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Schools in France send dozens of Muslim girls home for wearing abayas

Schoolgirls who refused to change out of the loose-fitting robes have been sent home with a letter to parents on secularism.

[Aljazeera](#) (05.09.2023) - French public schools have sent dozens of girls home for refusing to remove their abayas – long, loose-fitting robes worn by some Muslim women and girls – on the first day of the school year, according to Education Minister Gabriel Attal.

Defying [a ban on the garment](#) seen as a religious symbol, nearly 300 girls showed up on Monday morning wearing abayas, Attal told the BFM broadcaster on Tuesday.

Most agreed to change out of the robe, but 67 refused and were sent home, he said.

The government announced last month it was [banning the abaya in schools](#), saying it broke the rules on secularism in education that have already seen headscarves forbidden on the grounds they constitute a display of religious affiliation.

The move gladdened the political right but the hard left argued it represented an affront to civil liberties.

The 34-year-old minister said the girls refused entry on Monday were given a letter addressed to their families saying that "secularism is not a constraint, it is a liberty".

If they showed up at school again wearing the gown there would be a "new dialogue".

He added that he was in favour of trialling school uniforms or a dress code amid the debate over the ban.

Uniforms have not been obligatory in French schools since 1968 but have regularly come back on the political agenda, often pushed by conservative and far-right politicians.

Attal said he would provide a timetable later this year for carrying out a trial run of uniforms with any schools that agree to participate.

"I don't think that the school uniform is a miracle solution that solves all problems related to harassment, social inequalities or secularism," he said.

But he added: "We must go through experiments, try things out" in order to promote debate, he said.

'Worst consequences'

Al Jazeera's Natacha Butler, reporting from Paris before the ban came into force said Attal deemed the abaya a religious symbol which violates French secularism.

"Since 2004, in France, religious signs and symbols have been banned in schools, including headscarves, kippas and crosses," she said.

"Gabriel Attal, the education minister, says that no one should walk into a classroom wearing something which could suggest what their religion is."

On Monday, President Emmanuel Macron defended the controversial measure, saying there was a "minority" in France who "hijack a religion and challenge the republic and secularism".

He said it leads to the "worst consequences" such as the murder three years ago of teacher Samuel Paty for showing Prophet Muhammad caricatures during a civics education class.

"We cannot act as if the terrorist attack, the murder of Samuel Paty, had not happened," he said in an interview with the YouTube channel, HugoDecrypte.

An association representing Muslims has filed a motion with the State Council, France's highest court for complaints against state authorities, for an injunction against the ban on the abaya and the qamis, its equivalent dress for men.

The Action for the Rights of Muslims (ADM) motion is to be examined later on Tuesday.

Photo: Students attend class on the first day of the new school year at the College Antoine de Saint-Exupery middle school in Savenay, France [Stephane Mahe/Reuters]

“The fish stinks from the head”: MIVILUDES President resigns over Fonds Marianne scandal

Another obnoxious story of taxpayers' money liberally distributed to dubious associations hit Christian Gravel, who had to leave the French anti-cult mission.

by Massimo Introvigne

“Piscis primum a capite foetet”: “The fish starts stinking from the head,” according to a Latin saying that probably did not exist before Erasmus of Rotterdam made it popular during the Renaissance. There is a lot of bad smell when one approaches the MIVILUDES, the 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.

One time, it publishes [false and slanderous information](#) in its yearly report—and [runs away from a court case](#) where judges would have ruled on it. Another time, it is caught red-handed using [false statistics](#) and [anonymous reports](#) that can be equally false. Yet in another incident, its chief, [Hanène Romdhane](#), resigns unexpectedly for mysterious reasons.

The fish stinks from the head. Its former chief and now member of its Orientation Council Georges Fenech [went to Crimea](#) to applaud Putin for his illegal annexation of that Ukrainian territory. More recently, he breached the law by failing to pay what he owed Scientology after having lost a court case against it. He [had to suffer the humiliation](#) of seeing a bailiff access his bank and taking the money forcibly from his bank account.

The fish continues to stink from the head. Another had to get off the carousel. On June 6, [French media reported](#) that MIVILUDES President, Christian Gravel, had also resigned. This time, the reason why he had to resign was less mysterious.

On May 31, the General Inspection of the Administration (IGA) issued a first report on what is known in France as the scandal of the Fonds Marianne.

On October 16, 2020, high school teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded by a terrorist after he had been accused of showing to his students cartoons from the magazine “Charlie-Hebdo” offending Prophet Muhammad. One of the consequences of this crime was the increased support by the French government to organizations fighting Islamic radicalism and “separatism,” a word indicating in France the self-organization of religious

communities in a way deemed incompatible with the secular values of the French Republic.

From July 2020, [Marlène Schiappa](#) was the Minister Delegate in charge of Citizenship, attached to the Minister of the Interior. She launched a "Fonds Marianne" to finance, initially with Euro 2.5 million, private associations that had proved their effectiveness in combating "separatism." For her own political reasons, Schiappa also jumped on the anti-cult bandwagon, and repeatedly emphasized that she [considered the "sectes"](#) as no less "separatist" than Islamic fundamentalism.

The Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalisation (Interministerial Committee for the Prevention of Delinquency and Radicalization, CIDPR) was put in charge of selecting the associations to be funded through the Fonds Marianne. The chief of the CIDPR was Christian Gravel, at the same time the President of the MIVILUDES, which is administratively connected with the CIDPR.

The largest chunk of the Fonds Marianne (Euro 355,000) went to an association known as Union fédérative des sociétés d'éducation physique et de préparation militaire (Federation of Physical Education and Military Training Societies, USEPPM), connected with controversial journalist Mohamed Sifaoui, who had been often accused of Islamophobia. It [came out](#) that the USEPPM's application consisted of only seven sentences, and no serious investigation was performed on its ability to deliver serious results in the fight against radicalism. When the investigation started, [some media commented](#) that it could easily extend to private anti-cult organizations strictly associated with the MIVILUDES, which had also received funds from the CIDPR. While they were not yet accused of any financial wrongdoing, they may be easily be involved in the "suspicions of favoritism surrounding the structure created by Marlène Schiappa."

This may no longer be a problem for Marlène Schiappa, who was recently busy [posing for the cover of "Playboy" magazine](#). But it is a problem for Christian Gravel. He tried to switch all the blame for the USEPPM scandal to Schiappa, but the inspectors did not buy his version. Finally, he had to resign.

The MIVILUDES should now look for another president. The fish keeps stinking from the head. French bureaucrats who care for their reputation would probably prefer not to touch the rotten organization with a ten-foot pole.

Photo: Christian Gravel in happier times. Screenshot.

Sonia Backès caught red-handed: a "religious profiling" of Muslim students in schools

Police and intelligence services asked principals to identify how many pupils were absent from schools on the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (25.05.2023) - «[Separatism](#)», i.e. living according to religious values different from the secular Republican ideology, has been proclaimed a crime in France.

But what is separatism? If you are a Muslim in a French school, and are absent from the classroom on Eid al-Fitr, you are probably a “separatist.”

It is thus not surprising that the French police, claiming it had been asked to do so [by the intelligence services](#) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, wrote to principals asking to report “on absences from school during the period on Ramadan and particularly on the Eid day, April 21.”

Some principals, who obviously had not understood the French paranoid fear of “separatism,” believed they had been targeted [by a practical joke](#). However, they contacted the police and learned that the request was deadly serious. They also learned that within the police there is a cell “police-security-school” taking its instruction from “the intelligence services.” They were asked to answer as soon as possible. It was later confirmed that [the survey was national](#) rather than merely local.

Similar request about “suspicious” active Muslim students in public schools are common in Xinjiang. France, however, is not China, and some principals refused to answer. Instead, in the Hérault department, whose main city is Montpellier, and in Toulouse, they contacted the media and their trade unions. In Toulouse, the local newspaper “La Dépêche du Midi” denounced the [“religious profiling.”](#) Trade unions [instructed the principals not to answer](#), regarding the request as discriminatory and illegal.

“Le Monde” later connected the initiative to [an old “friend” of Bitter Winter](#), French State Secretary for Citizenship Sonia Backès, a fanatical opponent of “separatism” practiced by both Muslims and the so-called “cults.” [Backès admitted](#) that the Ministry of Internal Affairs asked principals for the percentage of pupils absent on Eid, but said it was not a “profiling” but rather a “study,” as names were not collected, only numbers.

The anti-racist NGO [SOS Racisme](#) called the initiative “very much shocking, as it regards the Muslim religious practice as a question of security.” The NGO also saw a “guilty casualness” in Backès’ statement.

The Union of French Mosques is now [“calling for a thorough investigation”](#) of the incident.

Photo: Sonia Backès ([credits](#)) and Muslims celebrating Eid al-Fitr in France (from Twitter).

Anti-cult Federation FECRIS membership collapses from 57 to 19 associations

FECRIS, a non-profit association under French law now headed by a Belgian Socialist politician, has suddenly withdrawn from its website 38 of its member associations. See why below in the article published by the European Times titled “Did anti-cult federation FECRIS lose at once 38 member associations, or did fake numbers before? by Jan Leonid Bornstein”

[Version en français](#)

[The European Times](#) (22.05.2023) - FECRIS is the *European Federation of Centers for Research and Information on Sects and Cults*, an umbrella organization funded by the French government, that gathers and coordinates "anti-cult" organizations throughout Europe and beyond. It has been the subject of [several of our articles recently](#), for their support to the Russian propaganda against Ukraine, which had started far before the current invasion of Ukraine, but recently culminated through their Russian representatives.

In France, [FECRIS is currently on trial](#), following a lawsuit filed by an NGO with UN consultative status named *CAP Freedom of Conscience*. The UN NGO is asking the Court of Marseille to disband FECRIS, due to its illegal activities, which include their support to their Russian members which are rabid attackers of Ukraine.

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FECRIS under scrutiny

Feeling under scrutiny since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, FECRIS had first hidden from their website the names of their Russian associations. But that did not prevent 82 Ukrainian prominent scholars to [write to President Macron](#) asking the end of FECRIS funding by the French government. So recently, FECRIS has merely taken off the whole list of its members from its website. Meanwhile, the Russian Orthodox "anticultist" and anti-Ukrainian attacker Alexander Dvorkin was still part of the board of FECRIS, after having been its vice-president for 12 years, a kind of thorn in the side of FECRIS, struggling with its court case and its international catastrophic reputation.

A few days ago, a new list was put on their website, which of course did not mention anymore any Russian member-association. But interestingly enough, the list which contained 57 associations before the war, is now made of only 19 members... It's a definite downfall. [The listing is preceded by a warning](#): "any association (and its members) not included in this list is not or no longer part of FECRIS". Does that mean that FECRIS is terminately shrinking, or that its 57 members were fake? That is what we wanted to understand.

Members "not authorized" to answer

So, we wrote to all current and "former" members of FECRIS asking a few questions about these new changes. Most of our requests remained unanswered, including with the President of FECRIS Belgian deputy André Frédéric, but we got a very few, but insightful, responses.

An Italian association which had been unlisted, *S.O.S. ANTIPLAGIO*, answered that they were not aware of having been unlisted and had not been warned in advance about it.

The Treasurer of FECRIS Didier Pachoud refused to answer and said that he would prefer that the answers come from the President of FECRIS. He said that he forwarded him the questions (which I had already sent) but I never heard back from the President.

The former President of FECRIS, Friedrich Griess, started by answering that he was not authorized to answer. Authorized by whom? I insisted politely and asked him what he thought of the numerous statements of Alexander Dvorkin and other Russian members of FECRIS regarding the war in Ukraine and the fact that Ukraine would be run by « cultists » manipulated by the West. He finally told me that he “was aware of the situation”, that he did “not support in any way the politics of Mr. Putin” and was “very unhappy about the actual situation because” he is “a good friend of Mr. Dvorkin”.

Finally the director of *A.V.P.I.M. – Association des Victimes des Pratiques Illégales de la Médecine*, Belgium, made an interesting answer. He explained to me that he was not in contact with FECRIS for 15 years, so before Alexander Dvorkin became the Vice President of FECRIS, and added that he had never been an active member of FECRIS. As his association was prominently featured as affiliated on FECRIS website in 2022, that triggered some curiosity.

So I randomly assessed some of the 38 associations that have been unlisted.

Fake members or disaffected ones

One of them, a **Swedish group** called ***Föreningen Rädda Individen*** (“Save the Individual Association”), had their website disappear end of 2020, and their last articles at this date were from 2017. So it looks that the association was not active for the last 6 years whilst it stayed on the FECRIS member list until recently.

Another one, ***NSS, National Spiritual Security of Armenia***, had a website address that sends you directly to the *National Security Service of Armenia*, the main intelligence service of the country. Does that mean that FECRIS is actively working with that intelligence service, as they did with the FSB and other intelligence services in many states? God knows. But for sure, this “member”, whether it never existed or was really the Armenian intelligence service, had a taste of fake.

The association listed under the name ***S.A.D.K. – Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft gegen destruktive Kulte***, in **Switzerland**, was in fact an Evangelical Center of Information, which for the French FECRIS, may taste a bit unsecular.

One of the disappeared associations, ***Sektenberatung Bremen*** (“Cult Advice of Bremen”), from **Germany**, seemed to be a one-man operation, has no website and since the late 90s there is no news about it anywhere.

Association of Religious Study Centers, in Kazakhstan, had only a Facebook page which does not exist anymore at least since 2021. It was never scanned by Web.archive.org before.

A FECRIS association in **France** named ***Attention Enfants*** (“Beware Children”) had their website vanished after May 2021. At this date, the last article on the website was dated 2006.

A Lithuanian association named ***C.P.B.- Cult Prevention Bureau*** never had any website, and no activity of such an association can be found on the internet, even in Lithuanian. Did it ever exist? Here again, God knows.

As we already [explained in November](#), the **Dnepropetrovsk City Center for the help to Victims of Destructive Cults "Dialogue", in Ukraine**, "has not published anything one line on their website since 2011. It looks like this member association stopped its activity more than 10 years ago but still remained on the FECRIS website to increase the number of members." FECRIS had tried to defend itself against the accusations of being pro-Russian by stating they had Ukrainian members, but in fact one of them was not active for 10 years, and the other one was a pro-Russian Ukrainian operation.

A FECRIS association in Norway called **Foreningen Redd Individet** ("Save the Individual Association") had no website and can't be found anywhere on Internet, at least with rapid research, besides being listed on FECRIS associated websites. Maybe it existed nevertheless, but before the existence of Internet...

Infosec, in Moldova: No activity, no website. On the website of the unlisted FECRIS group **Pancyprian Parents Union, in Cyprus**, the last publications are dated 2010. **In Sweden, RAM – Riksorganisationen Aktiva mot Manipulering** ("National Organization Active Against Manipulation") has no website and no activity. Then, the association in **Ukraine** named **U.N.I.A. – Ukrainian Network "InterAction"**, got their website disappearing in 2014, but even then, no article had been posted since June 2010.

Faking the list

No need to continue further. There are in fact two groups that have been unlisted from FECRIS website: one is the group of Russian members, whom FECRIS has supported for more than a decade and only disappeared when the risk for FECRIS reputation became too big for keeping them aboard. Through them, [FECRIS has been an active supporter of Russian propaganda against Ukraine](#). Russian members had their main leader, Alexander Dvorkin, as Vice President of FECRIS until 2021 and he was member of the board until March 2023. FECRIS has never made any public statement to denounce the anti-Ukrainian activities of its members, and on the opposite, they have condoned their propaganda for years, inviting them to speak at their annual symposiums, [along with official members of the French and Belgian governments](#).

The other group, maybe the biggest, is made of associations which in fact had stopped their activity long ago, if they ever had any. FECRIS was keeping them in the member list for one reason: look bigger when they were begging for subsidies from the French government.

Trial for the dissolution of the FECRIS: The anti-cultists lose the first round

On May 15, the Court of Marseille rejected FECRIS's motion to dismiss, and sentenced the anti-cult organization to pay the corresponding expenses.

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (22.05.2023) - [Readers of Bitter Winter are familiar](#) with the wrongdoings of FECRIS, the *European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sects*, an umbrella organization federating anti-cult movements in different countries and whose main financial support comes from the French government. FECRIS spreads throughout Europe and beyond the faulty and pseudo-scientific [anti-cult ideology](#).

It has also cooperated for years with the bloody repression of groups stigmatized as "cults" by the totalitarian regimes of [Russia and China](#). Since the democratic Maidan Revolution and the first Russian invasion of Ukrainian territories in 2014, the Russian branch of FECRIS has actively supported the aggression against Ukraine. It has fabricated for it a main tool of anti-Ukrainian propaganda, the false claim that the Maidan Revolution was organized by "cults," that "cults" dominate the Ukrainian government, and are exported by Ukraine into Russia to destabilize the Putin regime.

While after the second invasion of Ukraine of 2022, FECRIS has tried to separate itself from Russian anti-cultists, and [hide its past cooperation with its Russian branch](#), the latter had started its anti-Ukrainian campaign in 2014 and even earlier after the first Maidan of 2004, not in 2022. It has continued it during the long years when the most notorious Russian anti-cultist, Alexander Dvorkin, was Vice President of FECRIS, from 2009 to 2021.

FECRIS continuously spreads hate speech against the groups it singles out as "cults." FECRIS leaders in conferences and interviews have called for example the Church of Scientology "a cancer" and quoted approvingly a definition of the Jehovah's Witnesses as "a paradise of pedophiles."

FECRIS member associations have been sentenced repeatedly for defamation, and FECRIS itself lost a landmark case against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Hamburg, Germany, in 2020, where [it was found guilty](#) of 18 counts of untrue factual allegations. It tried to falsely claim that it had won the case in public, while [admitting it had lost it](#) in its closed-door meetings. FECRIS asked, and partially obtained, to have its legal expenses in the disastrous Hamburg case paid by French taxpayers through the funds it receives from the French government.

Not all turn the other cheek to FECRIS' aggressions. On September 10, 2022, an NGO with consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) called Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience (CAP-LC, Coordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience) summoned FECRIS before the Court of Marseille to obtain its dissolution, based on the accusation that it carries out illegal activities. (Paradoxically, FECRIS also has a consultative status at ECOSOC, although leading scholars of religions, including Ukrainian academics who remember the long anti-Ukrainian activities by its Russian branch, have asked that [such status be withdrawn](#)).

According to a summary by the Court of Marseille in an order dated May 15, 2023, in its writ of summons CAP-LC "recalls that it [CAP-LC] was founded for the defense of religious minorities and new religions, which FECRIS denounces as 'cults.' It relies on article 3 of the law of 1901 on associations, which provides for the nullity of association which pursues an illicit goal, and of its article 7, which offers to any interested party the possibility of acting in dissolution for this reason.

CAP-LC maintains that its social object of promoting religious freedom is threatened by the illegal activities of FECRIS, which is linked to the Russian power and to a radical fringe of the Orthodox Church, and through one of its affiliates participates in the installation of a Christian Orthodox religious hegemony and the discrimination against religious and spiritual minorities.

It bases its request for dissolution on the dissemination of discriminatory and defamatory statements in 2006, 2009 and at conferences in 2015 and 2016 against minority religious movements and the assimilation of several other organizations and movements to cults. CAP-LC indicates that these remarks were made by prominent members of FECRIS. It maintains that the associations belonging to FECRIS and their members trivialize a pseudo-legal-scientific discourse aiming at assimilating religious minorities to cultic deviances.

It recalls a conviction of FECRIS for defamation by a German court in 2020, and the multiple judicial condemnations in France from 1997 to 2015 against associations linked to FECRIS, and therefore part of its international network, notably UNADFI and GEMPPPI. It denounces the misuse of subsidies that FECRIS has received from the French Prime Minister for the organization of a conference in 2020, which was carried out online and whose funds were used to pay for the courts cases it lost."

On January 13, 2013, FECRIS filed a motion to dismiss the case based on two arguments. The first was that CAP-LC as an association had not been attacked by FECRIS and therefore lacked legal interest or standing to sue the same FECRIS. In fact, FECRIS even argued that the nullity of an association contract is a "relative nullity" that can only be claimed by a member of the association itself.

Second, FECRIS relied on the statute of limitations of the action, in that it was brought more than five years after the incorporation of FECRIS in 1994.

On May 15, the Court of Marseille rejected FECRIS' motion to dismiss and sentenced it to pay Euro 1,500 to CAP-LC as contribution to its expenses.

On the first claim, CAP-LC's alleged lack of legal interest, the Court observed that CAP-LC is a French association in good standing whose statutory aim is the protection of religious liberty. "It follows from the combination of articles 3 and 7 of the law of July 1, 1901, the Court stated, that any interested party can request the judicial pronouncement of the dissolution of an association when it has an illicit object or contrary to the laws.

The plaintiff denounces a list of the facts imputed to FECRIS that are likely to undermine its object insofar as they are against freedom of conscience and religious freedom. In support of its claims, CAP-LC provides documents emanating from FECRIS members, or reproducing remarks it claims were made during FECRIS conferences. It will be up to the trial judge to rule on the proof of these facts and their influence on the validity of the association's purpose. If they were accepted as true, they would be likely to damage the statutory object of CAP-LC. It follows that, at the stage of admissibility, the organization CAP-LC has a legal interest in acting."

On the second claim, concerning the statute of limitations, the Court noted that in a case of dissolution the date when the prescription period starts is not the date of incorporation of the association, but the date of the last unlawful act committed. The court observed that CAP-LC claimed that FECRIS acted illegally in 2018 and 2020, and that some of its

illegal acts were continuing at the time of the summons. As a consequence, the statute of limitations does not apply.

FECRIS has lost a first round of this important case. We know that in democratic countries the independence of the judiciary is a fundamental principle. We also know that the judiciary operates in a political and social context, which in France is hostile to movements stigmatized as "cults" and supportive of anti-cult organizations such as FECRIS.

Yet, the decision of May 15, in the first case when FECRIS is in court in France as a defendant and one in which its very existence is at risk, is a positive development. It recognized that, "if the facts were accepted as true" (and they are supported by a massive documentation), they would prove that FECRIS is an organization threatening freedom of religion or belief.

Photo 1 : *The Marseille Courthouse.* [Credits](#)

Photo 2 : *The order of May 15, 2023, by the Court of Marseille.*

Photo 3: *FECRIS President, Belgian Senator André Frédéric, and Thierry Valle, President of CAP-LC.* From Twitter.

MIVILUDES, from tragedy to farce: Bailiff compels Georges Fenech to pay his debts to Scientology

Former MIVILUDES chief and member of its Orientation Council had € 5,000 plus interests seized from his bank account.

HRWF Introduction

Scandals are piling up this year among anti-cult organizations in France and more is coming...

[MIVILUDES from Tragedy to Farce: Bailiff compels Georges Fenech to pay his debts to Scientology](#)

[Scandal: FECRIS falsifies the program of a 2017 conference to hide that a fanatic anti-Ukrainian Russian lawyer was among the speakers](#)

[To avoid judicial proceedings by Scientology, the MIVILUDES republishes its annual report](#)

[82 Ukrainian scholars denounce to Macron a supporter of Crimea's annexation](#)

[How MIVILUDES and French anti-cultists invented a cult](#)

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (19.05.2023) - We noted some days ago the curious relationship between the French governmental anti-cult agency MIVILUDES and the beautiful city of Caen, which is becoming synonym of bad luck for the controversial organization. Earlier this month, to avoid a hearing at the Court of Caen, MIVILUDES [had to republish its latest yearly report](#) including an answer by the Church of Scientology.

Confirming Marx's famous dictum that history often repeats itself twice, the first time as a tragedy and the second as a farce, something in the air of Caen confused again the MIVILUDES in the person of its former chief and now member of its Orientation Council Georges Fenech. He is known as an arch-anticultist, and an occasional [tourist to Crimea](#), where he went to applaud Putin for his illegal annexation of this Ukrainian territory.

On September 12, 2014, Fenech was interviewed by the radio network Europe 1 and stated unequivocally that Scientology was guilty of the crimes (including the "abus de faiblesse," the French version of brainwashing) for which it was on trial in Versailles. This was a case where a prosecutor regarded as objectionable that a local company had organized for its employees courses (on non-religious subjects) with teachers who were members of the Church of Scientology. In all democratic countries, there is a principle called "presumption of innocence." Every citizen has a right of being considered innocent until declared guilty by a final decision by a court of law.

In 2014 the Versailles case was pending. It is still pending today. On January 23, 2017, Caen's Court of First Instance sided with Fenech, finding him not guilty. However, on December 18, 2018, the Appeal Court of Caen reversed the first decision and concluded that Fenech had violated Scientology's right to the presumption of innocence. The Appeal Court noted that Fenech's behavior should be judged more severely than if he were just a common citizen. As a former magistrate and former president of the MIVILUDES, those who listened to his interview might have found his statements as especially authoritative and believable.

Fenech was thus placed under an injunction not to further violate Scientology's right to the presumption of innocence, and sentenced to pay Euro 5,000 to Scientology, including damages and legal expenses.

Fenech presents himself as a champion of the respect of the laws of the French Republic, and constantly accuses the "cults" of breaching them. The laws of "la République" are clear: court decisions should be obeyed, even if one disagrees with them.

Fenech, however, did not respect the decision of the Caen Appeal Court. For four years, several reminders notwithstanding, he did not pay his debt to the Church of Scientology.

In the end, it happened to Fenech what happens to debtors who are delinquent in their payments. A bailiff enjoined him to pay. He didn't, and the bailiff seized the money from his bank account, plus Euro 1,139.51 as interests. The money was transferred on the account of the Church of Scientology on April 26, 2023. A copy of the file is in possession of Bitter Winter.

France gave to the world the pochade and the vaudeville, and the French are generally admired for the levity with which they enjoy a good laugh. This time, they can laugh at the expenses of George Fenech, a custodian of the laws who, not content with having

breached the law once on the presumption of innocence, decided to breach it twice by not paying what he was sentenced to pay. Unavoidably, in the end he had his money taken from his bank account, as a common delinquent debtor.

Photo: Fenech's interview of September 12, 2014, for which it was sentenced. Screenshot.

Female basketball player banned for playing with headscarf

Salimata Sylla denounces a discrimination, noting that the International Basketball Federation allows female players to play with headscarves.

by Massimo Introvigne



Salimata Sylla. From Twitter.

[Bitter Winter](#) (17.05.2023) - There are stories that can happen only in France. French call them "franco-françaises," or quintessentially French. One concerns the French obsession with combating "separatism," or the possibility that religious communities, be they "cults" or parts of Islam, live a culture "separated" from the principles of the secular Republic.

25-year-old Salimata Sylla is a player for the French 3rd-league team Aubervilliers. Her career had caught the attention of the media, as she grew up in a problematic and crime-ridden banlieue. Hers was a success story of integrating into French society through sport. She was often invited to give talks to young banlieue girls, and was featured in a Footlocker promotional campaign.



Before the ban: Sylla as Footlocker testimonial and motivational banlieue speaker. From Twitter.

She appeared in all these events with a headscarf, and she wore it when she played. This was not a problem until in 2021 France passed its controversial law against "separatism," and inspired by it the French Federation of Basketball decided in 2022 that female players could not wear headscarves. Sylla was stopped from playing a game on January 8 and, since she insists on wearing her headscarf, has been prevented from playing ever since, after 14 years of her life devoted to basketball.

She is now organizing an alternative league where women players can wear headscarves but it is also challenging the French Federation and gathering supporters. She notes that the International Basketball Federation does allow female players to play with headscarves.



Sylla: "I will not play without headscarf." From Twitter.

Her protest has generated a few Islamophobic comments on social media, inviting her to “go and play in Saudi Arabia.” The French Federation is not applying any international rule, it is just enforcing the ideology of anti-separatism. As I said, some things seem to happen only in France.

Anthroposophy: French State Television censored for its anti-cult bias

The French Council of Journalistic Ethic and Mediation found that France 2 relied excessively on apostate ex-members, and presented a distorted view of Steiner schools.

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (15.05.2023) - The French Council of Journalistic Ethic and Mediation (CDJM) rendered on April 11 [an interesting opinion](#) about a complaint filed by the National Association for the Promotion and Future of Steiner-Waldorf Pedagogy (ANPAPS), representing the schools inspired by Anthroposophy in France, against the government-owned TV network France 2.

France’s journalistic milieus are normally biased against “cults” and tend to take seriously the information supplied by the governmental anti-cult agency MIVILUDES, which is often criticized abroad, and by “apostate” ex-members of religious movements. However, even in France there are limits, and the CDJM decision, which accepted several claims by the Anthroposophists, is extremely interesting because it censors French media’s typical approach to “cults.”

The case concerned a program titled “The Steiner Method, an Alternative Pedagogy Under Surveillance,” broadcast by France 2 on November 3, 2022. The program stated that “the Steiner-Waldorf schools strive to train future citizens who would not be able to fit into our Republic,” which corresponds to the accusation of “separatism” from common French “Republican” values commonly directed against both Islam and “cults.”

Rather than videos from present-day Steiner-Waldorf schools, the footage used consisted of “images from another century, in black and white, showing a group of students walking in circles in white togas, like the Solar Temple cult,” notorious for its mass suicides and homicides in the last decade of the 20th century. Statements by the MIVILUDES were repeated uncritically, and the program offered a tribune to Grégoire Perra, well-known as “the main detractor of Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy in France and of Anthroposophy.”

A request by the Anthroposophists to publish their response and a correction was ignored. France 2 defended itself by stating, inter alia, that it relied on statements by the MIVILUDES, a governmental agency. While, predictably, the CDJM stated that France 2 cannot be censored for quoting the MIVILUDES, it found aspects of the program’s presentation of the Steiner-Waldorf schools both inaccurate and sensational. It also censored the statement that it is difficult to obtain information on the Steiner-Waldorf schools from inside, observing that on the contrary the schools are open to visitors and primary sources about them are easily available online. The CDJM thus concluded that “France 2 violated the ethical obligation of accuracy.”

It also censored France 2 because it “chose not to broadcast contemporary images, but to insert black and white archival images of children running around in white togas. This excerpt is neither identified nor presented as an archival image, with an explicit mention on the screen. It has the effect of creating confusion on the current nature of the education that is provided in these institutions.”

Finally, the CDJM also noted that France 2 gave a prominent part in its program to anti-Anthroposophist Grégoire Perra and another opponent while the response by Anthroposophy was reduced to “a simple sentence given about fifteen seconds at the end of the sequence in question.” This, “when two witnesses, in particular, had spoken at length about their opposition to the [Steiner-Waldorf educational] method, cannot suffice as presentation of a reply, which would have been essential to achieve the balance requested by good journalistic practice.”

Finally, the CDJM notes that, when requested by the Anthroposophists, “no rectification of error was made to the online text accompanying the video of the sequence in question, and that France 2 therefore violated its ethical obligation to rectify inaccuracies and infringements of the truthfulness of the facts.”

In conclusion, while not all claims of the Anthroposophists were accepted, the CDJM concluded that France 2 on several points “violated.., the obligations of fairness and verification of the facts. It also failed to respect the ethical obligation to correct errors.”

This incident is not isolated. Throughout the world, and with a special viciousness in France, [media presents issues about groups labeled as “cults”](#) by relying on statements by anti-cultists and “[apostate](#)” ex-members, i.e., the minority of ex-members who turn into militant critics of the movement they have left. Media do not verify the facts, and refuse to give equal space to members of the movements who would present their different points of view. This may only result in biased and defamatory reports.

Professional watchdogs such as the CDJM may play an important role in correcting this widespread form of journalistic malpractice. Perhaps, more religious movements should file complaints with them in the future.

HRWF Note

France 2 is not the voice of the French State. It is a French public national television channel. It is part of the [state-owned France Télévisions](#) group, along with [France 3](#), [France 4](#), [France 5](#) and [France Info](#). France Télévisions also participates in [Arte](#) and [Euronews](#).

The Steiner-Waldorf school in Verrières-le-Buisson, France. [Credits](#).

Scandal: FECRIS falsifies the program of its 2017 Conference at the Belgian Parliament in Brussels

The purpose is to hide that a fanatical Russian anti-Ukrainian lawyer was among their speakers. Alexander Korelov claims “former Ukraine” is still “part

of my country, the USSR.” FECRIS retroactively changed the program of their 2017 conference to eliminate Korelov’s name and speech. See the scanned documents in the article of [Bitter Winter](#). The event was then hosted in the Belgian Federal Parliament by FECRIS’ new president [André Frédéric](#) who is also the president of the anti-cult group [AVISO](#). He is as well a former member of the House of Representatives (1999-2018) and he is now [President of the Regional Walloon Parliament](#). See [here](#) the details of his 14 mandates and positions as well as his incomes. (Subtitle by HRWF)

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (08.05.2023) - Readers of “Bitter Winter” know the lunatic Russian lawyer, Alexander Korelov, who in 2022 ridiculously claimed that [the Jehovah’s Witnesses were preparing a coup](#) to overcome the Putin regime. As a lawyer, Korelov regularly advises or represents leading Russian anti-cultists such as [Alexander Dvorkin](#) or [Alexander Novopashin](#) when they are accused of defamation by groups they stigmatize as “cults.” In 2017, Korelov introduced himself as “[lawyer of RATsIRS](#),” then the Russian branch of FECRIS.

Currently, FECRIS has [a new list of member associations](#) “recognized at the General Assembly held in Marseille on March 24, 2023,” which does not include its former Russian affiliates. However, there is no mention that the Russian anti-cult groups have been formally expelled, and their obnoxious ideology repudiated. And while FECRIS claims that the associations not included in the March 2023 list can no longer declare that they are part of FECRIS, as of today Novopashin ignores these instructions and keeps on his website a statement that his organization “[represents FECRIS in Russia](#).”

It is also interesting that even after the Marseille assembly FECRIS lists among its members the Bulgarian organization C.R.N.R.M. – Center for Research of New Religious Movements, whose website before disappearing in 2022 [evidenced their close cooperation](#) with Novopashin and his group, and the Ukrainian F.P.P.S. – Family and Personality Protection Society, listed as “dormant” because of the war. A leading member of this Ukrainian group is or was Vladimir Nikolaevich Rogatin, who became notorious for launching as early as 2014, through Russian media, the ideas that [Ukraine was plagued by Satanism](#) and that the Maidan anti-Russian revolution and the defense of Crimea against the Russian invasion [had been infiltrated by Nazis and neo-Pagans](#), both key tools of Russian anti-Ukrainian propaganda (in the latter article, Rogatin was introduced as “a correspondent member of the FECRIS”).

However, there is worse in FECRIS’ behavior about Russia. Much worse.

On May 19, 2017, the Secretary General of the MIVILUDES, the French governmental anti-cult mission, Anne Josso, [shared the stage in Brussels](#) with Korelov, as did other FECRIS luminaries, at a conference organized at the Belgian Parliament by the same FECRIS.

We denounced the ramblings of Korelov in October 2022. We obtained a magical effect. Conference programs are sometimes changed at the last minute—but we never heard of programs of conferences changed “after” they had been held. Yet, this is precisely what happened with the FECRIS conference of May 19, 2017. Before the “Bitter Winter” articles exposing Korelov, his paper was duly listed in the program of the conference.

After our articles, [Korelov "magically" disappeared from the program](#), as if he had never participated in the event.

The program of the 2017 conference on FECRIS's website before and after the "Bitter Winter" articles. The detail shows how the paper by Korelov has been eliminated. [Click to enlarge.](#)

The paper by Korelov [was also available](#) on FECRIS's website before our criticism; now, it has disappeared.

We are accustomed to the erratic behavior of FECRIS when it comes to slandering new religious movements, but this is something entirely different. Only in Stalin's Russia old pictures of Bolshevik leaders were manipulated to excise the images of those no longer in the good graces of the tyrant. Now FECRIS cuts from the program of one of its most important conferences a speaker who has become an embarrassment for it, thus creating a fake conference program and trying to retroactively change history. Does the French government, which publicly supports and finances FECRIS, have anything to say about this scandal and this fraud?

One who would probably not complain about the use of Soviet strategies is Korelov himself. On May 4, he gave [an interview to the website of fellow anti-cultist Alexander Novopashin](#) to answer, somewhat belatedly, Bitter Winter's criticism. In fact, he did not answer anything, and limited himself to insults. He calls our articles "typical example of frenzied Western propaganda." He insists that "attacking Father Alexander Novopashin is a sign of a small mind and a lack of elementary culture," a statement that, as it appears on the site of the same Novopashin, readers can surely accept as independent and impartial. Speaking of the undersigned, Korelov insists that "Introvigne does not burden himself with arguments, his judgments are unfounded and not based on facts. This person does not want to see what is really happening on the territory of the former Ukraine."

This is precisely FECRIS' problem with Korelov. It is not that he offends Bitter Winter, something FECRIS would perhaps gladly do as well if it would not be deterred by Western laws on defamation. It is the reference to "former Ukraine." And there is worse. In the interview, Korelov tells us something about himself. "I consider myself a Soviet person of the Orthodox faith, he says. I grew up in the USSR, I love our big country, I remember with warmth the best years of the Soviet Union. And Orthodoxy is my spiritual path." How he can reconcile the atheistic Soviet Union with Orthodoxy is something he can perhaps explain in his next interview.

It seems that Korelov lives under the delusion that the Soviet Union still exists. He continues by proclaiming that "Ukraine, now former, is a part of my country. My country is the Russian Empire, this is the USSR... The fact is that the sovereign state of Ukraine does not exist. This is an administrative region of the USSR, our land and our people... Ukraine is part of the USSR. So the military conflict is an internal affair..." Having allied themselves with the West, he laments, the Ukrainians are "sold into slavery, they are subjected to wild medical experiments. The modern 'collective West' is the greatest criminal for whom nothing is sacred."

Korelov has "no doubts about the victory of Russia" in the present war, but that will not be the end of its conflict with the West. "The satanized political West will not just calm

down. No wonder they are preparing a new viral attack on our planet. More dangerous than the notorious coronavirus. And we should not forget about the upcoming conflicts in Poland and Taiwan.”

I don't know about any upcoming conflict in Poland, although I understand Korelov hopes there will be one in Taiwan. However, interpreting the incoherent words of a madman in the end is not a useful exercise. It is much more interesting to focus on the fact that the madman, the “Soviet person” who believes that “Ukraine does not exist” was a honored guest of FECRIS and invited to speak in the parliament of a European Union country. And on the unbelievable attempt of FECRIS to hide the evidence of its past dealings with Korelov—something that in the world of modern Internet is impossible, as the earlier versions of modified pages can always be recovered, but that should show to its sponsors what kind of disreputable organization they continue to support.

More reading

[Deep concerns about the infiltration of FECRIS' Russian branch in Belgium](#)

Human Rights Without Frontiers is deeply concerned by the infiltration for years of pro-Putin and anti-Ukrainian propagandists in Belgian politics, including in the federal parliament of Belgium. HRWF (07.12.2022)

Photo: Alexander Korelov. From Telegram.

To avoid judicial proceedings by Scientology, the MIVILUDES republishes its annual report

Faced with a lawsuit, the French governmental anti-cult mission republishes its yearly report including a four-page right of answer by the Church of Scientology

HRWF (05.08.2023) On 5 May, Bitter Winter published an article by Massimo Introvigne titled [“Anti-cultism à la mode de Caen: to avoid a court hearing, MIVILUDES humors Scientology”](#) showing how surprisingly the MIVILUDES, the “Inter-ministerial mission for monitoring and combating cultic deviances (dérives sectaires)”, a peculiar French governmental institution officially endorsing and propagating the [anti-cult ideology](#), has suddenly decided to avoid a lawsuit in the city of Caen which would have put in the limelight of the media a number of systemic deficiencies of its methodology. Hereafter, we publish large excerpts of the said article; the divisions in sections and the titles thereof are HRWF's and not the author's.

The MIVILUDES in trouble with the right of reply

“The MIVILUDES publishes yearly reports, which [normally include](#) factual mistakes, faulty statistics, and slander against movements it has decided to label as ‘cults’ (‘sectes,’ a French word that should be translated in English as ‘cults’ rather than ‘sects’).

(...) What happened to the MIVILUDES, thus, was that some of its victims started taking legal actions. One was the Church of Scientology, which asked for its answer to the allegations included in the MIVILUDES document to be published within or at the end of the report on the MIVILUDES's website. The request was based on the French law on the

right of reply, or the right to defend oneself against public criticism in the same venue where it was published. Since MIVILUDES did not publish Scientology's answer within a reasonable delay, Scientology filed an emergency case (référé) with the Court of Caen, asking that MIVILUDES be forced to publish the answer. The hearing was scheduled for May 4. (...)

The MIVILUDES' "former chief and now member of its Orientation Council, Georges Fenech, already had a bad experience in Caen, where [he was sentenced in 2019](#) for infringement of the presumption of innocence of the Church of Scientology. Fenech prefers touristic destinations other than Caen, including Crimea, where [he went in 2019](#) to meet with Vladimir Putin and condone the occupation of this Ukrainian region by Russian forces, which the French government and the European Union regard as illegal."

"Trying to avoid the ill-fated Caen trip, the MIVILUDES did something that should be normal in democratic countries but is untypical of its modus operandi. Before the date of the hearing, it did [republish its last yearly report](#) by including the answer to it by the Church of Scientology. You may read the answer in the very last pages of this extraordinary 'second edition' of the MIVILUDES report."

About the arguments

"It is a common sense answer, focusing on the fact that the references to Scientology in the report do not amount to 'cultic deviances,' even if one accepts this notion that is typical of the MIVILUDES and is not endorsed by mainline scholars of new religious movements. The answer notes that, 'The Church [of Scientology] is pejoratively qualified as a multinational of spirituality. It is true that, like many other religions, the Church of Scientology has an international dimension: its followers are present in more than 150 countries throughout the world. But what is the difference with other religions such as Catholicism, Islam or Buddhism, for example? Why is the Church of Scientology treated differently with a commercial designation, when many countries in Europe and around the world recognize it as a religion like any other?"

What are really "the saisines"?

"The answer then criticizes the system of 'saisines,' i.e. MIVILUDES' method to evaluate the danger of a [cult](#) based on a number of reports against it anybody can send to the agency via a Web form. '

To justify the inclusion of our Church in the activity report, MIVILUDES puts forward on pages 35 and 38 the figure of 33 'saisines' received in 2022 concerning the Church of Scientology, without us knowing anything about the content of these 'saisines,' or even about this opaque concept of 'saisine' (does a simple request for information concerning our Church constitute a 'saisine?') Moreover, everyone can appreciate the special treatment given to the Church of Scientology in the activity report, for no apparent reason: 33 'saisines' are enough for MIVILUDES to devote 4 pages of its report to the Church of Scientology (pages 58 to 61 of the report) and to mention it 51 times.

This is much more than all the cumulative developments devoted to the Christian tradition as a whole (Catholicism, Protestantism and Evangelicalism), which has nevertheless been the subject of... 293 'saisines'! The yearly report thus testifies to a very curious conception of the principle of impartiality of the administration and of the neutrality of the State with respect to religions."

Half of the truth is not the truth

“After criticizing the report’s lack of understanding of what the theology of Scientology is all about, the answer discusses the case of a new Church of Scientology to be opened in Saint-Denis. “If, on this subject, MIVILUDES mentions the cancellation of the municipal decree which attempted to hinder the work necessary for the opening of the building, it forgets to specify that the State was also condemned by the Administrative Court of Appeal of Paris, at the same time as the city. The report tries to minimize this condemnation by simply indicating that the authorities must base themselves on strictly legal and objective considerations, without any pejorative a priori displayed towards the movement. This is a modest way of carefully avoiding the fact that the administrative judges condemned the administration for a misuse of power committed to the detriment of the Church, that is to say, the most serious violation tainting administrative action. One can only deplore the fact that MIVILUDES does not frankly disassociate itself from actions which seriously undermine the rule of law, because respect for the law is part of respect for the Republic and the great principles on which it is founded.”

Freedom of expression (verbal and printed) – a ‘cultic deviance’?

“The answer notes that the report presents proselytism activities and the distribution of flyers and booklets as ‘cultic deviances’ while they are part of the normal exercise of [religious liberty](#) by any religion. ‘The allegation that the Church seems to target fragile, suffering people, confronted with personal dramas or existential questions, adds the answer, is once again an allegation which has no reality: Scientology is universal and addresses itself to all, as is reflected in the profile of its devotees throughout the world, who belong to all socio-professional categories.’ The Church of Scientology is accused both of carrying out a massive propaganda by advertising its ideas online and offline and of secretiveness and ‘lack of transparency,’ which seems contradictory.

A controversial book endorsed by the MIVILUDES

The MIVILUDES report, the answer notes, advertises a comic book called ‘The Bubble Box,’ published in 2005 by a disgruntled ex-member of Scientology, and ‘endorsed by the MIVILUDES because it is one of the winners of its call for projects in 2021.’ The report, according to the answer, ‘tends to give it credibility by presenting it as a true testimony, whereas there is nothing to verify its authenticity. Whether or not this story really comes from a former faithful, its artificially dramatic tone, like a Hollywood thriller, has the effect of damaging the reputation and image of the Church, as well as the religious feelings of its faithful who do not recognize themselves at all in this story. This is all the more damaging since the report claims that the comic book was widely distributed with the blessing of a state agency.”

Finally, the answer mentions that the MIVILUDES report ‘also claims that the vigilance of some complainants has thwarted potential asset grabs by the Church of Scientology.’ However, ‘this claim is not supported by any source mentioned and... it is therefore impossible to know on what alleged facts it is based.’”

Conclusions

“It is clear, concludes the answer, that the MIVILUDES did not find any ‘cultic deviance’ in the activities of the Church of Scientology, even according to its own controversial definition of the notion. Having decided a priori that Scientology is a [cult](#),’ any activity it

carries out, which would be regarded as absolutely normal if practiced by another religion, are automatically labeled as 'cultic deviances.' This is a circular and faulty logic, which can only result in discrimination and slander."

Photo: The new Palais de Justice of Caen. From Twitter.

French Evangelicals ask UN to help against secularist state

The French Evangelicals ask the United Nations to help the French state speak respectfully about beliefs and stop "fuelling anti-religious sentiment, prejudice or stigmatisation of believers."

[CNE News](#) (12.04.2023) - That is clear from a letter sent by the National Council of French Evangelicals ([CNEF](#)) to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The High Commissioner will come to France on May 1st for the [periodic review](#) of the country's compliance with international rights conventions. In that context, NGOs can send reports to the UN Commissioner to ask for attention to problems.

Together with the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) and the European Baptist Federation (EBF), CNEF has produced a report with recommendations.

Surveillance

The French Protestants refer to the change in the law in mid-2021, reinforcing respect for the "Republic". In an [earlier report](#) from last October, the organisation wrote about a "shift toward a 'secular surveillance' of worship."

In a sheet with recommendations from this month, the four organisations warn that "new legislation on worship should not be restrictive or constraining". The Evangelicals see places of worship as "imperative needs of the population" that should be free to open also during a pandemic or security crisis.

Instead of speaking negatively about religion, state representatives should "promote the understanding of religious freedom in France by improving the teaching of the religious phenomenon within the national education".

In follow-up, the authorities should ensure everyone has freedom of expression, including the propagation of religious beliefs. That is part of the "pluralism of beliefs and opinions" in modern society.

At the end of the report, the Evangelicals ask for a "general conscientious objection" for caregivers, particularly concerning abortion and euthanasia.

Secular

Since 1905, France has been a secular country. That means that the influence of the (Catholic) church was no longer part of the political establishment. During the decades after that, church people have complained regularly that the state took this so seriously that it actually meant that the state tried to wipe the church out of society at all.

In 1905, the Protestants were happy since they enjoyed more space because of the secularisation. But now, they also detect an “anti-religious sentiment”, as they wrote last October.

Photo: The Evangelicals in France ask the UN to help to create a respectful environment for religion in their country. Photo Facebook CNEF

France: Protesters set on fire a historical convent—only three lines in the media

During the pension reform protests, radical demonstrators in Rennes tried to set on fire the Convent of the Jacobins together with a police station.

By Willy Fautré

[Bitter Winter](#) (18.04.2023) - On 14 April, in the city of Rennes, radical anti-Macron protestors from the extreme-left, who oppose the new law fixing the retirement age at 64, started a fire at the historical Convent of the Jacobins, converted into a congress hall, and did the same at a police station that was empty at that time. The French media outlets only devoted a few lines to this act of violence targeting a 14th-century Catholic building.

Considerable damage was also caused to shops in the centre of the city.

Minister of the Interior Gérald Darmanin strongly condemned these outbursts on Twitter. “The damage and attacks tonight in Rennes, against a police station and the Convent of Jacobins, by thugs determined to fight are unacceptable.” He promised “full support to the police and gendarmes mobilized,” adding that “the perpetrators will be prosecuted.”

The union of officers and police commissioners also reacted to the damages at the police station deemed “lamentable.” “Here is a police office in Rennes intended to welcome our fellow citizens that is going up in smoke. Why? This action of activists discredits the fight against the pension reform,” said the unionists.

Following these fires, an investigation was opened for “damage by dangerous means and criminal association.” Three people have been taken into custody. We will see what will be the final outcome of the prosecution—if any.

The convent is a foundation of the Order of Preachers, better known as Dominicans or (in France) Jacobins. The originality of this new order, created in 1215, lied in its location in the heart of the cities.

The first stone of the convent was laid on February 2, 1369, in the presence of the Duke of Brittany and built on the land of two generous donors, Pierre Rouxel and his wife. Its construction marked the beginning of an important spiritual, intellectual, and political revival in the history of the city and of Brittany. The work was rather slow because it was only based on donations from the faithful. To accelerate the undertaking, Duke John IV of Brittany gave his financial support and became the official founder.

The convent of Jacobins quickly became the place of an important pilgrimage, thanks to the devotion given to the image of the Virgin of Good News.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the importance of the Jacobin convent was not only linked to the worship of Our Lady of Good News, but also to its intellectual influence, which led to an increasing number of religious vocations. Theology was the primary subject taught here, which could be supplemented by philosophy, canon law, and the Holy Scripture.

The teaching was based on the important library of the convent: there were more than 5,000 printed books (a part of which is now kept by the library of Rennes Métropole). Just before the Revolution, some of the friars adhered to the new ideas of Freemasonry. Of the twenty or so Dominicans remaining in the convent in the 1770s, at least five were active in the "Parfaite Union" Masonic lodge.

At the Revolution, all religious properties were seized and became state property. Many of them were dismantled and sold as national assets. However, the convent buildings did not find a buyer. In 1793, the convent was assigned to the army and adapted to serve as military stores. Until the 1980s, the convent was the headquarters of the army's sports associations; it also housed equipment and certain archives of the Ministry of Defense. The convent was listed in the supplementary inventory of historical monuments in September 1986. It was classified as a historical monument in May 1991. In 2002, it became the property of Rennes Métropole, which transformed it into a Congress Hall in 2018.

Photo 1: The attack against the Convent of the Jacobins. From Twitter.

Photo 2: Rennes' Convent of the Jacobins (photo taken before the attack). [Credits](#).

Over 80 Ukrainian scholars denounce to Macron a supporter of Russia's annexation

In 2019, Georges Fenech, now a member of a French state institution, participated in the commemoration of Crimea's invasion and annexation by Russia



The controversial visit of a French delegation in 2019. Georges Fenech is the fourth one starting from the right, hiding behind the other French participants. Credit: [Libération](#)

HRWF (16.03.2023) - On the eve of the 9th anniversary of Russia's invasion of Crimea, over 80 Ukrainian scholars in religious studies have written to President Emmanuel Macron to denounce the presence in an institution of the French state of a supporter of Russia's annexation in 2014.

On the 5th anniversary of Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea, Georges Fenech, a former member of the National Assembly (2022-2008 and 2012-2017) was part of a controversial visit in Crimea of an unofficial French delegation led by MP Thierry Mariani.

Since 2021, Fenech has been a member of the Orientation Council of the MIVILUDES, a controversial state body monitoring the activities of a number of religious or belief groups, he had been the president of from 2008 to 2012.

The three-day visit of Crimea at mid-March 2019 was organized and financed by the "Russian Foundation for Peace," according to Mariani.

The participants were received by Leonid Slutsky, Chairman of the Committee on International Affairs in the Russian State Duma, and Vladimir Konstantinov, a Crimean MP accused of high treason in Ukraine, sanctioned by the European Union since 2014, and a strong supporter of Putin and the Russian annexation of Crimea. They also met Vladimir Putin himself in Simferopol.

The purpose for the unofficial French delegation was to testify in France about how well Crimea was doing under Russian occupation. French journalists from [Libération](#)

recognized Fenech in a Russian documentary that flanked the visit, and Mariani confirmed that Fenech who obviously wanted to go unnoticed was part of the delegation.

In 2011, Fenech also shared the stage at a conference with a Russian extremist Orthodox clergyman, Alexander Novopashin, number 2 of the Russian branch of the French FECRIS organisation known to stigmatize non-mainline religious or belief groups.

Recently, [Novopashin called Ukrainians "Nazis", "Satanists" and "cannibals."](#) He drives a car with a huge "Z" printed on it, insists that Western cults were behind the Euromaidan and Ukrainian authorities, that "the special operation of denazification is carried out not only to destroy the hydra in its lair, but to protect the whole Russian world." He preaches that "after an end will be put to Ukrainian Nazism, some other aggressor country will appear with which the United States will begin to threaten Russia. A civilizational war cannot be avoided."

France joins China and Russia by introducing special police techniques against "cults"

A new law allows officers to bug houses and cars, hack email, and even impersonate mail carriers delivering packages to those suspected of "cultic deviances."

by Massimo Introvigne



"Gendarmerie" in action in France. Credits.

Imagine that you live in a country where "cultic deviances" from what the majority of the citizens regard as the normal, and normally tepid, behavior in matter religious is looked at with suspicion by the authorities. Your neighbors, who do not like you for whatever reason, report to a specialized anti-cult agency or to the police that you behave strangely and perhaps are part of a "cult." At this stage, the police may be authorized to hack your

email and your computer or place a hidden microphone in your house or your car. And beware when the mail carrier knocks at your door with a package: it can be an undercover police agent.

This is unfortunately daily routine in China, where thousands of police officers work full time to crack down on “cults,” or in Russia where all members of a religious group regarded as “extremist,” which does not mean violent but simply trying to convert members of the majority Russian Orthodox Church, may be visited by the Federal Security Service (FSB), taken to jail, and even tortured. The democratic world continues to denounce these blatant violations of religious liberty and human rights—and rightly so.

Most of those who protest the denial of religious liberty in Russia and China would be mightily surprised to learn that similar legislation has been introduced in a country normally considered as a beacon of democratic values, France.

A country with a strong secular humanist tradition, France has been suspicious of religion since the French Revolution, and has a specialized governmental agency and police units fighting against “cultic deviances” (dérives sectaires). It should, however, be remembered that being a member of a “cult” is not in itself a crime in France.

The so-called French anti-cult law of 2001 has been criticized by virtually all international scholars of new religious movements who have studied it, but even its provisions does not make belonging to a “cult” (secte) or engaging in “cultic deviances” a crime. Only putting a person through certain techniques in a “state of physical or psychological dependency” causing her serious harm is a crime. I, and most scholars in my field, believe that these techniques do not exist, but at any rate in the French system that they are at work in a certain group should be proved on a case-by-case basis.

So, simply by being part of a “cult” (secte) or of a movement suspected of “cultic deviances” (dérives sectaires) you are not a criminal—not even in France. The problem is that you are treated like one.

A new [law of January 24, 2023](#), on the “orientation and programs of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs,” as its official comment specifies at no. 3.1.2, authorizes the relevant French authorities “to apply the special investigation techniques to the offence of abuse of weakness by an organized criminal gang (bande organisée) to facilitate the work of investigators in the combat against the cultic deviances.”



Entrance to the French Ministry of the Internal affairs, Paris. *Credits.*

The reference to an “organized criminal gang” is the key to allow the use of the “special investigation techniques.” The new law suggests in its article 16 that the typical crime of the 2001 anti-cult law, “abuse of weakness” through the famous and mysterious techniques creating psychological dependence (another incarnation of the discredit theory of **brainwashing**), can be perpetrated by an “organized gang”—and perhaps this happens in most or even all cases, since it is difficult to imagine a “cult” without an organization. This allows both to increase the penalties, up to seven years of imprisonment and one million euro of fine, and to apply the “special investigation techniques” in investigating the alleged crime.

The “special investigation techniques” are those listed in **Section XXV** of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The police officers will be able to hack mail accounts, bug homes and cars, send fake mails and use false identities on social media, impersonate “cultists” or potential converts and operate undercover, and even—as mentioned earlier—“deliver in place of postal service providers and freight operators objects, goods or products” to those suspected of “cultic deviances.” Note that according to article 706-79 police officers can be assisted by “specialized assistants” deputed on a case-by-case basis, and I wonder whether in the case of “cults” these may include the anti-cult activists.

The techniques of Section XXV were created to combat terrorism and organized crime. While always potentially dangerous for the rights of the defendants, a limited use of these techniques may in principle be admitted when the life of hundreds of citizens or the security of the country are at stake. Remember, however, that in the case of “cultic deviances” when an investigation is started there is not even evidence that the group will end up being accused of using forbidden techniques of brainwashing (or whatever France prefers to call them), even assuming they exist.

L'AMPLEUR DES MOYENS DEPLOYES PAR LES MOUVEMENTS A CARACTERE SECTAIRE FACE A LA FAIBLESSE DES MOYENS DE LUTTE CONTRE LES DERIVES SECTAIRES.

En ce début d'année 2022, force est de constater que le phénomène des dérives sectaires demeure plus que jamais prégnant en France et n'épargne aucun territoire. La Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires (MIVILUDES), pierre angulaire de la lutte contre les dérives sectaires, ainsi que les autres acteurs y participant sont d'autant plus mobilisés aujourd'hui que l'évolution du phénomène sectaire témoigne d'un accroissement et de mutations, accentués par

la survenance de la crise sanitaire doublée d'une crise sociale instaurant un climat anxigène empreint de méfiance, propice à la déstabilisation des personnes vulnérables. Dans ce contexte d'un phénomène sectaire à l'état gazeux et multiforme, s'imposant dans chaque sphère de la société, la justice doit relever le défi d'une meilleure caractérisation des infractions commises et d'une plus grande protection des droits et libertés fondamentales dans un cadre sectaire dans la mesure des moyens

juridiques disponibles.

I. Les dérives sectaires à l'aune de la protection des droits fondamentaux

En France, le régime démocratique caractérisé par un État de droit s'inscrit dans la concrétisation juridique de la nation de pluralisme. Cette dernière incarne, comme l'affirmait Rousseau, « le principe de la démocratie, c'est-à-dire le point de départ logique d'où se déduit l'ensemble de l'organisation sociale, culturelle, politique, constitutionnelle. »⁽¹⁾ Le pluralisme, au travers d'une sémantique diversifiée, est ainsi consacré dans les textes comme principe fondamental garantissant la liberté de conscience, fondement indispensable du contrat social.

À cet égard, l'article 10 de la Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen de 1789 (DDHC) indique que « Nul ne doit être inquiété pour ses opinions, même religieuses, pourvu que leur manifestation ne trouble pas l'ordre public établi par la Loi » et la loi du 9 décembre 1905 proclame que « La République assure la liberté de conscience. Elle garantit le libre exercice des cultes sous les seules restrictions édictées dans l'intérêt de l'ordre public ». Ces deux textes seront confortés plus tard par l'article 1er de la Constitution de 1958 énonçant que « La France respecte toutes les croyances ». Enfin, il est à noter que le Conseil constitutionnel⁽²⁾ a reconnu en 1977 la liberté de conscience comme un Principe Fondamental Reconnu par les Lois de la République (PFRLR).

Au-delà des textes nationaux, le pluralisme des opinions et des croyances se voit également juridiquement protégé par le droit européen. Ainsi, l'article 9 de la Convention européenne des droits de l'homme consacre que « Toute personne a droit à la liberté de pensée, de conscience et de religion » et la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme (CEDH) estime quant à elle que la liberté de conscience « représente l'une des assises d'une société démocratique au sens de la Convention »⁽³⁾. Rappelant l'importance de la diversité des opinions porteuse de la richesse intellectuelle et argumentative des débats d'idées au sein d'une société, la Cour explique que cette liberté est l'un des « éléments les plus essentiels de l'identité des croyants et de leur concept de vie, mais elle est aussi un bien précieux pour les athées, les agnostiques, les sceptiques ou les indifférents »⁽⁴⁾.



Hanène ROMDHANE
Responsable de la Miviludes.
Magistrate et Docteur en Droit Public.

The June 2022 article where Romdhane asked for a law allowing the police to use special investigation techniques against "cultic deviances."

The governmental anti-cult agency MIVILUDES itself **admits in its reports** that in most cases in which it asks the police to investigate nobody is committed to trial. In an article she published last year in the magazine of the Bordeaux Bar Association ("Revue des libertés fondamentales," June 2022, 46-55), the then chief of the MIVILUDES Hanène Romdhane (who **left the mission in stormy circumstances** at the end of 2022) admitted

that French prosecutors succeeded “very rarely” in obtaining court decisions punishing the crime of “creating psychological dependence” through “cultic deviances,” due to “the difficult legal characterization of the notion of mental control, whose contours are vague and far from the usual legal concepts.”

Rather than concluding, as scholars and courts did in other countries, that the idea that “cults” use mysterious and magically effective techniques of “mental control” is a pseudo-scientific myth, Romdhane asked precisely for a law allowing “the use of special investigation techniques to effectively combat cultic deviances.” She expressed the hope that perhaps “the use of these techniques could allow to overcome the obstacles that make it difficult to prove the existence of the psychological subjection.” However, if there are no fishes, even the use of the most draconian fishing techniques, such as throwing bombs into the river, would not allow the fishermen to capture them.

Only the anti-cult ideology and rhetoric seems to justify the police fishing party looking for imaginary crimes, and the enormous and unnecessary intrusion in the private lives and daily activities of peaceful citizens whose only crime is, in most cases, to think and believe differently from the majority.

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

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

By Massimo Introvigne

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

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

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

On April 21, 2011, the police discovered in Nantes, France, the body of Agnès Hodanger, the wife of the French aristocrat Xavier Dupont de Ligonès, and of their four children. Xavier was named by the police as the main suspect for the murders, but he disappeared

and has not been seen ever since. Although not well-known abroad, the affair has been the subject of hundreds of articles and several books and TV documentaries in France.

The Dupont de Ligonnès are a conservative Catholic family. Xavier's mother, Geneviève, and his sister Christine did not endear themselves to the authorities by continuing to claim that Xavier's guilt had not been proven, and other possibilities for the murder should have been considered. In general, French media do not like conservative or traditionalist Catholicism either.

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

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

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

Not surprisingly, the MIVILUDES found that "cultic deviances" were at work, and [sent the case](#) to the office of the District Attorney of Versailles, which opened an investigation based on the French anti-cult About-Picard law of 2001, which created a strange crime of abusing of a state of weakness created through psychological techniques (yet another incarnation of the discredited theory of [brainwashing](#), without using this name).

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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