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The Campaign Against Jehovah's Witnesses About Alleged Sexual Abuse

On 4-6 March 2021, an online conference on “Limitations of Religious Freedom in Europe” was organized by two European universities: Sigmund Neumann Institute for the Research on Freedom, Liberty and Democracy (Germany) in cooperation with the Center for Regional and Borderlands Studies/Institute of Sociology of the University of Wrocław (Poland).

Willy Fautré, from Human Rights Without Frontiers, presented a paper in which he analyzed the chronological mechanic of the mediatic stigmatization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium triggered by a questionable report of the CIAOSN in December 2018 (Centre for Information and Advice on Harmful Sectarian Organizations) on the alleged treatment of sexual abuse inside the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses.

On 5 October 2021, the French-speaking Tribunal of First Instance of Brussels dismissed the accusations against the Belgian organization of the Jehovah's Witnesses and some of its individual members. They 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 court decision was not appealed and is final, confirming hereby the unfounded character of the CIAOSN's allegations.

Brussels, March 2021

End of December 2018, the Belgian media suddenly made their headlines with catchy titles targeting Jehovah's Witnesses. The movement was hereby publicly suspected of covering up or hiding cases of sexual abuse in its midst, silencing the victims and their families.

The suspicions were based on a report of the *Centre for Information and Advice on Harmful Sectarian Organizations (CIAOSN)*¹, a state-sponsored organization, also known as the Information Center on Cults or the Cults Observatory.

The authors of the CIAOSN report cited newspaper articles published in the Netherlands as the rationale for investigating the activities of the Jehovah's Witness organization in Belgium. They also claimed that three testimonies collected by the Dutch association *Reclaimed Voices* were concerning facts which had allegedly taken place in Belgium, but *Reclaimed Voices* denied it in an email addressed to us. The CIAOSN investigators transmitted their report to the Federal Parliament and strongly recommended a parliamentary inquiry.

The recent anti-Jehovah's Witnesses campaign on the issue of sexual abuse in Europe started in the Netherlands with a number of reports published by *Reclaimed Voices*, an association founded by three former Jehovah's Witnesses, who claim to defend the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses' children and not to campaign against their organization. Afterwards, an association called *Reclaimed Voices/ Belgium* was created in the Flanders and started an anti-Jehovah's Witnesses campaign about alleged sexual abuse in their midst and other issues.

This paper analyses the media campaign targeting Jehovah's Witnesses on the issue of sexual abuse and the interactive dynamic between the actors involved in it. The objective was not to check the truthfulness of the self-reported stories and the accusations mentioned in various reports. It was not to deny either the existence of sexual abuse in Jehovah's Witnesses families or by people participating in or leading their religious activities.

This paper comprises of three parts: A chronology of the campaign, an investigation about the actors involved in it and conclusions.

¹ The CIAOSN is the "Centre d'Information et d'Avis sur les Organisations Sectaires Nuisibles". It is a state institution that was created in 1998 after the House of Representatives had published in 1997 a controversial report on harmful sectarian organizations to which a list of 189 allegedly suspicious religious groups had been attached.

The anti-Jehovah's Witnesses campaign: A story in four acts

Act I (2018): The report of the CIAOSN, a time-bomb

On 30 November 2018, the CIAOSN closed a 28-page report² about the management of sexual abuse on minors inside the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses and transmitted it to the Federal Parliament. This report comprises of four parts:

Part 1: The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses (pp 1-4)

Part 2: State of play in 13 countries about initiatives denouncing internal procedures of Jehovah's Witnesses in cases of sexual abuse on minors (pp 6-10)

Part 3: State of play in Belgium (pp 12-14)

Part 4: Conclusions (pp 15-17)

Annexes (pp 18-28)

Noteworthy is that the section on Belgium only covers two pages of short descriptions of seven alleged cases or reports published in the Belgian media in 20 years' time, between 1996 and 2017. In an additional paragraph, the CIAOSN justified the rationale of its decision to investigate the management of sexual abuse inside the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses as follows:

In June 2018, the CIAOSN received the 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. From June 2018 on, the CIAOSN received several direct and indirect testimonies from individuals claiming to have suffered from sexual violence in the midst of the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium when they were children. These testimonies suggest that the management of sexual abuse in Belgium is similar to other countries.

Two are two reasons why the CIAOSN published a report and transmitted it to the Federal Parliament with a recommendation to set up a parliamentary inquiry commission.

The first argument justifying the CIAOSN's move was that the Dutch association had transmitted them three Belgian cases. We contacted *Reclaimed Voices* on this

² Official title: "Signalement sur le traitement des abus sexuels sur mineurs au sein de l'organisation des témoins de Jehovah" du 30 novembre 2018. As of 1 March 2021, the report was not available on the website of the CIAOSN. The author of this paper got it from another researcher. It is said by the Belgian Federal Parliament to be an intermediary report (See <https://www.ciaosn.be/54K3713001.pdf>).

issue and they 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.³

It is incomprehensible that such an unfounded information has been published by the CIAOSN and communicated to the Prosecutor's Office without checking its source.

The second argument of the CIAOSN was that they received other testimonies 'directly or indirectly' but there are no details in their report concerning their collection methodology, the number of testimonies, their source, their nature and the dating of the alleged sexual abuse cases.

Last but not least, the CIAOSN Report does not address the issue of the distinction to be made between institutional abuse and family abuse, a point among many others stressed by Prof. Holly Folk in her article "Jehovah's Witnesses and Sexual Abuse: Belgium and the Netherlands" published In Bitter Winter.⁴

³ Excerpt from the email of Reclaimed Voices: "De informatie in het rapport van het IACSSO is incorrect. Wij hebben op 29 maart 2019 mevrouw Kerstine VanderPutte over deze onjuistheid gemailld. Het viel ons destijds op dat Koen Geerts, minister van Justitie (CD&V) daags ervoor in België bij radio 1 het volgende meldde: "Het is het IACSSO zelf die in Nederland informatie is gaan halen en heeft vastgesteld dat van die 286 Nederlandse klachten er drie Belgische waren". Iets soortgelijks werd op tv gezegd, bij Van Gils & gasten. Wij hebben in de Nederlandse media steeds alleen gecommuniceerd over de Nederlandse situatie. Aantallen die genoemd zijn betreffen alleen (vermeende) slachtoffers van misbruik in Nederland.

Personal notes: Kerstine Vanderput is the director of the CIAOSN. Van Gils & Gasten is a Flemish TV program.

⁴ Jehovah's Witnesses and Sexual Abuse: Belgium and The Netherlands, by Prof. Holly Folk, 13 January 2021, Bitter Winter, <https://bitterwinter.org/jehovahs-witnesses-and-sexual-abuse-2-belgium-and-the-netherlands/> Holly Folk is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at [Western Washington University](https://www.western-washington.edu/), Bellingham, Washington. She has previously taught at [Indiana Purdue University](https://www.indiana.edu/) and the [University of Indianapolis](https://www.indiana.edu/). In 2019, she has served as Program Chair for the [Association for the Sociology of Religion](https://www.asa-online.org/) annual meeting. She has lectured and published extensively on new religious movements, religion in Eastern Asia, new Christian groups, and communal studies.

This CIAOSN Report was however the time-bomb that exploded in the Belgian media less than a month later and triggered a chain reaction of news and comments that has still not come to end two years later.

On Thursday 20 December 2018 at 6.30am, *Belga* press agency published a breaking news which immediately inflamed all the media: “Sexual abuse on minors among Jehovah’s Witnesses? The Information Center on Cults requests an inquiry”.⁵

Very soon, as it could be expected, the question mark disappeared from the title in the media online:

Twenty-four minutes later, *La Libre Belgique* and *La Dernière Heure* titled “Sexual abuse on minors among Jehovah’s Witnesses: An inquiry is necessary”.⁶ At 1.35pm, *Le Soir*, another leading newspaper, made one more step, titling “How Jehovah’s Witnesses in Belgium silence sexual abuse on minors inside their community”⁷

On the same evening, the Belgian francophone TV channel RTBF announced in its 7.30pm TV News⁸ that the CIAOSN was asking the House of Representatives to establish an inquiry commission about possible sexual abuses ‘among’ Jehovah’s Witnesses. In addition, the RTBF posted on its website an article titled “Sexual abuse on minors among Jehovah’s Witnesses? The Information Center on Cults demands an inquiry.”

The RTBF TV news was followed by an interview of Frédéric Hoebeeck and his wife Céline Rouge, both former Jehovah’s Witnesses and co-founders of the non-profit association CheCoPa, the symbolic acronym for the French words “CHEnille, COcon, PApillon” (caterpillar, cocoon, butterfly).

The RTBF also gave the floor to a spokesperson of Jehovah’s Witnesses and was the only media to do it. He explained the internal procedure in force in cases of sexual abuse: to take all necessary measures so that the authorities are informed and to protect the children.

⁵ Des abus sexuels sur mineurs au sein des témoins de Jéhovah? Le Centre d'information sur les sectes réclame une enquête, RTBF, 20 December 2018, https://www.rtbef.be/info/belgique/detail_une-enquete-est-necessaire-sur-des-abus-sexuels-sur-mineurs-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehovah?id=10102767.

⁶ Des abus sexuels sur mineurs au sein des témoins de Jéhovah: Une enquête est nécessaire, *La Libre Belgique*, 20 December 2018, <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/des-abus-sexuels-sur-mineurs-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehovah-une-enquete-est-necessaire-5c1b2f7ecd70e3d2f7592726>.

⁷ Comment les Témoins de Jéhovah en Belgique taisent les abus sexuels sur mineurs au sein de leur communauté, *Le Soir*, 20 December 2018, <https://plus.lesoir.be/196635/article/2018-12-20/comment-les-temoins-de-jehovah-en-belgique-taisent-les-abus-sexuels-sur-mineurs>.

⁸ RTBF TV news (video), 20 December 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2g8Pw2K7pE>.

The RTBF finally justified its report by concluding that “in the Netherlands, in eight months’ time, the authorities have collected 286 testimonies of sexual abuse; this country has about 25,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses, a number close to the one in Belgium.”

By the end of the day, public opinion and political decision-makers in Belgium were unavoidably convinced that sexual abuse on minors had been practiced for a long time and in total impunity inside the Belgian movement of Jehovah’s Witnesses because their community leaders were illegally hiding such facts. Moreover, the CIAOSN appeared to be a necessary vigilance mechanism for the protection of children against Jehovah’s Witnesses and on its website, it published a call for collecting testimonies of (former) Jehovah’s Witnesses who were victims of or knew about sexual abuse⁹.

Act II (2019): The tsunami

Two months and a half later, the issue made the headlines again with the creation of a working group in the House of Representatives which was commissioned to inquire about “the management of sexual abuse on minors inside the organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses”. The parliamentary group was presided by André Frédéric, a Socialist MP who is the chairman of a Belgian anticult group named AVISO affiliated to FECRIS. Noteworthy is that the CIAOSN recommends this association on its website.

On 12 March 2019, *La Libre Belgique* published a press release of Belga titled “Pedophilia among Jehovah’s Witnesses examined by the House of Representatives”¹⁰. It stressed that according to the CIAOSN report, Jehovah’s Witnesses are against pedophilia but “the situation is less clear on the ground”.

On 27 March 2019, VRT1, a well-known Flemish Television released a 35-minute investigation program titled “The secret of Jehovah”¹¹ which dealt with the internal management of sexual issues by the organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Flanders and abroad: masturbation, homosexuality, incest, sexual abuse in family and in the community. For their investigation, the journalists talked with alleged victims, former elders and former members of religious discipline commissions, wrongfully called “internal judicial commissions” or extra-judicial bodies in the media. One of them was Patrick

⁹ <https://www.ciaosn.be/actu.htm>

¹⁰ La Chambre se penche sur la pédophilie au sein des témoins de Jéhovah, *La Libre Belgique*, 12 March 2019, <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/politique-belge/la-chambre-se-penche-sur-la-pedophilie-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehovah-5c87cd467b50a60724b42065>.

¹¹ VRT Eén, Pano, Het Geheim van Jehova (The Secret of Jehovah), YouTube, 3 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPE3akJgkGA>.

Haeck, one of the co-founders of the anti-cult association *Reclaimed Voices/Belgium*.

On the next day, the VRT published an article on its website titled “Jehovah's Witnesses' scandal: state intelligence to home in on sects” in which the then Belgian Minister of Justice, Koen Geens (Flemish Christian democrat) was reported to have said to VRT 1 that he wanted “Jehovah’s Witnesses wishing to leave the organisation to receive help from the cults’ watchdog” (CIAOSN). And he added "I will also ask the secret services to take a closer look at the activity of cults."

On 1 April, RTL, a major francophone TV channel, covered the issue in its evening TV news¹² after having posted two long articles on its website¹³.

In the aftermath of the VRT documentary, a series of articles was published in *Fædrelandsvennen*, a major Norwegian newspaper,¹⁴ and by the website of *Avoid Jehovah's Witnesses*¹⁵, run by a former Jehovah’s Witness in Ireland.

The inquiry of the Flemish TV channel is now a key element used by the anti-cultists in Belgium and abroad.

Act III (2019): The police search of the Belgian Jehovah’s Witnesses’ headquarters

On 25 April 2019, the Federal Judicial Authorities searched the Belgian headquarters of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Kraainem, on the outskirts of Brussels¹⁶.

A spokesperson for the Jehovah’s Witnesses then said to Brussels Times: “We attach a great deal of importance to the welfare of children, and invariably report

¹² Pédophilie au sein des Témoins de Jehova: des victimes brisent le silence et racontent leur calvaire (video), RTL Info, 1 April 2019, <https://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/societe/viols-et-agressions-sexuelles-sur-mineurs-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehova-des-victimes-racontent-leur-calvaire-video--1112795.aspx>.

¹³ Les cas de pédophilie cachés au sein des Témoins de Jehova pour ne pas salir leur communauté, RTL Info, 1 April 2019, <https://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/faits-divers/les-cas-de-pedophilie-caches-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehovah-pour-ne-pas-salir-leur-communaute-1112611.aspx>.

Les actes pédophiles au sein des Témoins de Jehova sont dénoncés depuis plus de 30 ans. Pourquoi rien ne semble changer? (video), RTL Info, 1 April 2019, <https://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/societe/les-actes-pedophiles-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehova-sont-denonces-depuis-plus-de-30-ans-pourquoi-rien-ne-semble-changer-video--1112804.aspx>.

¹⁴ *Fædrelandsvennen*, 2019, <https://www.fvn.no/nyheter/norgeogverden/i/GGOg4l/-Mannen-hadde-innrommet-overgrep-mot-ti-barn-Likevel-fikk-jeg-beskjed-om-a-ikke-ga-til-politiet-med-saken>.

¹⁵ The man had admitted abusing ten children. Still, I was told not to go to the police with the case, 2019, <https://avoidjw.org/en/news/man-admitted-abusing-10-children/>.

¹⁶ Jehovah’s Witnesses headquarters searched, VRT News, 30 April 2019, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2019/04/30/jehovahs-witnesses-headquarters-searched/>.

any allegations to the authorities. There is no place within our community for anyone who might carry out such practices.”

The Federal Public Prosecutor's Office then failed to communicate about what exactly they were looking for. Two years later, they have still not disclosed any information about the progress or lack of progress on the case and this is not meaningless.

Act IV (2020): A criminal case against Jehovah’s Witnesses

In the meantime, a former Jehovah’s Witness opened up another front on his personal war against Jehovah’s Witnesses. On 1 April 2015, Patrick Haeck, who had voluntarily left the movement in 2011, filed a criminal complaint against the Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses (CCJW) on the alleged ground of discrimination based on religious beliefs and incitement to hatred.

On 15 September 2020, the criminal court of Ghent started to examine his complaint¹⁷ which mainly focused on the alleged shunning (ostracization) practice in cases of disfellowshipping (exclusion) and disassociation (voluntary resignation).

The trial opened on 16 February 2021. In the meantime, the plaintiff had managed to have his complaint supported by over a dozen more former Jehovah’s Witnesses.

On 16 March, the First Instance Court of Ghent condemned the Christian Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses (CCJW) to a fine of 12,000 EUR on the ground that their teachings about the social distancing of their members from excluded members and other ex-members amount to discrimination and incitement to hatred.

The court decision, which will be appealed, was heavily criticized by Dr Massimo Introvigne in a series of four articles published in Bitter Winter¹⁸.

¹⁷ Jehovah’s Witnesses to face trial on discrimination and incitement to hate, The Bulletin, 16 September 2015, <https://www.thebulletin.be/jehovahs-witnesses-face-trial-discrimination-and-incitement-hate>

¹⁸ See <https://bitterwinter.org>

The anti-Jehovah's Witnesses campaign: Who is who and what?

Several organizations and figures were involved in the campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses and put in the limelight of the media.

The CIAOSN

This state institution officially named "Information and Advisory Centre on Harmful Sectarian Organizations" (CIAOSN)¹⁹ was created in 1998 after the work of a controversial parliamentary inquiry commission about cults and the publication of its report in 1997 to which a list of 189 allegedly suspicious religious and spiritual movements was attached. This parliamentary initiative was heavily criticized by scholars in religious studies in Belgium and abroad but also at the OSCE and the UN as being politically and ideologically motivated.

During its 20 years or so of existence, the appointments of the CIAOSN boards of directors have reflected the initial political and ideological instrumentalization of the cult issue. Its policies have been criticized for their proximity with the anti-cult ideology, especially the *European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism*, better known under its acronym FECRIS, founded in Paris in June 1994.

After two decades of international criticisms, the composition of the new board of directors put in place in July 2020 now shows a very different face from former appointees but the original objective remains the fight against so-called "harmful sectarian organizations," a questionable concept and terminology. The new board comprises of four French-speaking and four Dutch-speaking members: magistrates, lawyers, jurists, police and intelligence services officers, a Christian Democrat politician and a Catholic scholar in religious studies:

- Guy Rapaille, the current president was the director of the "Comité R" in charge of the oversight of the Belgian intelligence services from 2006 to 2018;

¹⁹ The CIAOSN (Centre d'Information et d'Avis sur les Organisations Sectaires Nuisibles) has been a controversial state institution created in 1998 after the controversial parliamentary report on harmful cults in 1997. Both parliamentary initiatives were heavily criticized by scholars in religious studies but also at the OSCE and the UN as being politically and ideologically motivated. Although the new board appointed in July 2020 mainly comprises of magistrates and lawyers (<https://www.ciaosn.be/cr20200917.htm>), CIAOSN's website goes on recommending notorious controversial anti-cult organizations such as FECRIS (<https://www.ciaosn.be/liens.htm>) which has been heavily criticized in a recent report of the bi-partisan US Commission for International Religious Freedom (<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Anti-Cult%20Update%20-%20Religious%20Regulation%20in%20Russia.pdf>)

- Thierry Werts, former francophone spokesman of the Federal Prosecutor's Office from 2015 to 2017 before being appointed as advisor at the Court of Appeal of Brussels;
- Eric Robert, president of the peace judges and the police courts judges of Namur district;
- Dany Lesciauskas, retired Federal Police officer;
- Luc Willems, a lawyer, co-rapporteur of the 1997 Belgian report on cults as an elected Flemish Christian Democrat member of the House of Representatives, retired from Belgian politics;
- Frank Judo, a Flemish Christian Democrat politician, historian, jurist and philosopher;
- Bert Broeckaert, a specialist in ethics and comparative religion teaching at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven;
- Yvette De Weyer, a Flemish jurist at 'Bruxelles Formation'.

The list of substitute members also comprises of eight members, including five members of previous boards. One of them, Mireille Stallmaster-Degen, is worth mentioning as she is the FECRIS secretary general. It is also worth stressing that Eric Brasseur, retired director of the CIAOSN, is on the list of substitute members.

The anti-cult ideology continues to permeate the activities of the CIAOSN as it is also evidenced by a study of its website: support for the activities of FECRIS and two of its member associations in France. Moreover, Jehovah's Witnesses are a primary target as media articles are reproduced on its website without any previous research on their truthfulness and academic studies are largely ignored.

The publicity in favor of four Belgian anti-cult organizations also raises some concerns. One of them, AVISO (Aid to Victims of Cults), was created in 2012 and is FECRIS member association in Belgium. The composition of its nine-member board speaks for itself. A few examples:

- André Frédéric, AVISO president, member of FECRIS board since 2018, Socialist senator and promoter of the 2012 Law on the abuse of weakness specifically targeting cults;
- Eric Brasseur, former CIAOSN director;
- Mireille Degen, FECRIS secretary general, former member and currently substitute member of the CIAOSN board;
- Dany Lesciauskas, member of the CIAOSN board;
- Roland Planchar, a well-known journalist at La Libre Belgique, a major newspaper of Catholic orientation, who has regularly supported CIAOSN activities in his articles.

Obviously, the anti-cult ideology of the CIAOSN continues to be strongly influenced by FECRIS ideology despite the warnings of the *US Commission on International Freedom* (USCIRF)²⁰.

In its report “The Anti-cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union” published in 2020, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Government:

Publicly censure Alexander Dvorkin, FECRIS vice-president, for his ongoing disinformation campaign against religious minorities;

Counter propaganda against new religious movements by the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS) at the annual OSCE Human Dimension Conference with information about the ongoing involvement of individuals and entities within the anti-cult movement in the suppression of religious freedom.

Belgium should seriously take these recommendations into consideration and implement social distancing from FECRIS and its affiliates.

Reclaimed Voices in the Netherlands

In its evening TV news report on 20 December 2018, the RTBF referred to the Dutch association *Reclaimed Voices*²¹, created by former Jehovah’s Witnesses, which had alerted the Dutch authorities after collecting about 280 alleged testimonies of sexual abuse ‘among’ Jehovah’s Witnesses over a period of 40 years.

The CIAOSN also mentioned *Reclaimed Voices* as a source of information about three alleged cases in Belgium, which the group has officially denied and notified to the CIAOSN, as previously mentioned.

Reclaimed Voices was created in December 2017 and claimed that it gathered all those testimonies in four months’ time. This announcement was largely covered by the Dutch media, De Volkskrant, NRC, Trouw, RTV Noord, RTL Nieuws, NOS, and others²² in such a way that it became an anti-Jehovah’s Witnesses

²⁰ The Anti-cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union, USCIRF, July 2020, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publication/anti-cult-movement-and-religious-regulation-russia-and-former-soviet-union>

²¹ *Reclaimed Voices* was only dealing with the management of alleged sexual abuse by the organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses, <https://reclaimedvoices.org>

²² See <https://reclaimedvoices.org/category/nieuws/mediaberichten/>

campaign by the media, but *Reclaimed Voices* asserts it is neither their objective nor their intention²³.

The founding members of the Dutch association are three former Jehovah's Witnesses: Raymond Hintjes, Aswin Suierveld and Frank Huiting.

Raymond Hintjes (Brunssum, 1977) was educated as a Jehovah's Witness and was very active in the community. He is not a victim of sexual abuse. When he was a teenager, he discovered that he was homosexual. At the age of 28, he broke off from the community and was excommunicated.²⁴ Afterwards, he studied religious sciences at the Radboud University in Nijmegen and graduated as a bachelor. Now he is teaching ethics in a school in Roermond.

Aswin Suierveld presents herself as non-conformist, defender of nature, writer and eco-philosopher. She studied social psychology in Wesleyan University in Connecticut (USA) and theology at the Theology à Noordelijke Hogeschool Leeuwarden (Netherlands).

Frank Huiting is an account manager. For years, he said in the media that he was a victim of sexual abuse by another teenager in the premises of a Jehovah's Witnesses community in the 1990s.

On their website, there are many press articles and a report titled "Sexual Abuse Among Jehovah's Witnesses, Background and Recommendations" (2018)²⁵, drafted by Raymond Hintjes and Aswin Suierveld who criticize the internal procedures of the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses when it is confronted to alleged sexual abuse committed in family or in an institutional context.

However, there is no other information about the 280 collected testimonies of alleged abuse in the last 40 years. Data about analytical statistics, the type of abuse, the credibility of the testimonies, the dating and the context of the alleged facts are not available.

The Dutch authorities did not remain deaf to the accusations of *Reclaimed Voices* and commissioned scholars from the University of Utrecht to write a report.

²³ Source: Private correspondence "Ik wil graag vermelden dat Stichting Reclaimed Voices *geen* strijd wil voeren tegen de organisatie van Jehovah's Getuigen. Reclaimed Voices wil graag opkomen voor de veiligheid van kinderen ook als deze opgroeien binnen een religieuze gemeenschap" (I want to mention that Reclaimed Voices does not want to fight against the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses. Reclaimed Voices wants to defend the safety of children, including if they grow inside a religious organization).

²⁴ See <https://reportersonline.nl/author/mannetje1977/> and <https://www.voxweb.nl/nieuws/voormalig-jehovahs-getuige-voert-strijd-tegen-misbruik>

²⁵ Seksueel Misbruik bij Jehovah's Getuigen, Achtergrond en Aanbevelingen, Raymond Hintjes en Aswin Suierveld, January 2018, <https://reclaimedvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Seksueel-misbruik-bij-Jehovahs-Getuigen-Achtergronden-en-Aanbevelingen.pdf>

The Dutch Report under scrutiny of foreign scholars

The CIAOSN Report largely referred to the Dutch Report titled “Sexual Abuse and Willingness to Report Within the Community of Jehovah’s Witnesses”²⁶ to justify its call for a parliamentary inquiry commission in Belgium.

In 2019, the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Justice and Safety commissioned Kees van den Bos, Marie-Jeanne Schiffelers, Michèlle Bal, Hilke Grootelaar, Isa Bertram and Amarins Jansma and Stans de Haas, to investigate the accusations of alleged sexual abuse among JW’s and to draft a report.

Among perspicacious readers of the Dutch Report were Holly Folk, Massimo Introvigne and Gordon Melton, three well-known scholars, who published a co-signed well documented expert opinion of 21 pages distinguishing facts from myths. Their Expert Opinion was published on the official website of the Authorities of the Kingdom of The Netherlands.²⁷

The foreign scholars hailed that the Dutch Report recognized its objective was not to establish the truth about the self-reported stories of sexual abuse they encountered. But in their analysis of the methodology, they stressed a number of questionable points, such as the qualification of “closed religious community” attributed to Jehovah’s Witnesses and the interpretation of the statistics about the alleged complaints.

In the Dutch Report, the researchers claimed to have examined 751 complaints. This number was quickly converted by the media into the idea that there were more than 700 Jehovah’s Witness perpetrators of sexual abuse in the Netherlands. Such a conclusion could not be drawn from their work.

The investigators in the Netherlands posted an online internet questionnaire, and also had an email address box where participants could send responses. The study was therefore not so much a scientific survey as an invitation for people to post accusations and complaints. Moreover, the Dutch researchers accepted all responses, complete or incomplete, and regardless of their credibility as there was no mechanism to check it. The 751 alleged complaints are therefore just

²⁶ Seksueel misbruik en aangiftebereidheid binnen de gemeenschap van Jehova’s getuigen, 188 pages and annexes, 2020 Boomjuridisch, <https://boeken.rechtsgebieden.boomportaal.nl/publicaties/9789462907782#5>

²⁷ Expert Opinion, Holly Folk, Massimo Introvigne and Gordon Melton, 21 pages, 2020, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/rapporten/2020/01/23/tk-bijlage-1-expert-opinion/tk-bijlage-1-expert-opinion.pdf>

anonymous responses to a questionnaire online and an email address, not more than that.

The foreign scholars also noted that the Jehovah's Witnesses do not sponsor or provide any activities that separate children from their parents or otherwise take custody of children. They do not sponsor or organize Sunday Schools, catechism education, kindergartens, or other activities where children are separated from their parents. In consequence, there is a much lower risk of abuse, which is confirmed by the data of the Dutch Report.

Abuse can of course occur at home, and several cases mentioned in the Dutch Report are in fact incests, not abuse in an institutional setting. However, there is no evidence in the Report that incest is more prevalent among Jehovah's Witnesses than in Dutch society at large.

The Dutch Report also admitted that it was impossible to give a precise estimate of the prevalence of sexual abuse about Jehovah's Witnesses in the Netherlands. On that basis, the foreign scholars disagreed with several recommendations of the Report as they would lead to the singling out, ostracization and discrimination of Jehovah's Witnesses but they agreed to the obligation to report.

CheCoPa, an association of former Jehovah's Witnesses

The association CheCoPa was not mentioned in the CIAOSN report but the married couple of Jehovah's Witnesses who created it was interviewed by the RTBF right at the beginning of the anti-Jehovah's Witnesses campaign and by other francophone media outlets.

CheCoPa is a non-profit association registered in 2015.²⁸ Its objective is to promote and coach personal development. It is a small psychological assistance group created on the initiative of two former Jehovah's Witnesses, Mr and Mrs

²⁸ CheCoPa, 232A Chaussée de la Hulpe, 1170 Watermael-Boitsfort (Brussels). Website:

<https://www.checopa.be>, checopa.assoc@gmail.com.

The non-profit association (asbl) was registered in Belgium on 23 September 2015 (See

<https://www.companyweb.be/company/638804980/free-pub/13544957>). The founding members were:

Hoebeek Frédéric, Bruxelles I, 27.03.1962, Avenue Georges Benoit, 16, 1170 Watermael-Boitsfort;

Hoebeek Patrick, Bruxelles I, 31.05.1963, Rue du Tienne 19a, 1495 Tilly-Villers-la-ville;

Kalisa Umuhuzi Odry, Ottignies, 18.10.1987, Rue des Fabriques 47 1000 Bruxelles;

Rouge Céline, Grenoble, 11.09.1979, Avenue Georges Benoit, 16, 1170 Watermael-Boitsfort;

Tikhonov Sigris Natalia, Genève, 29.11.1974, Avenue Charles Michiels 178/2 1170 Watermael-Boitsfort.

Natalia Tikhonov Sigris holds a PhD in History and civilization from the University of Geneva.

Since 2015, a number of founding members have resigned and others have adhered to the association. See

<https://www.bonnescauses.be/media/27632/assemblée-extraordinaire-checopa-2017.pdf>.

As of 2020, the board of directors was comprised of four members, Mr and Mrs Hoebeek-Rouge, and two newcomers: a psychotherapist and a staff of the board of the CPAS (Public Centre of Social Assistance) of the city Mont-St-Guibert, in Brabant.

Hoebeeck-Rouge. It is run by volunteers without any recognized expertise in religious and psychological matters. Prevention of mental manipulation and indoctrination in a cult, in a family or in a professional setting is also among their objectives. In this regard, their definition of mental manipulation explicitly refers to the UNADFI, the well-known French anti-cult organization affiliated to FECRIS.

In an interview with the free newspaper METRO on 4 December 2017, Céline Rouge was introducing herself as “a life coach and a psychotherapist”²⁹ who helps individuals in their quest for spiritual, relational and professional autonomy. The objective of the association, she said, is mainly to help persons in need of getting out of their mental subjection, whether it is related to a cult (*secte*), a dominating personality in the family or in a professional context.

As to Frédéric Hoebeeck, he is presenting himself as a photography artist and a former specialized educator in 1986-1989. Hoebeeck, who lived in public assistance institutions from his birth on to his majority (in 1963-1984), wrote a 384-page book³⁰ about his sad life in those institutions for children in need, his spiritual quest and his life as a Jehovah’s Witness during 21 years before being expelled from the organization for dissenting theological opinions. A few months later, his wife left the movement³¹ and created CheCoPa with him.

In his book, Hoebeeck mentions two cases of intra-family sexual abuses that were reported to the police and the perpetrators were sentenced to a prison term. Other intra-family cases were only suspicions but there are no cases of sexual abuse of children by elders in the congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses that he belonged to.³²

When Frédéric Hoebeeck and his wife left the movement in 2012, they were working in supermarkets.

During the interview of the couple Hoebeeck-Rouge with the RTBF, they testified that after watching a documentary accusing Jehovah’s Witnesses of covering up cases of sexual abuse they left the movement to allegedly protect their three children. They had then lodged a complaint with the police although it was clear from the interview that their children had not been victims of sexual abuse attempts by Jehovah’s Witnesses.

²⁹ Bonnes Causes: Céline Rouge de l’asbl CheCoPa, Metro, 4 December 2017,

<https://fr.metrotime.be/2017/12/04/start/travailler-bonne-cause-celine-rouge-de-lasbl-checopa/>

³⁰ Cette blessure, Souvenirs d’un enfant de l’Assistance Publique (That wound, Souvenirs of a Public Assistance child)Frédéric Hoebeeck, Ed. CheCoPa, March 2019.

³¹ See video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6zCvSIO6aY>

³² See page 329 of the book “Cette blessure, Souvenirs d’un enfant de l’Assistance Publique”

Reclaimed Voices/ Belgium

Reclaimed Voices/ Belgium was registered as a non-profit association in 2019. Its objective was initially to denounce sexual abuse among the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium and to have its policies changed in this regard. Its seat is in Stekene, in the region of Ghent (East Flanders).³³ There are four members of the board of directors.

Pascal Mertens, a former un-baptized Jehovah's Witness, is the president but the most vocal member of the board in the media in Belgium and abroad is Patrick Haeck, who was a member of the movement for 35 years, including as an elder for 19 years.

In an interview with *La Libre Belgique*³⁴ he said to have collected about 90 complaints in the first six months of the creation of *Reclaimed Voices*. In an article of *The Brussels Times*, Patrick Haeck declared that "for most victims, it has been 10 or 15 years since the abuses took place."³⁵

On 12 January 2021, the association was renamed "Back to BASE", an acronym for Blood, Abuse, Shunning and Education, to reflect the broadening of its scope: blood transfusion, sexual abuse, shunning and information.³⁶ Unofficially, it can be assumed that this name change is the consequence of the decision of *Reclaimed Voices* in The Netherlands to put an end to their collaboration with Patrick Haeck's group and their formal demand to stop using the same name in Belgium.

The Belgian organization is now involved in a global fight against Jehovah's Witnesses as Patrick Haeck is prosecuting the Belgian association of Jehovah's Witnesses in a criminal court on the alleged ground of discrimination and incitement to hatred, as it was said before.

³³ See official registration act at http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/tsv_pdf/2019/04/08/19048246.pdf

³⁴ Une association recense près de cent abus sexuels au sein des témoins de Jéhovah en Belgique, Belga/ La Libre Belgique, 9 August 2019, <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/societe/une-association-recense-pres-de-cent-abus-sexuels-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehovah-en-belgique-5d4cff0fd8ad5859353fb096>

³⁵ Jehovah's Witnesses: 90 victims of sexual abuse come forward, The Brussels Times, 9 August 2019, <https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/belgium-all-news/63334/jehovahs-witnesses-90-victims-of-sexual-abuse-come-forward/>

³⁶ See official registration act at http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/tsv_pdf/2021/01/14/21303201.pdf. Noteworthy is that *Reclaimed Voices* in the Netherlands wrote in a private correspondence to Human Rights Without Frontiers that it "had found necessary not to continue their work" with Reclaimed Voices/ Belgium and "asked them not to use the name *Reclaimed Voices* any more." Most probably because the Belgian organization attacks the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses on quite a number of issues in the media and through the judicial system.

Conclusions

Sexual abuse on minors is a horrible plague and suspicions of such cases must be reported in due time to the relevant civil authorities for the protection of the minors. The police and secular courts are indeed better equipped to investigate abuse claims than religious and other communities and to identify the facts.

Reporting to the police by outsiders is still open to debate as denunciations can be groundless or ill-intentioned or be misused for personal settlements of scores. In such matters, the law enforcement forces must have the final say to establish the truth.

Sexual abuse exists in all realms of society, in families as well as in institutions: religious communities, schools, sports centers, summer camps, clubs, and so on.

In the last few years, the Roman Catholic Church has been in the eye of the cyclone on this issue. Hundreds of clergymen around the world, even at the highest level, have been convicted and sentenced by courts. The priests' celibacy has been pointed at as the main source of sexual abuse but this fundamental characteristic of the Catholic theology remains a non-debatable issue. Moreover, the Church has been accused of covering up such criminal behaviors and a number of prelates have recognized it.

Sexual abuse on minors has not only happened in a religious institutional setting, as the #metoo movement has also revealed such cases in various sports, such as athletics and swimming.

The facts are usually denounced years and decades later when victims are adults. Many cases which have emerged in the last few years date back to the last century where that sort of phenomenon was massively and wrongfully disregarded and silenced by families, society and leaders in charge of institutions. In those times, the police and the judiciary were also failing to take domestic violence into consideration.

The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is now at the heart of media campaigns in several countries targeting their alleged mishandling of sexual abuse cases the dating of which is not clearly identified but most probably go back to the last decades of the 20th century.

We now live in a context where the general public is very much concerned (and rightly so) about sexual abuse, and may tend to believe all media reports, whether they concern proved facts or mere hypotheses and rumors.

At this stage, despite the media coverage of individual testimonies targeting the Jehovah's Witnesses' organization, there is no study or data available about the current situation or proving that sexual abuse is more prevalent among them than in other religious communities or other segments of society.

Pointing at the responsibility of religious leaders for covering up alleged cases of sexual abuse in the framework of their religious institutions is certainly an issue that only the police and the judiciary can clarify. Up to now, no judicial case is known among Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium.

The recent focus on Jehovah's Witnesses about this issue cannot be extracted out of a broader context. Since the Jehovah's Witnesses appeared in Belgium in the first years of the 20th century, they have first been victims of hostility by a society dominated by the Catholic Church and later on by the state because of their conscientious objection to military service. Since then, this hostility has taken new faces with the secularization of society, the actions of former members and the emergence of anti-cult movements.

Because of their minority status and peculiar lifestyle, Jehovah's Witnesses are more exposed than others to slander and stereotyping. The new campaign against them in the media is just a new face and a new phase of a long-standing hostility.

Public opinion is also unfavorably predisposed against groups that the media or vocal organized opponents label as "cults", and may easily believe allegations of sexual abuse against them, regardless of the credibility of the accusations but our compass must always be the decision of the judiciary.

Stereotyping, demonizing, scapegoating and discriminating against religious or other groups are not acceptable in our democratic societies but justice must always prevail in courts, not in the social media or the media.