

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l

Avenue d'Auderghem 61/16, 1040 Brussels

Phone/Fax: 32 2 3456145

Email: international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net>



OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Warsaw, 30 September 2014

Working Session 13 : Tolerance and non-discrimination II/ Intolerance against Christians and members of other religions

FRANCE: Social hostility towards a number of minority religious groups

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l recommends to the government of France

To revise its policies stigmatizing and ostracizing so-called sects and their members

To stop financing organizations fueling social hostility towards religious or belief groups

To respect the jurisprudence and the fundamental principles of neutrality and impartiality governing the relations between the state and any religious or belief community as advocated by the jurisprudence of the European Court

To examine the good practices of the Geneva-based *Centre d'Information sur les Croyances* in Switzerland which is financed by three French-speaking and one Italian-speaking cantons.

Social hostility towards a number of minority religious denominations in France is a source of concern for experts in freedom of religion or belief.

A sociologist of religions in Canada, Prof. Susan Palmer, has published a 250-page book (*) based on research trips in France that was supported by two standard grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, a federal granting agency of Canada. She visited 14 religious groups that appeared on the list of 173 sects and also 'immigrant religions'.

- She interviewed spiritual leaders, lawyers and anti-cult activists
- She visited rural communes, ecological farms and meditation centers
- She attended lectures and court proceedings
- She collected new religious movement literature, anti-cult bulletins and media reports
- She tried repeatedly to arrange meetings with MIVILUDES (Mission Interministérielle de Vigilance et de Lutte contre les Dérives Sectaires) and UNADFI (Union Nationale pour la Défense de la Famille et de l'Individu) who never responded to her phone calls

Over the course of her research, the Canadian researcher observed the many ways in which these groups were ostracized and subjected to social control. The groups were raided by police and military squadrons, their offices searched, the leaders arrested, and the groups were banned from participating in community festivals and from renting conference rooms. Many of their members, French citizens, lost their jobs or were denied promotions once their affiliation with a so-called sect was unmasked.

Some of the people Prof. Susan Palmer interviewed were in the midst of divorce and custody disputes, and due to their sect affiliation had already lost access to their children or had their visiting rights curtailed. Many members complained of sudden tax audits and of *mediabolization* (demonization in the media).

Some of the groups investigated by the Canadian scholar have successfully lodged complaints against France at the European Court but their image was irremediably damaged by various French state institutions and actors, state-sponsored anti-sect organizations and the negative media coverage during the domestic judicial proceedings.

While it is legitimate for a state to protect its citizens and to warn them against various dangers, stigmatizing some belief systems on the basis of unreliable and biased information gravely contributes to various forms of discrimination and social hostility such as verbal insults, physical assaults, attacks of places of worship and community buildings, and so on.

A good practice that should inspire France is certainly the policy of the *Centre d'Information sur les Croyances* (CIC) in Switzerland which is financed by three French-speaking and one Italian-speaking cantons.

The CIC, a public institution, is led by a Council the members of which are independent, highly competent in various domains and do not represent public authorities, political parties, mainline religions or belief systems.

The CIC respects the principle of neutrality as advocated by the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights. It collects data about religious movements and treats them in a scientific non-biased way. It publishes reports on religious movements without drawing any conclusion, judgment of value, assessment, advice or recommendation, without warning against a specific religious group but leaves it to the reader or the applicant for information to make his/her own opinion according to his/her needs.

The public authorities of the four cantons have decided not to demonize newly established religious or belief groups. They have chosen to disregard the ostracization, confrontation and repression approach of the “sect/cult issue”. The CIC privileges the problem resolution approach through objective information, dialogue between conflicting parties and education. This approach is in line with the philosophy of living together in a context of religious diversity and tolerance.

(*) The New Heretics of France: Minority Religions, La République, and the Government-Sponsored “War on Sects,” by Susan Palmer. Oxford University Press, 2011. 304 pp., b&w illustration, £45.00/\$74.00. ISBN-13: 9780199735211.