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## **A bitter winter for MIVILUDES**

***The deep crisis of the French governmental anti-cult mission has been revealed by the resignation of its chief, Hanène Romdhane.***

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (26.12.22) - <https://bit.ly/3Z0OhUK> - Earlier this month, French media reported that the chief of the MIVILUDES, Hanène Romdhane, a judge, resigned from his position—or perhaps was compelled to do so by the president of the mission, Christian Gravel. The MIVILUDES is the French Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances (dérives sectaires: note that the French "secte" and its derivative words should be translated into English as "cult" and not as "sect"), a unique French anti-cult agency that is part of the government itself.

No French media outlet has really explained why Romdhane had to leave, but Bitter Winter collected some comments from well-informed sources, who spoke under condition of anonymity. Romdhane is a magistrate, and was reportedly dispatched by the Ministry

of Justice to the MIVILUDES to give to the mission a clearer legal framework, avoiding at the same time potential legal liabilities. If this was so, her work has not been successful.

The legal status of the MIVILUDES' activities remains unclear, and its reports [continue to include fake news](#) that amounts to slander and exposes the mission to lawsuits for defamation. In its most recent report, the MIVILUDES has republished false information about the Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium for which its Belgian counterpart CIAOSN has been found guilty of defamation [by a decision of June 16, 2022](#) of the Court of Brussels. MIVILUDES and CIAOSN meet every month to exchange information.

Not only the MIVILUDES creates legal liabilities for the government, it also sends other state agencies and security services into merry chases based on unreliable information. The MIVILUDES had to admit that [its figures about "cults" in France](#) are speculative and not based on recent data, and that its work and statistics [are derived from "saisines,"](#) which are not "reports" on specific wrongdoings but also include simple comments and questions by other branches of the French administration and private citizens.

Another reason of dissatisfaction, perhaps shared by Romdhane and [mentioned by some French media](#), is that politicians have consistently used the MIVILUDES as a vehicle for self-promotion. Before the last French political elections, it was the French Minister Delegate for Citizenship at the Ministry of Interior, [Marlène Schiappa](#). Today, it is Secretary of State for Citizenship Sonia Backès, who tells a strange story about being a "survivor" of Scientology, which has been challenged by her own brother in an [interview he gave to Bitter Winter](#).

Understandably, the government is even less happy when the MIVILUDES is used for political purposes by politicians of the opposition such as Georges Fenech, a rabid anti-cultist who was the mission's president until 2013 and came back as a member of its Orientation Council in 2021.

Speaking of Bitter Winter, according to our sources a main reason of dissatisfaction with the MIVILUDES is its relationship with private anti-cult organizations such as the French UNADFI and the European federation FECRIS, whose wrongdoings we expose systematically. After Romdhane left, the MIVILUDES's [President Gravel claimed](#) that the mission's main success has been to obtain one million euros from the government and distribute it to the private associations. However, that MIVILUDES functions as an ATM for the associations is not without challenges. The NGO CAP-LC (CAP Freedom of Conscience) [reported the UNADFI](#) to the French National Court of Audit (Cour des comptes) to be investigated on how it spends its money.

FECRIS is in even deeper trouble for its relationship with Russian organizations and individuals—such as Alexander Dvorkin, who sits in its board of directors, Alexander Novopashin, and Roman Silantsev, who [has been invited](#) by a FECRIS affiliate to a conference in France as late as July 2022—, who are fanatical supporters of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. FECRIS has published a short text condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has ["hidden" the Russian affiliates](#) from its list of members, and finally eliminated the list from its website altogether, claiming it is "under revision."

To no avail, as [Novopashin himself](#) revealed on December 2 that the Russian organizations, Dvorkin, and himself had never been expelled from the FECRIS and are

still its representatives in Russia. Novopashin also wrote to Bitter Winter calling our attention on his statement.

After 82 Ukrainian scholars [wrote to President Macron](#) calling for an end to the French support of FECRIS, whose Russian affiliates effectively help the invasion of Ukraine by portraying it as a country dominated by "cults," MIVILUDES's tight relationship with FECRIS became an even more embarrassing topic.

It is indeed a "bitter winter" for the MIVILUDES, and the French agency should blame only itself for it. Years of slander of religious minorities based on press clippings and dubious information supplied by anti-cultists created an international image of bigotry that is now impossible to overcome.

*Photo: MIVILUDES president Christian Gravel peddling the mission's dubious statistics on television. Screenshot.*

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## **French court fines restaurant owner for banning Muslim woman**

Daily Sabah (30.11.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3h4w6wc> - A French court fined a restaurant owner in southwest France for prohibiting the entry of a Muslim woman for wearing the Islamic headscarf (also known as the hijab).

The court in the city of Bayonne in the Basque region ruled that the 64-year-old female restaurant owner was guilty of discrimination based on religion for asking the customer to remove her headscarf.

The incident took place on [Mother's Day in July, when the Muslim woman went to the restaurant](#) to have dinner with her son.

Footage obtained during the incident shows the mother and son arriving at the restaurant door, and the woman who owns the business said she will not let the two customers into the restaurant because her mother is wearing a "headscarf from the Dark Ages."

The restaurant owner, who is believed to be a Christian because she was wearing a religious symbol – a cross around her neck – claimed that "the headscarf is a tool to subdue women" to her Muslim client, whom she then refused to let in.

The customer, who stated that he was shocked by the words directed at him, went to the police station and filed a complaint on the grounds that they were discriminated against.

With the implementation of laws targeting Muslims in France, Islamophobic and discriminatory attacks against headscarved women, Muslims and Islamic establishments and places of worship have increased, which appear to have emboldened anti-Muslim racist attacks.

Recently, the decision of the municipality of Grenoble to allow veiled swimwear on public beaches and swimming pools in the country was suspended by a court upon the instructions of Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin.

Photo: Judge hammer on a French flag background in this undated file photo. (Shutterstock File Photo)

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## **Is State Secretary Sonia Backès a “Scientology survivor”? Her brother tells a different story**

***She oversees the anti-cult mission MIVILUDES and tells a dramatic tale about her past. But her brother raises doubts about it.***

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (28.11.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3ihM9aa> - Sonia Backès is the new French State Secretary for Citizenship, and she has in her portfolio the [MIVILUDES](#), the controversial Inter-Ministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances (“dérives sectaires”: note that the French “secte” and its derivative words should be translated into English as “cult” and not as “sect”). She has also a dramatic story to tell, one French media love to report. She insists she is a “cult” survivor, who managed to escape at age 13 from what for the MIVILUDES is the quintessential “cult,” the Church of Scientology.

While we at Bitter Winter make no mystery of our criticism of the MIVILUDES and of the French governments’ attitude to “cults” (sectes)—which we believe puts freedom of religion or belief at serious risk—we also respect individual stories and feelings, including those of both Secretary Backès and her relatives who are still parishioners of Scientology. We also believe that the public deserves to hear both sides of controversial stories. Backès’ version “is easily available on several French media, including “[Le Figaro](#),” the French “[Huffington Post](#),” and “[France Info](#),” where it is easy to hear her story from her own voice.

Bitter Winter presents an alternative narrative, and gives voice to Backès’ brother, a Scientologist. He is understandably angry about his sister’s criticism of their mother, who died last July. Our readers may compare the two versions of the story, and decide for themselves.

*BW: Your sister Sonia Backès is now the State Secretary for Citizenship in France, under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and she has in her portfolio the MIVILUDES, the controversial “anti-cult” agency of the French government. She recently spoke publicly about having been raised by her mother, who was a Scientologist, and said that when she was 13, she escaped and went back to live with her father in New Caledonia, with the purpose of fleeing Scientology. How did you react?*

"Actually, I was very upset. My mother died at the end of July, and just after that my sister gave an interview to the French newspaper 'Le Figaro,' where she told a story about my mother, and her pretended childhood in Scientology that I know is not true. The truth is that she never 'escaped Scientology' as she pretended in 'Le Figaro' and elsewhere. When she was 14, Sonia and I were living in Paris with our mother, and Sonia was nostalgic of her life in New Caledonia where she was born and had been raised in her early age. It was my mother, after discussing with her, who paid a flight ticket for my sister to go back to Noumea and live with her father.

My mother was indeed a Scientologist, and we have been raised by Scientologist parents who told us about their faith, as it happens in any religion. Then, like in any religion, some children will keep practicing and others will drift away from their church or from practicing. It happens to the Catholics, it happens to the Protestants, it happens to Muslims, to Jews, nothing weird here. Nonetheless, Sonia and our mother kept a very strong relationship for their whole life.

Of course, sometimes there could have been conflicts, as it often happens between parents and children, between mothers and daughters, but that should not become a reason for smearing the memory of your dead mother just after she passed away. My mother was a very brilliant woman, who always did everything she could to help and take care of her children. She deserves better. Sonia knows it, but it looks like her political career became somewhat more important than the truth."

*BW: It seems gross that a politician may attack her own mother for the sake of her career. Why should your sister invent a story that is not true?*

"Well, a few days before she died, my mother showed and gave me a text message that Sonia had just sent to her. In the text message, Sonia was explaining that she was going to have MIVILUDES in her portfolio as a State Secretary, and that she was afraid that Mediapart (a French online newspaper specialized in investigating politicians and potential scandals) would discover that our mother was a Scientologist. As you know, MIVILUDES has always promoted the discrimination of Scientologists. Then, Sonia added that for this reason, she would have to say that she had left the family because of Scientology, to avoid a scandal.

My mother answered that, instead of inventing stories, she should tell the truth, which is that she always respected the religion of her family and was in fact respecting the freedom of religion of anyone, and that would have been it. The truth is that she never attacked the chosen religion of her mother, stepfather, and brother until she got a government position in relation with the MIVILUDES, where it is expected that she is a bigot.

Can you believe that she was creating a story that she had to leave her own mother because of Scientology, and in the next sentence of her text message, she was saying that they should see each other when they would have time? It seems to me that MIVILUDES insists that those associated with it attack new religions, and force them to separate from their family members who belong to a new religious movement. Isn't this precisely the "cultic behavior" that they pretend to combat?

My mother was upset, and she would have liked to take it up in person with Sonia. But then she was admitted to the hospital, and died before being able to talk to Sonia further about it. I would have spoken to Sonia about it, but when my mother died Sonia was in

New Caledonia, and after I went back to the US, I thought I would have time to speak with Sonia when I would have come back to Paris. But she went on spreading lies to several medias before I came back.

Nevertheless, I came to Paris recently, and asked Sonia if we could meet and have a coffee together. Indeed, since our mother passed away, we never had the opportunity to chat in person. She invented a fake professional obligation not to meet."

*BW: How do you remember your sister's relations with Scientology?*

"The truth is what my mother said. My sister never told me anything negative about Scientology. She knew that her family was doing well, that it was a Scientologist family, and she was of course OK with that. She was regularly having holidays with us. In fact, we had a wonderful time in Paris all together in April, Sonia, me, my mother and my father (Sonia's stepfather). We are all Scientologists.

Then, when she had been appointed as a State Secretary in July, she invited my mother and my father Place Beauvau, at the Ministry of the Interior, to show them her new office. If she really had a problem with our religion as she pretends now, she would not have done it. The truth is that my mother has always taken care of her family, including Sonia. And Sonia knows that she was part of the family, that we were respecting and loving her, and before she became what she recently became, before she was forced by her commitment to MIVILUDES to lie and attack her own mother, she was respecting us and our beliefs, naturally."

*BW: Both Sonia and you were raised by Scientologist parents in your early age. Was your experience different from what Sonia told the media?*

"Definitely. I have been raised by parents who were Scientologists, and in fact, I decided quite young to study Scientology by my own. In fact my parents, including my mother, never forced me to do anything. I love Scientology and, to the opposite of what is often said in some medias, I believe it gives more freedom, more ability to take your own decisions and more self-determination than anything else that I know of.

Every Scientologist I know would confirm it, and it's a religion based on your own observation, your own ability to understand for yourself what is life, and how to be a better person. Today, I live in the US for professional reasons, I have a flourishing career and honestly, Scientology has been helpful for my whole life with no downside."

*BW: Well, definitely this is not Sonia's discourse on Scientology now. You say it is proving difficult for you to meet her. But, if you would be able to meet, what exactly would you like to tell her?*

"I would tell her that I understand that she could have a vision different than mine, that she could also have her own personal story with our mother, and that she has also to take a public position and deal with difficult image situations, but that none of these should be a sufficient reason to lie, and to choose what she thinks will help her political career over truth and family.

She knows that what she says is not true, and she should have told the MIVILUDES that everything they are saying about Scientology is a lie, because she knows it from her personal experience with her family. My personal opinion is that this story proves that those at the MIVILUDES are the ones breaking up families. And moreover, Sonia should respect the memory of our mother with integrity. Living with integrity and truth is more important than immediate political success."

*Photo 1: Secretary Sonia Backès with her brother in April 2022. Courtesy of Secretary Backès's brother.*

*Photo 2: Secretary Backès with her mother and stepfather, April 2022. Courtesy of Secretary Backès' brother.*

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## **"Cults": The French Law, a model for Japan?**

***The About-Picard law is a failed and wrong statute that should be repealed in France rather than exported abroad.***

*by Massimo Introvigne*



*Nicolas About (from Twitter) and Catherine Picard (credits).*

Opponents of the Unification Church/Family Federation for World Peace and Unification who use or, rather, misuse **the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe** to claim that legal measures against "cults" are needed, suggest that something similar to the French About-Picard law of 2001 should be introduced in Japan.

I was very much part of the discussions surrounding the adoption of the controversial law, but they happened more than two decades ago. What the About-Picard law is all about, and how it emerged, needs to be shortly explained. In 1994, 1995, and 1997 an esoteric new religious movement known as the Order of the Solar Temple organized a series of mass suicides and homicides that claimed several dozen lives in Switzerland, France, and Quebec. The incidents generated an enormous emotion in France, because many of the victims were French and some of the group's members were wealthy professionals, making it difficult to dismiss their story as one typical of "marginal cults."

In France, after the first Solar Temple suicides and murders, a Parliamentary commission to investigate "cults" (called in French "sectes") was set up. It released its report in December 1995. Its two main recommendations were to institute an inter-ministerial agency for combating "cults," and to pass a new anti-cult law. The agency was created in 1996. It had various incarnations up to present-day MIVILUDES, the Inter-ministerial mission for monitoring and combating cultic deviances (dérives sectaires).

MIVILUDES publishes periodically reports on "cults" that receive a good deal of criticism for their vagueness and lack of rigor. For instance, the Mission **has recently admitted** that its figures of 500 "cults" and 500,000 "victims of the cults" in France, which it often repeats and are quoted in the media, come from old texts of 1995, 2006, and 2010, which were already controversial when they were published, are not even quoted correctly in the MIVILUDES' reports, and of course refer to more than a decade ago.

The methodology of MIVILUDES is based on the "saisines" concerning various "cults" it receives every year. The "saisines" are alerts by those who write to the MIVILUDES, or use a web form, to denounce a "cultic deviance." **We objected** that there is no verification that those sending a "saisine" to the MIVILUDES exist, let alone tell the truth, and mentioned the case of an American scholar who had successfully registered with the French governmental mission a "saisine" signed by Napoleon Bonaparte.

**In 2022, the MIVILUDES admitted** that "saisines" are not "reports" of identifiable "cultic" abuses. They include any interaction between the MIVILUDES and public and private subjects. That the MIVILUDES does not provide either scientifically valid or objective information about "cults" should be, by now, obvious.



*Protest against the MIVILUDES in Paris. From Twitter.*

Introducing a law against “cults” in France proved more difficult than creating a specialized agency. How can a “cult” be identified and distinguished from a legitimate religion? French politicians consulted various experts, some genuine and some self-styled. Some Christian enemies of “cults” suggested to define the “cults” as those professing doctrines regarded as heretic by mainline religions. However, this would obviously have violated the Constitutional principle of secularity, converting the state into a judge of religious doctrines.

The alternative that emerged was to use the main tenet of the anti-cult ideology, i.e., that legitimate religions are joined through an act of free will, while conversions to “cults” are obtained through a mysterious technique variously called “mental manipulation,” “mind control,” or “brainwashing.” The first drafts of the French law created the crime of “mental manipulation,” punished with severe jail penalties.

American scholar J. Gordon Melton and the undersigned edited a book called “Pour en finir avec les sectes” (To put an end to the discussion on cults), which went into two editions in 1996 and was quoted by many voices in the institutional and parliamentary debates.

The authors included most of the leading international scholars of new religious movements, who argued that two decades of debate among academics had led to the conclusion that “mental manipulation” or “**brainwashing**” **does not exist**. We also pointed out that American case law since the “Fishman” decision by a federal court in California in 1990, as well as decisions in other countries (including Italy), had already recognized that the notion of “mental manipulation” as allegedly practiced by “cults” belongs to the realm of pseudoscience.



*Massimo Introvigne (left) and J. Gordon Melton (right) entered the debate in 1996 with the book "Pour en finir avec les sectes."*

Our criticism was also echoed by senior judges and politicians in France, including cabinet ministers. After lengthy discussions, it was decided to eliminate all references to "mental manipulation" from the draft law.

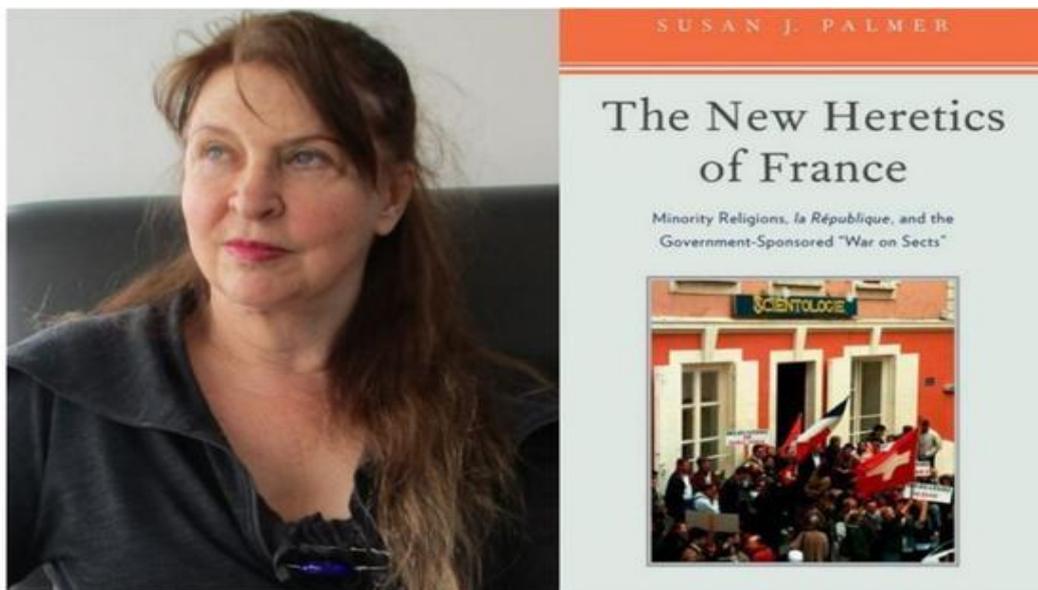
However, pressures by anti-cultists continued, and in the end the law was passed in 2001 incriminating, rather than "mental manipulation," "techniques likely to impair a person's judgment" by putting her "in a state of psychological... subjection." Senator Nicolas About and MP (and anti-cult activist) Catherine Picard persuaded a majority of their colleagues that this was something different from the criticized "mental manipulation" or "brainwashing." Critics objected that it wasn't.

Under the About-Picard law, members of religious movements using these "techniques" are punished with three years of imprisonment, leaders with five years. The movements themselves may be legally dissolved.

The About-Picard law was passed in 2001. In 2011, in its tenth anniversary, Susan J. Palmer, a well-known Canadian scholar of new religious movements, published with Oxford University Press the book "The New Heretics of France." Palmer reviewed the international criticism of the About-Picard law, and presented the results of a detailed study of how it had been enforced. She updated it in conference papers presented in 2022, with similar results.

In short, she found that the law was strong with the weak, and weak with the strong. It led to the conviction and imprisonment for having used "techniques creating a state of psychological subjection" of the leaders of several small groups, most of them with only a few dozen followers. While anti-cultists had proclaimed the law would destroy the organizations they denounced as stereotypical "cults" such as the Church of Scientology

or the Jehovah's Witnesses, in fact it was never successfully enforced against them, nor against any large group with thousands of devotees.



*In 2011, Susan J. Palmer assessed the impact of the law after ten years of enforcement.*

The reason this happened is that, to avoid mentioning the discredited concept of “mental manipulation,” a vague category of “techniques creating a state of psychological subjection” had been introduced. Either these “techniques” are the same as “mental manipulation” or “brainwashing,” and fall under the criticism scholars have directed against these categories, or it is unclear what they are. Good lawyers, supported by good experts, can easily prove that using the “techniques” mentioned in the About-Picard law is an imaginary crime. However, the law can be enforced against small groups lacking the resources to hire effective lawyers or the contacts with competent experts.

French anti-cultists blame the fact that the About-Picard law has been unsuccessful on the scholars whom they accuse of being “cult apologists,” or hired guns for the “cults.” In fact, they created a caricatural image of these scholars, claiming that they defend all religious groups, guilty or innocent, and dogmatically believe that “cults” never commit crimes.

Perhaps these scholars exist, but I have never met one. On the contrary, the scholars I know maintain that religious groups and individuals who commit common crimes, both part of traditional religions (such as pedophile priests or terrorists who claim to act in the name of Islam) and of new religious movements, should be prosecuted and sentenced. Common crimes include homicide, physical violence, rape, sexual abuse, and so on. They are different from imaginary crimes such as “being a cult” or “using techniques aimed at psychological subjection.”

To prosecute religious (and non-religious) groups and individuals that commit real crimes, no special law is needed. Special laws only create dangers for religious liberty and, by confusing the issues, make it more difficult to prosecute the real crimes. Twenty years of the About-Picard law abundantly prove it. It is a failed and wrong model. Progress would be made by repealing it in France, certainly not by exporting it to other countries.

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## Feet of clay: The French MIVILUDES acknowledges the faulty bases of its reports

***These bases are the "saisines" (in theory, alerts by those who write to denounce a "cultic deviance"). We now learn the "saisines" are not real "reports."***

By Massimo Introvigne

France has a strange institution called MIVILUDES, the Inter-ministerial mission for monitoring and combating cultic deviances (dérives sectaires), which is now connected with the Inter-ministerial Committee for the Prevention of Delinquency and Radicalization (CIPDR).

It publishes periodically reports on "cults" (called in French "sectes") that receive a good deal of criticism for their vagueness and lack of rigor. For instance, the Mission [has recently admitted](#) that its figures of 500 "cults" and 500,000 "victims of the cults" in France, which it often repeats and are quoted in the media, come from old texts of 1995, 2006, and 2010, which were controversial when they were published, are not even quoted correctly in the MIVILUDES' reports, and of course cannot tell us anything about the situation today.

Bitter Winter [has also denounced](#) the faulty methodology of MIVILUDES, which declares a movement more or less dangerous based on the number of "saisines" concerning the group it receives every year. The "saisines" are alerts by those who write to the MIVILUDES, or use a web form, to denounce a "cultic deviance." [We objected](#) that there is no verification that those sending a "saisines" to the MIVILUDES exist, let alone tell the truth, and mentioned the case of an American scholar who had successfully registered with the French governmental mission a "saisine" signed by Napoleon Bonaparte.

We believed that MIVILUDES' use of the "saisines" was bad. We were wrong. It is much worse. A French correspondent who routinely inspects publicly accessible documents about the MIVILUDES found a decision by the CADA (Commission for the Access to Administrative Documents) dated May 12, 2022. The decision concerns a lawyer who had tried to obtain copies of all the "saisines" received by the MIVILUDES since 2015 about the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The CADA decided that the lawyer, subject to certain conditions, has the right to consult them, after the MIVILUDES will have hidden the names and other details making it possible to identify those who sent the alerts, but this is not the most interesting part of the story.

What is more important is the MIVILUDES' somewhat arrogant statement in the procedure that the lawyer "made a confusion." The confusion, the MIVILUDES stated, was "between real reports (signalements) and 'saisines' sent to the MIVILUDES. The latter also include questions and institutional exchanges." The MIVILUDES then argued that "the reports, which consist of testimonies, contain many elements that could affect the security and privacy of the persons mentioned in them." They cannot be disclosed without eliminating all these "elements," and once all these details will be eliminated they will become uninteresting.

This argument refers to the "reports." The "saisines" however, we are now told, are not "reports" and also include simple "questions and institutional exchanges," which thus are not "testimonies." It seems that, if a local city council ("institutional exchange") or even a private citizen ("question") asks the MIVILUDES "What do you know about the group X?" this is counted as a "saisine." If two university students looking for material about the group X, and one city council to which the group X has asked an administrative authorization, contact the MIVILUDES, this makes three "saisines."

In the [report for the years 2018–2020](#) of the MIVILUDES three "saisines" are enough to include The Church of Almighty God within the analysis of "cultic deviances." Remember, the "saisines" are not "reports" denouncing that identified French citizens had a negative experience with a group. They are just interactions with the MIVILUDES where the name of the group has been mentioned. Yet, the number of "saisines" is a key element to include a group in the MIVILUDES reports.

The conclusion is that the "saisines" belong to the category of thin air. Not only the system of the "saisines" is easily manipulable by those hostile to a certain group. Even if the "saisines" are genuine, they do not mean anything.

After the emotions created by the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whom his assassin wanted to punish for his cooperation with organizations connected with the Unification Church, somebody proposed to import the MIVILUDES into Japan and create a similar agency there. Those who know how the MIVILUDES operates understand that the problem would be to shut it down in France, rather than to export it abroad and spread additional faulty research and false information.

*Photo: Protest against the MIVILUDES in Paris.*

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## **French court rules in favour of burkini ban**

Euronews (21/06/2022) - <https://bit.ly/3QJJWB2> - France's highest administrative court has upheld a nationwide ban on the wearing of "burkini" swimming costumes in public pools.

Authorities in Grenoble had challenged the ban on the full-body swimsuit, which is typically worn by some Muslim women to uphold their faith.

The city's municipal council had sparked nationwide controversy in May when it relaxed its rules on the swimwear allowed in public pools.

But the French Conseil d'Etat said on Tuesday allowing the burkini would "undermine the principle of neutrality of public services".

Grenoble mayor Eric Piolle has argued that people using public services, such as swimming pools, should be allowed to dress as they please.

But opponents said the policy violated France's core secular value that religion cannot be used to inform decisions or policies.

Judges at the Conseil d'Etat ruled in favour of the Isere prefecture and confirmed that the new swimwear regulations in Grenoble had only aimed "to satisfy a religious demand".

"The very specific derogation made ...is likely to affect the proper functioning of the public service and the equal treatment of users," the court said.

French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin **wrote on Twitter** that the ruling was "a victory for the law of separatism, for secularism and beyond, for the whole Republic."

A local court in Grenoble had previously ruled in favour of the burkini ban, stating that people should be able to "free themselves from this rule for religious purposes".

Since 2016, several local French authorities have attempted to outlaw the wearing of the burkini in public places.

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen has condemned the swimsuit as "clothing of Islamist propaganda" and has called for more regulation.

But in 2019, authorities in the northwestern city of Rennes quietly updated its pool hygiene policies to allow burkinis and other types of swimwear.

*Photo: Karima, wearing a full-body burkini swimsuit, swims in Cannes after the call to support the wearing of burkinis by businessman and political activist Rachid Nekkaz. - Copyright ERIC GAILLARD/REUTERS*

### **More reading**

[Burkini ban challenged by Grenoble city council in top French court](#)  
[French court blocks Grenoble's bid to allow full-body swimsuit](#)  
[Controversy as French city Grenoble allows women to wear 'burkinis' in swimming pools](#)  
[Women in France fined for wearing 'burkini' swimsuits at pool](#)

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## **La Flotte-en-Ré: The case of the Virgin Mary statue goes on**

***In a case started in France by secular humanists, the court ordered the removal of the statue. The city appealed.***

*by PierLuigi Zoccatelli*



*The Virgin of La Flotte-en-Ré. From Twitter.*

Bitter Winter (31.03.2022) - <https://bit.ly/375WOir> - Last month, Bitter Winter reported about the strange case of a statue of the Virgin Mary in the French village of La Flotte-en-Ré, on the Ré Island, that the secular humanist organization National Federation for Free Thought (Fédération nationale de la libre pensée) wanted removed or destroyed.

The case is legally complicated. When it was erected in 1945, to thank the Virgin Mary for the safe return home of local soldiers in World War II, the statue stood on private ground. In the 1980s, the municipality decided to create a new roundabout, and needed the part of the ground where the statue was. An agreement was reached, and the statue was kept and moved just a few meters in what was now public ground.

Theoretically, the French law prohibits to "install on public ground" religious symbols. However, in this case, the municipality had not "installed" or "erected" a statue. It had just slightly moved a statue that already existed on private ground, pursuant to an agreement with the owner.

However, on May 17, 2020, a car hit and destroyed the statue. The municipality reconstructed it, and the National Federation for Free Thought argued this was a new "installation" of the statue, as such forbidden by the 1905 law separating church and state.

On March 3, 2022, the Justice Court of Poitiers sided with the freethinkers. It concluded that what the city did was a "new installation," and ordered the statue removed within six months. It can be a precedent for two similar cases pending about statues at Les-Sables-d'Olonne (Vendée) and Cogolin (Var).

In Cogolin, the case is about two statues, one of St. Maurus and one of the Virgin Mary. The second one has a curious story, as it was already moved in 2013, after some inhabitants complained that it was disrespectful to the Virgin Mary that it stood on Chemin de la Radasse, since "radasse" is a slang term for "prostitute." It was then

moved to the more appropriately named street Chemin Notre-Dame-des-Anges, but it remained on public ground.



*The statue of the Virgin Mary in Cogolin. From Twitter.*

One element not considered in the Poitiers Court decision is the overwhelming opinion of the citizens of La Flotte-en-Ré to keep the statue of the Virgin Mary where it is. They argue that the statue is not devotional but has become a local landmark and an opportunity to reflect on the anguish of the wars.

On March 22, the city appealed. The mayor, Jean-Paul Héraudeau, expressed the city's willingness to go to the State Council and the European Court of Human Rights if needed. He is supported by the mayors of nearby cities in what they perceive as a case where judges do not really understand local traditions and local sensitivity.

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## **Jehovah's Witnesses take MIVILUDES to court**

### ***Press release***

Les Témoins de Jéhovah/ France (16.03.2022) - Following the publication of the 2018-2020 MIVILUDES activity report, Jehovah's Witnesses filed a formal complaint on 16 March 2022 with the Administrative Tribunal of Paris against the MIVILUDES.

Jehovah's Witnesses allege that the MIVILUDES report used bad methodology which was calculated to publicly denigrate them and label them as a harmful cult. The MIVILUDES report ignores the work of well-respected scholars and the judgments of courts of justice in France.<sup>[1]</sup> Instead, the report's findings are based on unsubstantiated allegations from unreliable anonymous sources. This unreliable methodology used by the MIVILUDES ignores and violates the fundamental legal principle of adversarial proceedings and violated the rights of thousands of peaceful believers who are publicly stigmatized

without being able to defend themselves or without even knowing what they are accused of.

Jehovah's Witnesses are profoundly concerned by the ensuing climate of religious intolerance and hostility against their religion that the activity of the MIVILUDES has been promoting over the years. This has resulted in countless acts of discrimination, along with instances of hate speech and, inevitably, hate crime. It has been well-documented and established that the poorly-researched reports generated by the MIVILUDES have resulted in insidious and damaging effects on law-abiding citizens.

It is worth mentioning that in 2006, the Council of State granted Jehovah's Witnesses request for disclosure of 'documents of general information concerning them'. These documents, which according to their detractors were conclusive and damning, proved to be no more than a list of their places of worship.

It is especially appalling that the State-funded MIVILUDES uses public money to produce a report with unsupported and unreliable allegations calculated to malign a whole spectrum of the population in the view of public opinion. The *Cour des comptes* has already issued a report regarding the MIVILUDES' operations and has questioned the lack of professionalism of the MIVILUDES and the relevance of such a body. In fact, the MIVILUDES' way of operating violates both the religious neutrality of the State and the first article of the Constitution which guarantees that France "... shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs."

Furthermore, the MIVILUDES deliberately ignores that: (1) Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in France for more than 120 years and that the 250,000 or so people who regularly or occasionally practice this religion in France are law-abiding citizens who are well integrated into society; (2) for more than twenty years, the highest administrative court in France, the Council of State, granted Jehovah's Witnesses the status of a religion (Judgment of 23 June 2000); (3) Jehovah's Witness religious ministers benefit from the fund for worship (CAVIMAC); (4) Jehovah's Witnesses are among the seven religions which are allowed to send chaplains into prisons; (5) the European Court of Human Rights has recognized Jehovah's Witnesses as a "well-known" Christian religion and protected their religious activities through numerous decisions.

On 8 November 2021, Jehovah's Witnesses asked the MIVILUDES to delete defamatory passages from the 2018–2020 activity report and to rectify serious omissions and misleading information contained therein. They also asked the MIVILUDES to end its stigmatization of Jehovah's Witnesses as a so-called cult (secte) and to remove their name from the 24 February 2021 report "Lutte contre les dérives sectaires." MIVILUDES did not comply with any of these requests. Jehovah's Witnesses are confident that the courts will remedy these serious violations.

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## Acts of intolerance against Christians

Observatory of Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe (OIDCE) - 23.02.2022 - <https://bit.ly/3MK1BqI> - In February, the OIDCE reported a number of incidents against Christians in France and other countries.

### Church tagged with insults against a priest

During the night of February 23rd, unknown vandals spray-painted an insult on the side of a church in Curlu, France. The insult was directed towards the parish priest Sylvain Mansart, who commented: "At least I'm not alone in this problem. (...) We comfort each other". Priests in neighbouring churches have received similar abuse. The local police confirmed these claims and are investigating.

The other targeted priest is called Abbé Jean-Louis Brunel and was also targeted in Barleux, according to the news source.

Source: [Courier Picard](#) (23.02.2022)

### **Tiktok influencers desecrate French Church on viral video**

Two TikTok influencers, Benjamin Ledig and "Queen Paul", filmed themselves wearing a crop-top and twerking (dancing sexually) in front of a crucifix at the Parisian church of Saint Paul on February 16th. They later posted this video on social media where it received some 20 million views despite it being repeatedly removed. Ledig claims he did it to protest the "homophobia" of the church while "Queen Paul" apologized for his behaviour.

The two youths entered the church and decided to shoot the film in front of a crucifix "for a laugh." Ledig states "What I wanted to say is that I do not condone what the Church does: its homophobia, the fact that same-sex marriage is not accepted." On the other side, "Queen Paul" has apologized and has taken the video down. After 6 million views, TikTok also removed the video but Ledig continued to post it and it has since got 20 million views.

Many people belonging to different religions have commented on the post saying it is "a scandal to do such a thing in church" and identifying it as a "lack of respect" towards Christians.

The parish priest Pierre Vivarès has condemned the act and says he "will explore all legal possibilities to stop the infringement of his rights constituted by the recording and broadcasting of this video without prior express authorization." This act shows a lack of respect for Christian symbols in a place of worship.

Source: [Life Site](#), [Breaking News](#) 21.02.2022

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## **Hijabs in the French courts**

By [Frank Cranmer](#)

Law & Religion UK (03.03.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3vXu9XB> - On 24 June 2019, the council of the Bar Association of Lille amended its rules of procedure by adding the following to the section devoted to "relations with institutions": "An advocate may not wear with the robe any decoration or sign ostensibly manifesting a religious, philosophical, community or political affiliation or opinion". A student advocate who wished to wear the *hijab* in court and her pupil-master each lodged an appeal against the change. (The French text, rather unhelpfully, describes her as wishing to wear "*le voile ou le foulard*", though Reuters [reports](#) that the applicant, Ms Sarah Asmeta, wears the *hijab*.)

The case came before the highest civil court in France, the *Cour de Cassation*. The main questions before the Court were as follows:

- Is the council of a bar association competent to prohibit, in its rules of procedure, the wearing of any sign manifesting a religious, philosophical, community or political affiliation or opinion, with court dress?
- Does this prohibition by the bar association constitute an attack on freedom of religion and freedom of expression?

In its judgment of 2 March 2022, the Court came to the following conclusions. The Bar Council of Lille had been competent to act as it had. In the absence of a specific legislative provision and in the absence of a regulatory provision enacted by the National Bar Council, it fell within the remit of local bar councils to regulate the wearing and use of the costume of their profession. The Bar Council of Lille, therefore, had the power to modify its rules of procedure in order to prohibit the wearing of any distinctive sign with court dress.

The restriction of freedom of religion and expression was proportionate. By requiring its members to wear court dress without any distinctive sign, the Bar Council was contributing to ensuring equality between lawyers and, through that, to equality between litigants. The principle of equality was one of the constituent elements of the right to a fair trial. Prohibiting the wearing of a sign manifesting a religious, philosophical, community or political affiliation or opinion was therefore necessary and appropriate, on the one hand, to preserve the independence of the advocate and, on the other, to guarantee the right to a fair trial. The prohibition did not, therefore, constitute discrimination.

You can read the full text here: [2 mars 2022 Cour de cassation Pourvoi n° 20-20.185](#).

## France: 857 acts against Christians in 2021

***A report shows that there were also 589 against Jews, and 213 to Muslims .  
"Physical violence is on the increase", said an evangelical leader.***

Evangelical Focus (22.02.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3M05Y0d> - Hate towards people because of their faith is increasing in France, according to the initial findings of the investigation carried out by two MPs, ordered by French Prime Minister Jean Castex.

*La République En Marche* (the Republic on the Move, LERM) and *MoDem* (democratic movement) MPs, Ludovic Mendes and Isabelle Florennes, presented their report in a press conference on 10 February, after **over thirty interviews with religious representatives, police and judicial authorities**, and four trips to Strasbourg, Sarcelles, Lyon and Nantes.

They counted **1659 anti-religious acts in 2021: 857 acts were against Christians, 589 against Jews, and 213 attacks against Muslims**. The latter have grown by 38% compared to 2019. Those data consolidate the provisional assessment presented in December by the Minister of the Interior, Gérald Darmanin.

**"A rise in hatred over the past ten years"**

"There has been a **rise in hatred over the past ten years**, which is [getting worse](#) both face to face and online", Mendes pointed out.

The two MPs explained that "every denomination that was interviewed described a **society that is becoming more and more hateful and violent**" towards them.

Furthermore, "the **small daily aggressions are more and more frequent**.

Unfortunately, many seem to be getting used to it, or rather learning to live with it", added Mendes.

They underlined that this rise in hatred and violence "is **fuelled by political discourse**, with a speech that no longer has any limits", and advocated for "a better education about religions".

**Romain Choisnet**, communications director of the [National Council of Evangelicals in France](#) (CNEF) commented on the study on twitter, stressing that "for a long time, anti-Christian acts consisted of [damage](#) to or theft from places of worship, which still account for most of the incidents, but **physical violence is on the increase**".

### **"Secularism is not about hiding religion"**

Amid a country divided over the **recent and controversial appointment of the Christian philosopher Mark Sherringham as the head of the Higher Council for School Programmes** (CSP), the French MPs "hope that the debate on religions in schools will not be refused, because [secularism](#) is not about hiding religion".

Ludovic Mendes and Isabelle Florennes will deliver their final report in early March.

*Note: This article has been corrected - the growth of 38% compared to 2019 was not related to general anti-religious attacks but to anti-Muslim attacks.*

*Photo : The windows of the store were full of anti-Christian offensive graffiti. / @comcnef.*

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## **French religious associations must sign a Republican Commitment Contract to access subsidies**

***Evangelicals say the new contract "contains guarantees for freedom of religion" but also warn about its application, because "certain terms could be misinterpreted".***

Evangelical Focus (01.02.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3uuQjzk> - [French](#) associations, including "religious associations", wishing to receive public subsidies or approval as of 1 January have to sign the Republican Commitment Contract (CER).

The CER is **one of the key measures of the “Law to reinforce the respect of republican principles”**, also known as “**anti-separatism law**”, approved last year by the French Assembly after a **controversial discussion**.

It states that **associations must “accept seven commitments**: respect for the laws of the Republic; **freedom of conscience**, freedom of the members of the association; equality and non-discrimination; fraternity and prevention of violence; respect for the dignity of the person; and respect for the symbols of the Republic”.

### **“CER contains guarantees for freedom of religion”**

The **National Council of Evangelicals in France (CNEF)**, along with the **Protestant Evangelical Committee for Human Dignity (CPDH)**, issued a statement on the issue, pointing out that “**in general**, the terms of the CER **contain guarantees for freedom of association** and freedom of **conscience, thought and religion**”.

“As it stands, the text thus **allows so-called denominational associations**, which pursue the general or local interest, to enter the scheme, while **affirming a religious identity** and foundations linked to their action”, add the entities.

The evangelical representatives also “**welcome commitments to fraternity and the fight against violence**, as they constitute the basis of any associative contribution to the common good”.

### **“We call for a society of trust and not of mistrust”**

However, the CNEF and the CPDH say they “**must remain vigilant about the conditions of application and interpretation of these new measures** by public authorities or administrations”.

“**Certain terms** such as abusive proselytism or arbitrary exclusion **could be misinterpreted**. The possibility of administrative appeal is not excluded if the public authorities refuse to provide financial support”, warns the statement.

That is why the evangelical entities “**urge the state to pay particular attention to respecting the freedoms** cherished by associations when applying this new control mechanism”.

“**We call for a society of trust and not of mistrust**”, the French evangelicals conclude in the statement.

*Photo : A view of the French Assembly. / Photo: Chris Waits, CC BY 2.0*

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## **France Senate votes to ban wearing of religious symbols at sport events and swimming pools**

National LAW u. dehi (20.01.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3ChIuz4> - In the latest move as part of a controversial **decade-long effort** to curb the public expression of religion, the French Senate voted 160-143 Tuesday in favor of a **bill** seeking to amend its national **Sports Code** to ban athletes from wearing religious symbols, such as hijabs and burkinis, at sports competitions, public swimming pools, and bathing areas.

The bill was proposed on December 8, 2021, by over 80 Senators belonging to the center-right opposition party Les Républicains. It prohibits the wear of "conspicuous religious symbols" by participants in sports events organized by "federations and affiliated associations" and states that rules for the use of public swimming pools or artificial bathing areas must respect the neutrality and secularism of public services.

The bill's statement of reasons refers to a conflict between the "peaceful and neutral" practice of sport on the one hand and the abuse of the secular principles of the French Republic and "Islamic radicalization" on the other. It states freedom of exercise of religion must be accompanied by neutrality, meaning no individual differences or affiliations are put forward by athletes. A **2021 law** to strengthen oversight of sports clubs to prevent radicalization has not been implemented, it states, causing "incidents" of non-neutrality in sport.

One incident the statement mentions is the **2019 protest** against the fine imposed by Grenoble city for wearing burkinis at a public pool. The bill describes this protest, a peaceful demonstration where Muslim women wore burkinis in defiance, as a "provocative militant action" defending an unrecognizable vision of women." It continues by saying that while local governments like Grenoble can legislate on health and safety matters, including banning religious signs that "pose a safety risk," they look to the Senate to take a stand with respect to secularism.

Notably, in 2012, the French Football Federation banned the wear of veils in official matches or competitions it organized one day after a similar International Association Football Federation (FIFA) ban was overturned.

The bill is not yet final: a committee comprising members from both houses of parliament will now attempt to find a compromise on its text. While the bill's statement of reasons cites Article 50 of the Olympic Charter, which seeks to prohibit "political, religious or racial demonstration or propaganda" at Olympic venues, it is unclear whether the changes brought by it will apply to the 2024 Paris Olympics.

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## **500 « sectes », 500 000 « victimes » en France ? La MIVILUDES avoue ne pas disposer de données récentes**

***La mission gouvernementale française avoue aujourd'hui s'être appuyée sur des chiffres vieux de dix ans (et controversés).***

[Lire le texte originel en anglais.](#)

*Par Massimo Introvigne*

Bitter Winter (05.01.2022) - Si vous suivez la presse française, vous avez probablement lu qu'à cause de COVID-19, les « sectes », une vieille obsession en France, prolifèrent plus que jamais. En fait, il y a maintenant 500 « sectes », avec 500 000 « victimes », dont 50 .000 à 90 000 sont des « enfants ». Ces chiffres invraisemblables ont été repris par les médias français, et même mentionnés au niveau international.

Les vérificateurs de faits (fact-checkers) des médias fiables les ont probablement considérés à première vue comme légèrement étranges. Pourtant, ils ont été certifiés par une institution gouvernementale, la MIVILUDES, la Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires. Grâce à ce cachet gouvernemental, ceux qui ont repris ces chiffres dans les médias se sont fourvoyés.

Malheureusement pour ces médias et la MIVILUDES, il existe en France des lois similaires au FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) américain permettant aux citoyens d'accéder aux documents du gouvernement sous certaines conditions. L'ONG CAP-LC (Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience) dotée d'un statut consultatif spécial auprès de l'ECOSOC (Conseil économique et social) des Nations Unies a utilisé ces lois pour demander à la MIVILUDES d'où provenaient ces statistiques.

Le 19 juillet 2021, la MIVILUDES a répondu, et la lettre a maintenant été publiée par le [magazine français Rebelle\[S\]](#). Il s'agit d'une lettre très surprenante dans laquelle la MIVILUDES admet qu'elle ne dispose pas de statistiques récentes et qu'elle ne s'appuie que sur des documents anciens, datant parfois de 25 ans.

Pour les « 500 sectes », la MIVILUDES affirme que le chiffre est tiré du rapport controversé de 1995 établi par une Commission parlementaire française sur les « sectes ». En réalité, ce rapport recense 173 « sectes » et, comme l'explique la lettre, le chiffre de 500 inclut les « filiales ». Inclure les « filiales » reviendrait à prétendre qu'il existe en France des dizaines de milliers de religions en considérant chaque paroisse catholique comme une religion. Plus important encore, la liste de 1995 a été tellement critiquée et même ridiculisée que la MIVILUDES elle-même a déclaré à plusieurs reprises qu'elle ne s'y référait plus. Mais, elle l'a fait pour créer l'alarme par des statistiques bidon.

Le nombre de 500 000 « victimes » des « sectes », dit la lettre, arrondit le nombre de 460 000, qui proviendrait du [rapport annuel d'activité de la MIVILUDES de 2010](#), c'est-à-dire d'il y a 11 ans. En fait, ce commentaire montre que la MIVILUDES lit mal ses propres documents.

Dans le rapport 2010, page 253, on lit, dans une séance consacrée à la Nouvelle-Calédonie, qu'on y a trouvé « 60 000 adeptes des groupes sectaires », ce qui signifie que la Nouvelle-Calédonie, alors qu'elle représente moins de 4 % de la population nationale française, concentre 20 % du nombre total des membres de sectes en France, évalué entre « 300 000 et 400 000 sur l'ensemble du territoire français ».

Si 60 000 est présenté comme un pourcentage du total, cela signifie que le chiffre est *inclus* dans le total. 60 000, c'est 20% de 300 000, ce qui signifie que le rédacteur de la partie du rapport consacrée à la Nouvelle-Calédonie a considéré le chiffre le plus bas comme moins incroyable que le chiffre le plus élevé, 400 000.

Cherchant un moyen de justifier son chiffre actuel de 500 000, la MIVILUDES en 2021 a pris le chiffre le plus élevé de 2010 (400 000) et a ajouté les 60 000 de Nouvelle-Calédonie (qui en fait étaient déjà comptés comme faisant partie des 300 000 ou 400 000), en prétendant inexactement que le rapport de 2010 parlait de 460 000 « membres des sectes », et a arrondi le chiffre à 500 000. Les médias aiment les chiffres ronds après tout. Comme dans des cas similaires, la section sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie du rapport 2010 ne fournit aucune source ni preuve pour le chiffre de la Nouvelle-Calédonie et pour le chiffre national.

Enfin, la lettre indique que le chiffre de 50 000 à 90 000 mineurs « victimes » de « sectes » ajuste le chiffre de « 35 000 à 100 000 » [d'un rapport publié il y a 15 ans](#), en 2006, sur l'influence des « sectes » sur la santé physique et mentale des mineurs. Aucun

étudiant de premier cycle ne pourrait s'en tirer avec un rapport d'étude « ajustant » de manière créative des statistiques vieilles de dix ans. Le rapport de 2006, en tout cas, présentait ses chiffres comme conjecturaux, déclarant que le nombre réel « reste difficile à évaluer ».

Le document de 2006 précise que « L'évolution même des mouvements à caractère sectaire rend difficile toute appréhension plus précise du nombre de mineurs concernés », pages 21 et 22. Une fourchette « entre 35 000 et 100 000 » montre qu'il ne s'agit même pas d'une véritable statistique, mais qu'elle est fondée sur les déclarations de quelques témoins, qui n'ont pas expliqué leurs sources ni leur méthodologie.

En résumé, nous savons maintenant, non pas grâce aux critiques de la MIVILUDES, mais grâce à la MIVILUDES elle-même, qu'elle ne dispose d'aucune statistique sur les « sectes », et que les chiffres qu'elle mentionne proviennent de documents de 1995, 2006 et 2010, qui ne sont même pas cités correctement et ne peuvent évidemment rien dire de la situation actuelle. Ces documents ont été largement critiqués par les universitaires lors de leur publication, et proposaient des chiffres incroyables basés sur les déclarations d'un petit nombre de témoins et de sources qui n'étaient pas mentionnées ou qui n'existaient peut-être même pas.

Les fausses statistiques, comme nous l'avons appris lors de la crise du COVID, constituent une part particulièrement dangereuse des informations fallacieuses (fake news). Elles sont intolérables lorsqu'elles sont diffusées par les médias, et deviennent un scandale public lorsque des institutions gouvernementales sont impliquées.

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## **500 "Cults", 500,000 "Victims" in France? MIVILUDES admits it has no recent data**

***The French governmental mission now confesses it relied on decade-old (and controversial) figures.***

*By Massimo Introvigne*

Bitter Winter (05.01.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3HDSkg6> - If you read French, you have probably read that because of COVID-19 "cults," an old obsession in France, are proliferating more than ever. In fact, there are now 500 "cults," with 500,000 "victims," of which from 50,000 to 90,000 are "children." These fantastic figures have been repeated by French media, and even mentioned internationally.

Fact-checkers in reliable media probably at first sight regarded them as slightly strange. However, they were certified by a governmental institution, the MIVILUDES, the Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires (Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Cultic Deviances). Because of this governmental stamp, those who repeated these figures in the media got away with them.

Unfortunately for these media and the MIVILUDES, in France there are laws similar to the American FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) allowing citizens to access documents of the government under certain conditions. An NGO with special consultative status at the United Nations' ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) called CAP-LC (Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience, Coordination of associations

and individuals for freedom of conscience) used these laws to ask the MIVILUDES where these statistics came from.

On July 19, 2021, the MIVILUDES answered, and the letter has now been [published by the French magazine Rebelle\[S\]](#). It is a sensational letter, where the MIVILUDES admits that it does not have any recent statistics and it is only relying on old documents, sometimes dating to 25 years ago.

For the "500 cults," the MIVILUDES states the figure is taken from the controversial 1995 report of a French Parliamentary Commission on "cults." In fact, this report listed 173 "cults," and as the letter explains the number of 500 included the "local units" (filiales). Including the "filiales" would be similar to claiming that in France there are tens of thousands of religions considering each Catholic parish as a religion. More importantly, the 1995 list was so much criticized and even ridiculed that the MIVILUDES itself has repeatedly stated that it no longer relies on it. Only, it does when it comes to create alarm through bogus statistics.

The number of 500,000 "victims" of the "cults," the letter says, adjusts the number of 460,000, which allegedly comes from the yearly report of activity of MIVILUDES of 2010, i.e. of 11 years ago. In fact, this comment shows that the MIVILUDES misreads its own documents.

In [the 2010 report](#), page 253, we read in a session about New Caledonia, that there "60,000 adepts of the cultic groups" (adeptes des groupes sectaires) were found, meaning that New Caledonia, while accounting for less than 4% of the national population of France, was plagued by 20% of the whole number of cultists in France, evaluated at "300,000 to 400,000 on the total territory of France" (3 à 400 000 sur l'ensemble du territoire français).

If 60,000 is presented as a percentage of the total, it means that the figure is *included* in the total. 60,000 is 20% of 300,000, meaning that whoever wrote the section on New Caledonia of the report regarded the lower figure as less unbelievable than the higher one of 400,000.

Looking for a way to justify its current figure of 500,000, the MIVILUDES in 2021 took the higher figure of 2010 (400,000) and added the 60,000 in New Caledonia (which in fact were already counted as part of the 300,000 or 400,000), inaccurately claiming that the 2010 report referred to 460,000 "cultists," and adjusted the figure to 500,000. Media likes round figures after all. As in similar cases, the section on New Caledonia of the 2010 report did not supply any source or evidence for both the New Caledonian and the national figure.

Finally, the letter states that the figure of 50,000 to 90,000 minors who are "victims" of "cults" adjusts the figure of "between 35,000 and 100,000" of [a report published 15 years ago, in 2006](#), on the influence on "cults" on the physical and mental health of minors. No undergraduate student could get away with a term paper creatively "adjusting" decade-old statistics. The 2006 report, at any rate, introduced its figures as conjectural, stating that the real number "remains difficult to evaluate" (reste difficile à évaluer).

The 2006 document stated that "the evolution of the movements characterized as cults makes any more precise estimation of the number of the minors involved difficult"

(L'évolution même des mouvements à caractère sectaire rend difficile toute appréhension plus précise du nombre de mineurs concernés: pages 21 et 22). A range "between 35,000 and 100,000" shows that this was not even a real statistic, and in fact was based on statements by a few witnesses, who did not explain their sources or methodology.

Summing up, we now know not from critics of the MIVILUDES but from the MIVILUDES itself that it has no statistics on "cults," and the figures it mentions comes from documents of 1995, 2006, and 2010, which are not even quoted correctly and of course cannot say anything about the situation today. These documents were widely criticized by scholars when they were published, and offered unbelievable figures based on statements by a small number of witnesses and sources that were left unmentioned or perhaps did not even exist.

False statistics, as we learned during the COVID crisis, are a particularly dangerous part of fake news. They are intolerable when they are spread by media and become a public scandal when governmental institutions are involved.

Photo : *MIVILUDES's letter to CAP-LC.*

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