*, it published a [press release](#) where it claimed that it had "won" the Hamburg case. This was repeated by some FECRIS affiliates in different countries, but it's just an attempt to throw dust in the eyes of those who have not read the decision.



Since the Jehovah's Witnesses had claimed that 32 FECRIS statements were defamatory, and the court found 17 of them defamatory, one partially defamatory, and 14 non-defamatory, FECRIS claimed that it had "won" the case since the 14 statements declared non-defamatory were "essential," and the 18 points for which they were sentenced were "ancillary".

The court did not distinguish between "essential" and "ancillary," but what it did was to clearly declare a winner by sentencing FECRIS to pay some money to the Jehovah's Witnesses rather than vice versa.

FECRIS' press release also gave the false impression that the Court of Hamburg had validated the 14 statements it had considered non-defamatory as true. In fact, the Court itself had warned against such an interpretation, noting that in German law "expressions of opinion enjoy extensive protection. Accordingly, inaccurate opinions also share in the scope of protection." One clear example of an "inaccurate opinion" regarded as non-defamatory, which FECRIS mentions in its statement as if it had been confirmed as true by the Hamburg judges, is that "all claims of persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia are just primitive propaganda."

Of course, FECRIS appointed as its Vice President Alexander Dvorkin, the main architect of the persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. However, only a "primitive" Russian propaganda can claim that the Jehovah's Witnesses are not the victims in Russia of a persecution that has been denounced as such by the European Union, the United States, the United Nations, the European Court of Human Rights, and several individual European governments (including Germany).

FECRIS will probably answer the report filed at the Human Rights Council by attacking CAP-LC. Shooting the messenger is a FECRIS specialty, but they should remember Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's dictum that by smashing the barometer one does not eliminate the bad weather.

They may also answer that there are court cases they won, either because their statements were regarded as non-defamatory (but remember, "non-defamatory" does not mean "true") or because they successfully sued for defamation or insults religious groups that lost their temper and called them inquisitors, Nazis, or worse.

But this is not the point. France supports FECRIS and its affiliates and asks its representatives to advise the government because it recognizes them as "experts" on "cults." If, in several cases, they have been found guilty of spreading fake news and defamation, their credibility as "experts" is destroyed, no matter how many times they narrowly escaped being sentenced or won cases against religious movements that got tired of turning the other cheek and retaliated.

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## **Europe will not have a Religious Liberty Day**

***The proposal by the Conservatives and Reformists group was rejected before reaching the floor of the European Parliament.***

By Marco Respinti

Bitter Winter (17.06.21) - <https://bit.ly/35zZKjn> - It seems that the European Parliament (EP) does not have a special interest in religious liberty, despite it being an integral part of the European Convention of Human Rights.

There is an international day for almost everything, but the proposal to establish an International Day for Religious Liberty was recently rejected.

The idea was launched by the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance. Upheld by the Conservatives and Reformists group, which transformed it into a political proposal, joined by the European People's Party and by the Identity and Democracy group, it was rejected by Renew Europe, the Socialists, the Greens, and the Left.

Underlining that religious freedom is a basic human right, protected by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the promoters wished to establish the International Day on June 24, the anniversary of the [adoption of the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief](#) by the Council of the European Union in 2013.

Few noticed this rejection, because the proposal was blocked before the next plenary session of the EP, and its text will not even be published.

The Conservatives and Reformists group says it will advance its proposal again in the future.

Photo : *The European Parliament in session* ([credits](#))

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## **Bishops want EU's religious freedom office beefed up**

***Catholic bishops of the European Union (COMECE) call for sufficient financial resources to defend religious liberty around the world***

By Arnaud Bevilacqua

La Croix Int'l (10.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3gdO10k> - Europe's Catholic bishops have congratulated the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, for the recent appointment of a new special envoy to monitor religious freedom abroad. But they are urging her to make sure the post is given sufficient financial resources so that it can effectively do its work.

### ***A "fundamental value" of the EU***

In a [June 2 letter](#) to the president, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) welcomed the fact that Europe is focusing anew on religious freedom, "a fundamental right and a core value of the EU, which is under threat in many parts of the world".

Von der Leyen appointed the new special envoy on May 5, filling a position that had been vacant since December 2019.

COMECE president, [Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ of Luxembourg](#), said the bishops were particularly pleased that the EC president chose Christos Stylianides for the post.

A former European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, the Cypriot MEP is a member of the European People's Party. Cardinal Hollerich noted that he has opened "fresh spaces for cooperation with Churches and Faith-Based Organizations in humanitarian activities".

He said this appointment of a special envoy "on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion and Belief" should give "voice to voiceless individuals and communities whose freedom of thought, conscience, and religion are violated, being subject to intolerance, discrimination and, in some cases, even, persecution".

### ***"Institutional and financial support"***

But the Jesuit cardinal said Stylianides will need "reasonable and adequate human and financial resources" in order "to carry on his high responsibility" effectively.

He urged the EU to give the envoy all the support he needs, especially since the issue of religious freedom often touches upon thorny internal questions in each member state.

Without power and without means, Stylianides risks raising hopes that cannot be fulfilled.

"Therefore, it is our hope and kind request to you that the EU Special Envoy have your institutional and financial support to be able to duly perform his responsibility," said the COMECE president.

He said the EU must embrace its role "as a relevant voice in supporting human rights and vulnerable individuals and communities around the world".

COMECE just last year celebrated the 40th anniversary of its foundation.

Members of its standing committee will be in Rome from June 9-11 to meet Vatican officials and religious freedom is expected to be one of the items on the agenda.

They are also expected to meet with Pope Francis while at the Vatican.

Photo : Christos Stylianides, shown here on Feb. 26, 2018, has been named the new European Advocate for Religious Freedom. (Photo by VIRGINIA MAYO/AP)

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## **"To stop islamic terrorism, discriminate against Non-Muslim religious movements"**

***Laws are passed with the alleged aim of combating Islamic radicalism. They are then used against peaceful religionists labeled as "fundamentalists" or "cults."***

By Massimo Introvigne\*

Bitter Winter (06.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3iui4lZ> - The new Flemish legislation on religion and the statements by politicians surrounding its introduction are yet another example of what is emerging as a fascinating, if paradoxical, social and political phenomenon: the discrimination of some non-Muslim religions under the pretext of combating terrorism based on ultra-fundamentalist Islam.

In several European countries, terrorist attacks by groups and individuals claiming to act on the basis of an ultra-fundamentalist interpretation of Islam (one not shared by most Muslims) have claimed hundreds of victims and shocked public opinion. Politicians concerned for their votes understand that "something should be done."

The first reaction is to introduce legislation against "Islamic fundamentalism." This is rarely effective, because the ultra-fundamentalist organizations responsible for terrorism such as al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State operate underground. A law banning "extremist" organizations would not affect them. They are already banned everywhere as criminal groups.

There is no evidence that banning other conservative Islamic groups would help combating terrorism. There is no evidence either that prohibiting the use of the veil or of Islamic modesty swimming suits to Muslim women would have any effect on terrorism. I have studied ultra-fundamentalist terrorism and published several books on the issue, dealing inter alia with the personality of terrorists responsible for some of the bloodiest attacks. Only a handful of them were members of conservative organizations, or had been educated in conservative mosques. Some, like several members of the al-Qa'ida commandos, were scions of rich families, in some cases educated in exclusive international private schools. Recently, the Islamic State recruited desperate, marginal immigrants via the Internet, people with little knowledge of Islamic theology and no ties with any Muslim organizations.

On the contrary, laws against conservative Islam may antagonize Muslims, and make recruitment by terrorist organizations easier rather than more difficult. We all know that things about terrorism may change quickly, but it is a fact of life that so far Italy has had zero terrorist attacks by ultra-fundamentalist Muslims (we had some by politically motivated Palestinians in the past century, but this was a different story). As a scholar and a member of the former Ministry of the Interior's Committee on Islam in Italy, I have been often interviewed on why this happens. I am persuaded that the conciliatory attitude towards Muslims exhibited by different Italian governments has significantly contributed to making recruitment by terrorist organizations unsuccessful in our country.

There is also another problem with laws targeting conservative Islam. They immediately encounter Constitutional problems. Constitutions, not to mention the European Convention on Human Rights, prohibit legislation singling out a specific religion. Politicians thus should frame their laws in general terms, targeting religions that are "separatist" (a favorite word in France) or "extremist."

Laws are thus introduced, and sold to parliaments and voters as needed tools to "combat radical Islam." Once passed, they have little or no effect on radical Islam or terrorism. However, they are used to harass and discriminate against peaceful religious movements.

This is becoming almost a sociological law. The Flanders, where the law is promoted as needed after the growth of radical Islam and bloody terrorist attacks in Brussels, are not the first case. In Russia, laws against "extremism" created after 9/11 were expanded after one of the most horrific modern terrorist attacks, the Beslan school siege of 2004, which left 334 dead, most of them children, to let the government outlaw religious organizations guilty not of physical violence only, but also of "verbal" extremism. Arguing that one's religion was better or superior to other religions was considered a key test for extremism. The law was not used to ban al-Qa'ida or the Chechen organizations guilty of terrorism (they were already banned), but led to peaceful Muslim groups such as the followers of Turkish mystic Said Nursi, and non-Muslim religions such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Church of Scientology being harassed (the Jehovah's Witnesses were outlawed in 2017; dozens of them are in jail).

In Denmark, it was claimed [earlier this year](#) that a law compelling all religions to translate into Danish their sermons and publish them in advance was needed to stop incendiary sermons by radical imams. Catholics and Protestants immediately objected that those who would really suffer would be immigrant and other Christian communities catering to linguistic minorities. The most radical imams would not be affected, as they operate clandestinely anyway.

In the Italian region of Lombardy, a law was passed making it extremely difficult for non-Catholic religious community to be authorized to open new places of worship. It was nicknamed the "anti-mosque law," but in fact Muslims in Lombardy, most of them poor immigrants, were not very much interested in building mosques. The law, however, greatly affected the booming Evangelical community.

In France, the law on "separatism" is still being discussed, but is another egregious example of how a law popular with certain media because it would allegedly keep radical Islam under control would be in fact easily used to discriminate against small Christian communities and groups labeled as "cults" (sectes). In particular, as in the case of the Flemish draft law, it may impose limitations on groups that need to be economically supported by their co-religionists abroad.

In France, finally, the veil was lifted, and we learned that the paradox was not an unintended consequence of an amateurish approach to the problem of ultra-fundamentalist Islam. We were told, in so many words, that selling to the voters a law "against radical Islam" and using it later against non-Islamic religious group was totally intentional. The lady who serves as Minister Delegate in Charge of Citizenship at the Ministry of the Interior, Marlène Schiappa, [told the French media loudly and clearly](#) that the law is also intended for, and will be used against, groups classified as "cults" (sectes).

So, finally the cat is out of the bag. What we are witnessing is a huge fraud. With a disturbing Islamophobic language, the public opinion is agitated against the ghost of "radical Islam," and told that exceptional measures should be passed. Perhaps not all, but some of those proposing them are aware that these measures will be remarkably ineffective against Islamic radicalism and terrorism. However, they still want to pass them, first for electoral reasons, and second, because they plan to use them against groups they may call "archconservative" (including successful Evangelical and Pentecostal churches), "cults," or *sectes*. If they would openly proclaim their antipathy against high-commitment religion, if not religion in general, their proposals would generate more hostile reactions than real interest, and would likely fail. By waving the red flag of

“Islamic terrorism,” on the other hand, they may succeed in passing laws that hide a different agenda.

*\*An introductory paper at the Special Meeting of the Freedom of Religion or Belief Roundtable Belgium “The New Flemish Legislation on Religion: A Cause of Concern,” June 2, 2021.*

Photo: *Frans Hogenberg (1535–1590), The Calvinist Iconoclastic Riot of August 20, 1566 in Antwerp, at the start of the Flemish wars of religion.*

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## **Islamic religious education in Europe: an increasing matter of concern**

By Leni Franken, senior researcher and teacher assistant at the University of Antwerp (Belgium)

BYU LAW (08.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3hGzCun> - Against the backdrop of labor migration, family reunification, and the ongoing refugee crisis, the number of Muslims in Europe has increased over the past decades. This has resulted in a growing number of Muslim schools and Muslim students enrolled in Islamic Religious Education in state schools. In the Netherlands, for instance, the number of state-funded Muslim schools has increased from only a few schools in the 1980s to more than 50 schools today. Comparably, the present number of students enrolled in Islamic Religious Education in Belgian state schools is, with more than 20%, twice as many as ten years ago. In addition, an increasing number of students with a Muslim background are enrolled in non-denominational and non-confessional “religion education” classes, which are organized in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish state schools.

Given this rather new sociological situation, combined with the presence of (violent) Muslim fundamentalism in Europe, “Islamic Religious Education” has become a matter of concern for politicians, religious stakeholders, policymakers, and academics. Hence the book *Islamic Religious Education in Europe* [1] offers a comparative study of curricula, teaching materials, and teacher training in fourteen European countries. These country reports are followed by multi-disciplinary essays—from the hermeneutical-critical to the postcolonial—addressing challenges posed by teaching about and into Islam.

### **Education into Islam: essentialist, Sunni-oriented, and of poor quality**

A recurring theme in the 14 country reports is that, notwithstanding the rather long experience with Islamic Religious Education *stricto sensu* (i.e. education *into* Islam, organized in a denominational and confessional way), several problems are common: due to a lack of adequate teacher training, teachers are not always suitably skilled; curricula and textbooks—which are often influenced by Turkish Islamic institutions (e.g. *Diyanet*)—are outdated, uncritical, and not adapted to the European context; attention for Muslim minorities such as Shi’a and Alevi is limited, and attention for other religions (with the exemption of Judaism and Christianity) and secular worldviews is almost absent. Most

European nations are nowadays concerned about the quality of Islamic Religious Education, which has resulted in the establishment of teacher-training programs and an update of curricula and textbooks. Overall, these are worthwhile initiatives, but there is still much work to be done.

One explanation for the poor quality of Islamic Religious Education is the fact that the different Muslim communities are, in terms of ethnic/national origin, religious practice, and doctrine, very diversified, while at the same time the state requires them to unify in one single community. This has not only led to tensions within officially “recognized” Muslim Communities (e.g. in Austria and Belgium), but it has also led to an uneasy and unprofessional implementation of Islamic Religious Education, which is often Sunni-oriented and essentialist. In this regard, Austria is an interesting case: here, the Islamic Religious Community in Austria (IRCA) and ALEVI are recognized as separate communities, while other claims for recognition, by the Shiites, are pending. By recognizing multiple Islamic communities in this way and by organizing Islamic Religious Education correspondingly, the internal diversity within Islam can be taken into consideration. One should, however, also notice that there are many more forms of practicing Islam (and thus also of Islamic Religious Education). Thus, where to draw the line for recognition remains a challenge, even in a more diversified system of recognition. Most likely, reality may urge representatives to go for pragmatic and consensus-oriented solutions.

### **Islam Education: marinated in a Lutheran, post-colonial, and essentialist dressing**

Unfortunately, education *about* Islam, as part of non-denominational and non-confessional *religious* education, is not without problems. As with education into Islam, there is, in curricula and textbooks, little attention for diversity *within* religions, including Islam. Besides, the so-called “neutral” classes about religion are often marinated in a Lutheran, post-colonial, and essentialist dressing: the default idea is that all religions have a founder, a holy book, a doctrine, and fixed practices, but this is a western/Christian idea that is absent in many religious and secular traditions.

Providentially, this problem is now recognized by most religious scholars, and this awareness steadily reaches religion education classes in schools. In Norway for instance, the new curriculum for the school subject “Knowledge of Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of Life, and Ethics” emphasizes the diversity between religious and secular worldviews, and also *within* these religions and worldviews. Besides, the student’s understanding of religion and secular worldviews is challenged through analysis of and critical reflection on sources, norms, and the (western) concepts used in (comparative) religious studies.

### **Education about and into Islam: exclusion or complementarity?**

Overall, the analysis of Islamic Religious Education in 14 national contexts (Part I) and the interdisciplinary, reflexive essays (Part II) make clear that both education *into* and education *about* Islam face several problems and challenges. This, however, does not imply that the baby should be thrown out with the bathwater. Numerous contributions in *Islamic Religious Education in Europe* reveal the urgent need for “religious literacy,” a need that has also been emphasized by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. Organizing a state-controlled and mandatory subject about different religions and secular worldviews could offer solutions here, provided it is organized in a “critical, objective and pluralistic manner” (cf. ECtHR, *Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen v. Denmark*, ECtHR, *Folgerø and others v. Norway*) and provided the above-mentioned problems are countered constructively.

Research in England and Sweden (chapters 6 and 13) has shown that Muslim students are not opposed to such a “neutral” school subject, which is not only on the compulsory curriculum in Swedish state schools but also in state-funded denominational schools. In addition to this mandatory school subject, Muslim schools can also organize denominational Islamic Religious Education classes, provided these classes do not oppose the common teaching aims of Swedish education. Interestingly, most Swedish Muslim students consider the classes *into* Islam as a meaningful complement to the mandatory classes *about* religion. What is at stake here is not a story of *exclusion* (either confessional/denomination *or* non-confessional/non-denominational), but a story of *complementarity*.

The Swedish Religious Education model is not without deficiencies but could nevertheless be inspiring for the way Europe deals with (Islamic) Religious Education. Rather than thinking in terms of denominational versus non-denominational, policymakers could also opt for a model where all students learn about religions and secular worldviews, while optional classes into a particular religion/worldview could be organized on request. If organized in a critical and nuanced way, both types of education will lead to increasing religious literacy, to personal identity formation (*Bildung*), and to future responsible citizens in an increasingly secularized and pluralized world.

Photo: USCIA.org

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## **About the appointment of the new EU Special Envoy on freedom of religion or belief**

### ***What Christos Stylianides should know as he takes the post of the Special Envoy on religion or belief outside European Union?***

By Dr. Ewelina U. Ochab

FORBES (16.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3wck2uw> - On May 5, 2021, the European Commission appointed Christos Stylianides as Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside European Union (EU Special Envoy on FoRB). Christos Stylianides has significant crisis management background, having served as the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management between 2014 and 2019 and as the European Union’s Ebola Coordinator. As we have seen over the years, in many cases, dealing with violations on grounds of religion or belief outside European Union will mean dealing with crisis scenarios.

According to the online announcement, “[EU Special Envoy on FoRB] The Special Envoy will establish a dialogue with national authorities and other stakeholders in countries suffering from discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. He will support for intercultural and interreligious dialogue processes, including encouraging dialogue between representatives of different faiths and the setting up of joint initiatives. He will put in place measures to target de-radicalisation and prevention of extremism on grounds of religion or belief in third countries. In cooperation with authorities from third



countries, he will promote religious diversity and tolerance within educational programs and curricula.”

The mandate of the EU Special Envoy on FoRB is relatively new. It was established in a February 2016 [resolution](#) on Daesh atrocities with the first appointment made in May 2016. At that stage the mandate was for a year, with the possibility that it would be renewed. This was the first mandate of its kind. However, in recent years, it has become very clear that the mandate needs to be strengthened to maximize the impact of the office. Among others, the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, in its [2017 report](#), called for refining the mandate. The report identified that, as it stood, “the formal position of the Special Envoy is weak. It is not a full-time activity and with limited resources.” Similar recommendations on strengthening the mandate were subsequently made by Mr Andrzej Grzyb, the Rapporteur for the Committee on Foreign Affairs, who in his [report](#) on the “EU Guidelines and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU” recommended for the mandate to be extended to periods of a few years rather than for one year and renewed on a yearly basis. These recommendations have not been adopted yet.

The post of the EU Special Envoy on FoRB has remained empty for almost two years. The appointment of Christos Stylianides is a welcome sign that the European Commission continues to recognize the importance of engaging on the topic of freedom of religion or belief internationally.

What should Christos Stylianides expect as he takes the post? Not boredom, that’s for sure. A brief glance at the most egregious atrocities, many of which meet the legal definitions of genocide or crimes against humanity, confirms that there are several situations requiring urgent attention.

While we may not hear much about Daesh at the moment, there are still over [10,000](#) active members in Syria and Iraq. Daesh fighters have been using the pandemic to consolidate and so pose a renewed threat to religious communities, such as Yazidis and Christians. Furthermore, the communities once targeted for annihilation by Daesh continue to be in urgent need of assistance, let alone of psychological support. Those communities remain without justice.

In Myanmar, while international focus is on the coup, Rohingya Muslims, once targeted by the Burmese military, face [renewed threat](#) - their perpetrator now rules the country. Despite consideration by the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, the atrocities against the Rohingyas are far from resolved. Similarly, other religious minorities in Myanmar face dire situations that continue to be overshadowed by the bigger picture.

In China, Uyghurs are subject to atrocities which [legal experts](#) determine meet the legal definition of genocide. Thousands of [Uyghurs](#) are detained, forcibly indoctrinated and subjected to torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, rape and sexual violence, forced abortions, forced sterilizations, removal of children to another group, and much more. Beijing [denies](#) the atrocities.

In Nigeria, [Boko Haram](#) and Fulani militia tore the country apart killing anyone who opposes their destructive ideology, both Christians and moderate Muslims.

In North Korea, being a [Christian](#) is the equivalent of a death sentence.

In Ethiopia, Orthodox Christians have been targeted with [deadly attacks](#). Churches have been the scenes of massacres with hundreds of killed and mass-graves filled with bodies.

This is without even mentioning violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief other than international crimes discussed above, whether acts of violence based on religion or belief, acts of harassment, marginalization or discrimination.

While the EU Special Envoy on FoRB, Christos Stylianides, will have plenty to engage with, having Christos Stylianides with his significant experience of working on crisis management, will be an important skill that can make a difference.

Photo : European flags wave in front of the Berlaymont building - European Commission (EC) headquarter - in Brussels, Belgium, on January 14, 2019. (Photo credit: Michele Spatari/NurPhoto via Getty Images) NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

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## **The EU and freedom of religion or belief at the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council**

HRWF (25.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3ISirpR> - On 24 March, the EU Delegation to the UN in Geneva issued a press release which summed up the activities of the EU on a number of issues at the 46th session of the Human Rights Council. About freedom of religion or belief, it said:

**“Promoting respect and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FORB)** remains a major priority for the European Union. It is a right to be exercised by everyone everywhere, based on the principles of equality, non-discrimination and universality. We have therefore, as in previous years, introduced a resolution at the Human Rights Council to respect and protect this fundamental right. *“We are pleased that this resolution, as well as the resolution by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on Combating Religious Intolerance, have both been adopted by consensus,”* notes EU Ambassador Stevens. This year’s thematic report of the UN Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed focused on countering Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred to eliminate discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief, to which the EU Delegation also organised a very timely debate.”

This virtual debate titled “Anti-Muslim hatred as an obstacle to freedom of religion or belief” was organized by the EU Delegation and Canada in close cooperation with Dr Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB.

Photo: genevaplac.ch