

Table of Contents

- [A unique document: the minutes of the hearing of a Buddhist group by the Belgian parliamentary enquiry committee on cults](#) - (29.12.2000)
- [Public meetings of Sahaja Yoga banned amid police intervention](#) - (02.11.2000)
- [2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:Belgium](#) - (05.09.2000)
- [A Franco-Belgian enquiry committee hears evidence from victims of Belgium's anti-sect policy](#) (05.06.2000)
- [Cults strike back](#) - (01.06.2000)
- [Controversial Movements Discuss Internally how they Can Handle their Dark Sides](#) - (29.04.2000)
- [State Security finds 50 sects dangerous](#) - (29.04.2000)
- [Court of Arbitration confirms the law creating a Sect Observatory](#) - (21.03.2000)

A unique document: the minutes of the hearing of a
Buddhist group by the Belgian parliamentary enquiry
committee on cults

HRWF International Secretariat (29.12.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - On the 26th November 1996 the parliamentary enquiry committee on cults heard the group OKC (Ogyen Kunzang Chöling). This Buddhist group is well inserted into Tibetan Buddhism, and fully recognised by the highest authorities on the matter. On that occasion, they were represented by Rui de Carvalho Oliveira, Jean-Louis Corne and their counsel Inès Wouters who recently took part in a televised debate on the subject of children within sects.

With the permission of attorney Wouters and the OKC, we present you extracts of that hearing which centers around children of members of the OKC, reproduced. At the forefront is the issue of the children attending a school run by the OKC in France.

It is useful to stress that the situation of the children in the Midi region of France was examined in depth by legal experts in a 1996 social enquiry, carried out at the request of the judge for children in Digne. The report published as a result of the enquiry concluded by dismissing the idea of educational assistance being needed. (a conclusion which was confirmed a second time in 1999). This report however failed to hold the attention of the enquiry committee.

The extract presented below raises a number of questions about the methods of questioning used by the committee as well as what limits should be respected to avoid meddling in the internal affairs of a religion. The question also arises as to whether the committee would have leveled the same questions and used the same tone when questioning a representative of one of Belgium's established religions. The complete report runs to 57 pages and can be consulted at Human Rights Without Frontiers' Brussels office, along with the social enquiry report relating to the situation of the children.

Committee Chairman : The problem that primarily preoccupies me – and you have submitted several interesting documents on this subject – is the situation of the children. Why are children of 3 years of age separated from their parents, taken away and gathered in a single centre where – it seems to me according to what I've been told - life is very strict, even to the point of being spartan, (compulsory prayers for young children who haven't reached an age where they can decide for themselves, etc)? How do you justify that?

Mr de Carvalho : Before Mr Corne speaks on this matter, I would like to draw your attention to the letter and the results of the enquiry that was carried out at the request of the judge of Digne.

Chairman : I have read that file. I could see that children from your centre had received good scholastic results and that they had received high marks from the teachers at the correspondence school where you had enrolled them. (.)

Mr Corne : (.) Children are not sent to this centre when they are three.(.) Generally, they are sent there around the age of five or six. How did this come about? There was never a decision made that all the children would be placed in a centre in France called “Le Château du soleil” ; it just happened spontaneously.

In fact, educational events and various meetings would always take place there, with both adults and children in attendance. A sort of day nursery was set up so that the adults could take part in the teaching. That was how, little by little, the children started to be grouped together. This lasted for two months, during summer. The children had their own special diet, their own snacks and fruit supplements, which were more appropriate for growing children. It was then noticed that the children formed a group and that their social interaction was very stimulating. They really blossomed.(.)

The children's welfare was always the primary concern, to have happy and well brought up children, well educated with a good standard of teaching, enjoying good health and the best conditions of life. (.)

The OKC combines life in a Provençal village with religious instruction. You could say that this was more like a Catholic boarding school, the like of which perhaps still exists today – where children would go to morning mass and there have a lesson in religion.

In the morning, as their first lesson, the children have a lesson on the Buddhist religion. They are taught texts and told about the life of the masters. In the evening they have an hour of the equivalent of a religious mass, with prayers, meditation and religious observances. For about half an hour a day they also study the Tibetan language. Their education is not too different to the one I had in my Catholic school. There was a mass every morning, or choir practice. I was in the St Gudule choir school, either you went to mass, or you practiced your singing. I also had classes on religion.

The children's life is extremely balanced and very varied.

Chairman : Varied or repetitive?

Mr Corne : I think that every child who attends school does the same thing every day.

Chairman : You do not say that your syllabus is varied. The timetable stays the same every day.

Mr Corne : No, but the timetable is very rich (.) At 9 am there is the religious class, Buddhist instruction. (.) At 10 am scholastic instruction starts. (.) Morning lessons last from 10 am until 1 pm. Lunch is between 1 and 2.30 pm. As there is an hour and a half break, the children have time to play or to read. Interestingly, the children have a marked taste for reading. Between 3.30 pm and 6.30 pm, two activities are planned. First of all, handicrafts. (.) The afternoon finishes with a dance lesson for the girls and sports for the boys. (.)

Chairman : So what else is on the timetable?

Mr Corne : Supper is arranged at 6.30 pm and at 7.30 pm the equivalent of the mass starts and lasts until 8.30 pm. After that the children have free time until they go to bed.

Chairman : So one hour of prayer is arranged for the evening. But are there no prayers in the morning?

Mr Corne : Yes there are, the children say a short prayer when they get up.

Chairman : What about at midday?

Mr Corne : No, there are none then. There is a religious class in the morning.

Chairman : (.) What about meal times, I've been told that these must take place in absolute silence?

Mr Corne : No, that's not true. But when you decide to live a certain way, rather like a pioneer, often quite significant decisions are made. It was decided that eating should be done in silence to concentrate more fully on what was being eaten.

Chairman : So that was the ideal, but things didn't turn out quite like that?

Mr Corne : I wouldn't say that it was the ideal. But it is a fact that at the beginning, one tries to make as much progress as possible. In reality, meals are never eaten entirely in silence. The silence lasts for a few minutes. Then whoever said the prayer – just as in Christianity, a prayer is said before the meal...

Chairman : So there is a prayer at midday then. Just a few minutes ago you told me the complete opposite.

Mr Corne : But this prayer only lasts a few seconds. It's a prayer said before mealtimes, just as in Catholic schools.

Chairman : According to my information, there was a compulsory prayer in the morning, midday at mealtimes and another hour of prayer in the evening. So this information was not untrue, there is indeed a prayer at midday.

What were you saying about the person who said the prayer?

Mr Corne : After a few minutes of silence, he authorises the children to begin talking.

Chairman : So what do they talk about?

Mr Corne : They are perfectly able to carry on a normal conversation.

Chairman : To change the subject, could you clarify for me the OKC movement's financial turnover in Belgium?

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

Public meetings of Sahaja Yoga banned amid police intervention

HRWF International Secretariat (02.11.2000)/ Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Brussels: Three hours after it had begun, a public meeting of the new religious movement Sahaja Yoga was banned by order of the mayor. A dozen police officers accompanied by a bailiff turned up to make sure the ban was respected.

On Thursday 26th October at 4.30pm, the organisers of the meeting, scheduled for later that evening, were informed that it had been banned, following orders from state security. The auditorium of the cultural centre in Woluwe St Pierre (Brussels) had been hired several months in advance for a presentation of the Sahaja Yoga movement, and the meeting had been advertised by radio, posters, and leaflets.

At 6.30pm barricades were erected in front of the entrance to the cultural centre and a dozen uniformed and plain clothed policemen were in attendance. Some stated that they belonged to the public relations department of the gendarmerie, others that they were part of the state security services and others to the Belgian Brigade of Surveillance and Research (BSR). An affidavit was also presented by a bailiff. The organisers were informed that all meetings of any kind were forbidden and that any discussion of Sahaja Yoga would result in arrest.

The individual responsible for hiring out the hall claimed that the sect's dangerous nature had only been discovered at the last minute. He added that the presence of the gendarmerie and the state security services was justified by the sect's attempt to infiltrate the town's dance centre(!). Allegedly, the group had hired the hall to stage a dance display, but in reality it turned out they wanted to talk about their "guru", Shri mataji NIRMALA Devi. He claimed also that this sect was extremely dangerous because it kidnapped children.

"This is a completely untrue story", Johan Decocker, one of Sahaja Yoga's spokesmen, told *Human Rights Without Frontiers*. "Our advertisements have always been very clear. Our meetings consist of an information session on our movement and its founder, Shri mataji NIRMALA Devi. Our movement has wrongly been put on the list of dangerous sects. Never has it been prosecuted for illegal activities. We have around 150 members, ordinary law-abiding people." Mr Decocker added: "In Belgium, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and freedom of religion are no longer guaranteed. The mechanism which fights against sects, whether they are dangerous or not, has taken a step forward which will have very serious consequences. In attacking us, it is sending a strong signal to the other movements on the sect "blacklist", a list which has not however been adopted by the government."

Human Rights Without Frontiers, CESNUR and religious sociologists who have studied this movement have gathered no proof of the sect kidnapping children either in Belgium or in other countries. Only a few instances of contended custody in divorce cases could be found.

Human Rights Without Frontiers fears that the Belgian policy to fight sects, criticised at the latest OSCE meeting at Warsaw on the 23rd October, is heading for the same impasse as the Interministerial Mission regarding the fight against sects in France, also very severely criticised during the OSCE conference.

Human Rights Without Frontiers also fears that this policy may push minority religious movements underground, as in some communist and Muslim countries, a course of action that would perhaps not be without risk for national security in the case of some really dangerous movements.

Human Rights Without Frontiers notes that in the European Union, "sects" are only perceived as a problem in French-speaking territories. German governments who were previously spearheading the anti-sect fight have clearly retreated, and not taken further action.

Human Rights Without Frontiers calls the Prime Minister and the government to pronounce clearly and strongly on the "list of 189 movements", bearing in mind that its authors have denied intending to attribute a dangerous nature to the movements, along with the fact that this list was not passed by parliament.

Despite these two very clear political positions taken by the previous government, the "list of 189 movements" has become an officious "blacklist" cited by public authorities, journalists and lawyers to justify their discriminatory treatment of these movements and their members. Recently, Jehovah's Witnesses have been the target of journalists who have not taken the precaution of carrying out even basic verifications of statements from ex-members of the movement

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom : Belgium

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor U.S. Department of State (05.09.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (13.09.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the Government took action against groups that it considers "harmful sects."

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There are generally amicable relations among the various religious communities; however, several religious groups complain of discrimination, in particular groups considered by the Government to be sects. In September 1999, police raided offices and homes of members of the Church of Scientology.

The U.S. Embassy maintains constant contact with the Government in an effort to address problems of religious freedom.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

The law accords "recognized" status to Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism,

Anglicanism, Islam, and Greek and Russian Orthodoxy, and these religions receive subsidies from general government revenues. Taxpayers who object to contributing to religious subsidies have no recourse. By law, each recognized religion has the right to provide teachers at government expense for religious instruction in schools, but not all avail themselves of this right. For recognized religions, the Government pays the salaries, retirement, and lodging costs of ministers and also subsidizes the construction and renovation of church buildings. The ecclesiastical administrations of recognized religions have legal rights and obligations, and the municipality where they are located must pay any debts that they incur.

The Government applies the following five criteria in deciding whether to grant recognition: 1) the religion must have a structure or hierarchy; 2) the group must have a sufficient number of members; 3) the religion must have been in existence in Belgium for a long period of time; 4) the religion must offer a social value to the public; and 5) the group must abide by the laws of the State and respect public order. The five criteria are not listed in decrees or laws. The law does not further define "sufficient," "a long period of time," or "social value." However, as early as 1834 the Court of Cassation ruled that no subjective values should be used in determining what constitutes a religion. If a religion is not recognized by the Ministry of Justice, the decision may be appealed to the State Council.

The lack of independent recognized status does not prevent religious groups from practicing freely.

The Government also supports the freedom to participate in nonconfessional philosophical organizations (laics). Laics serve as a seventh recognized "religious" group, and their organizing body, the Central Council of Non-Religious Philosophical Communities of Belgium, receives funds and benefits similar to the six recognized religions. According to the Government, the nonconfessional philosophical organizations have 350,000 members. However, the laics claim 1.5 million members, or 15 percent of the population.

In 1999 the Evangelical Association (a group of evangelical Christian organizations) claimed discrimination due to the Government's refusal to grant it recognized status separate from the recognized Protestant group. Despite the Government's refusal, it is negotiating with the group in an effort to ensure that the Evangelical Association enjoys the same benefits as recognized religions. The Ministry of Justice is assisting in discussions intended to enable the Evangelical Association to be involved in the leadership of the recognized Protestant group.

Religious Demography

The population of approximately 10 million is predominantly Roman Catholic. Approximately 75% of the population belongs to the Catholic Church. The Muslim population numbers approximately 350,000, 90 percent of which are Sunni. Protestants number between 90,000 and 100,000. Greek and Russian Orthodox churches have about 100,000 adherents. The Jewish population is approximately 40,000, and the Anglican Church has approximately 21,000 members. In addition to the recognized faiths, the largest nonrecognized religions are Jehovah's Witnesses, with approximately 27,000 baptized members, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), with approximately 3,000 members, and Buddhists, whose population numbers approximately 2,000. Unofficial estimates indicate that approximately 10 percent of the population does not practice any religion.

The most recent statistics available from the Catholic Church indicate that in 1995, 71 percent of children born in the country were baptized in the Catholic Church, 52 percent of all marriages took place in the Catholic Church, and funerals for 78 percent of all registered deaths were held in the Catholic Church.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In 1997 a parliamentary commission, established by the Government to recommend a policy to deal with the potential dangers that sects may represent to society--especially children--issued its report. It divided sects into two broadly defined categories. The report characterized a sect as an organized group of individuals espousing the same doctrine within a religion. The Commission considers sects in this sense to be respectable and to reflect the normal exercise of the freedom of religion and assembly provided for by fundamental rights. Harmful sectarian organizations, the second category, are defined as groups having or claiming to have a philosophical or religious purpose whose organization or practice involves illegal or injurious activities, harms individuals or society, or impairs human dignity. When the commission published its report, it attached a list of 189 sectarian organizations that were mentioned during testimony presented to the commission.

The list did not characterize any of the groups as harmful. Parliament adopted the report's recommendations but did not adopt the attached list of sects.

To implement one of the report's recommendations, in May 1998 Parliament passed legislation creating a "Center for Information and Advice on Harmful Sectarian Organizations." Although the Center is not yet fully operational, it has begun to collect open source information on a wide range of religious and philosophical groups and to

provide information and advice to the public regarding the legal rights of freedom of association, freedom of privacy, and freedom of religion.

The Government established a budget for the Center, which was scheduled to open in 1999, but has not yet published regulations to govern its operations. The Center is expected to become fully operational in summer 2000. In April 2000, regulations to govern the Center's operations were submitted to Parliament for approval. The Center is authorized to propose policy or legislation on the problem of sects but is not authorized to provide opinions or assessments of individual sectarian organizations. Parliament also passed legislation in October 1998 creating an interagency body that is to work in conjunction with the Center to coordinate government policy on sects, and on May 3, 2000, the Minister of Justice signed a decree to establish the interagency body. The names of the members of this body are to become public in June 2000.

The Minister of Justice is the principal coordinator of the Administrative Coordination Cell, which is expected to begin functioning when the Center for Information becomes fully operational in the summer of 2000. Neither the Government nor Parliament has yet taken any action to establish a special police unit on sects, but the Government has designated one national magistrate in the District Court of First Instance to monitor cases involving sects. Both measures were recommendations of the 1997 parliamentary report.

The law creating the Center also stipulates that the harmful nature of a sectarian group is to be evaluated in reference to principles contained in the Constitution, orders, laws, decrees, and in international human rights instruments ratified by the Government.

The parliamentary report also recommended that the country's community governments sponsor information campaigns to educate the public--especially children--regarding the phenomenon of harmful sects. In March 1999, the Francophone Community government launched a prevention campaign called "Gurus, Beware!" The campaign was intended to fulfill the commission's recommendation to educate the country's youth on the dangers posed by harmful sects. Information for the campaign was disseminated through pamphlets, brochures, television, and cinema advertisements. On one page, the brochure discussed 20 of the groups listed in the 1997 commission report and stated that Belgium harbors certain "dangerous sects." In April 1999, one of the groups discussed in the brochure, the Anthroposophic Society (based in Antwerp), filed suit to halt its distribution. An Antwerp court issued an order enjoining the Francophone Community government from further distribution of the brochure until all defamatory language referring to this group is removed from the text. The Francophone Community agreed not to publish any additional brochures. Other sectarian organizations placed on the 1997 parliamentary list continue to complain that the list is discriminatory.

In December 1998, Parliament enacted legislation formally charging Belgian State Security with the duty to monitor harmful sectarian organizations as potential threats to the internal security of the country. This legislation uses the same language as the

Parliamentary commission's report and defines "harmful sectarian organizations" as any religious or philosophical group that, through its organization or practices, engages in activities that are illegal, injurious, or harmful to individuals or society.

Several religious groups complain of incidents of religious discrimination. For example, leaders in the Muslim Executive Council continue to be frustrated by a law that forbids the wearing of headscarves by young women and girls in school.

Some courts in Flanders have stipulated, in the context of child custody proceedings and as a condition of granting visitation rights, that a noncustodial parent who is a member of Jehovah's Witnesses may not expose his or her children to the teachings or lifestyle of that religious group during visits. These courts have claimed that such exposure would be harmful to the child. However, other courts have not imposed this restriction.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools but does not require students to attend religion classes. Public school religion teachers are nominated by a committee from their religious group and appointed by the Minister of Education. All public schools have a teacher for each of the six recognized religions. The Catholic Church also maintains a network of private schools at the primary and secondary levels. Catholic schools receive government subsidies for working expenses and teacher salaries. Children and their parents may choose the religious course in which they wish to be enrolled. A seventh choice, a nonconfessional course, is available if the child does not wish a religious course.

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

On September 30, 1999, a 110-officer police force raided offices and homes of members of the Church of Scientology. No arrests or convictions resulted from this raid. The Government is unwilling to provide further statements, as the matter is still under investigation. Church members stated that the Government's seizure and retention of church computers, materials, and files impede the ability of the Church to practice freely. The Church also filed a complaint that the Prosecutor's Office provided a statement to the press in violation of secrecy laws; the complaint is pending and no action was taken by mid-2000.

The Church of Scientology expressed frustration with a lack of access and communication with the Government, both before and after the September 1999 raids of church property and followers' homes.

In April 2000, the Belgian Consulate in Los Angeles refused missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) visas to enter Belgium for missionary work. Similar visas had been processed for decades without problems. In May 2000, the

Ministry of Interior instituted temporary procedures to ensure the issuance of visas to Mormon missionaries and undertook to establish permanent procedures by October 2000.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

There are amicable relations among the various religious communities. At the national level, there is an annual general assembly of the National Ecumenical Commission to discuss various religious themes. The Catholic Church sponsors working groups at the national level to maintain dialog and promote tolerance among all religious groups. At the local level, every Catholic diocese has established commissions for interfaith dialog.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy maintains constant contact with the Government in an effort to address problems of religious freedom.

At the October 1999 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) meeting, Belgium was criticized by the U.S. delegate for religious discrimination/intolerance and failure to meet OSCE commitments on protecting religious freedom. The U.S. delegate asked what steps Belgium would take to ensure that the Government's "anti-sect" organizations do not become vehicles for promoting prejudice and stereotypes. In response, the Government stated that it had an open dialog with sects, and that this dialog takes place both in public and behind closed doors.

U.S. Embassy representatives discussed the issue of religious freedom throughout the period covered by this report with officials from the Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, and Interior, as well as with Members of Parliament. There is an ongoing dialog between the Embassy and the Ministry of Justice at the cabinet level regarding the implementation of recommendations of the 1997 parliamentary report on sectarian organizations. During the period covered by this report, embassy officials also met with representatives of all recognized religions (Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Anglicanism, Islam, and Greek and Russian Orthodoxy), as well as with groups such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Scientology.

The U.S. Embassy and the Government worked in international human rights forums to criticize religious rights abuses in other countries. Embassy officials met with high-level government officials and actively assisted in resolving outstanding complaints of religious discrimination.

In response to a U.S. request, the Government has addressed the problem of visas for Mormon missionaries (see Section I.)

www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/irf/irf_rpt/irg_belgium.html

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

A Franco-Belgian enquiry committee hears evidence from victims of Belgium's anti-sect policy

HRWF International Secretariat (05.06.2000) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - After Paris, Marseilles, Lille, Lyons and Rennes came Belgium's turn on the 26th May to host an enquiry committee set up by Omnum des Libertés (an organisation set up in 1996 to defend individuals discriminated against for their spiritual, religious or therapeutic choices) to collate evidence from victims of discrimination and religious intolerance in Belgium. The committee was made up of Professor Anne Morelli of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, pastor Robert Hostetter director of Protestant Programmes at the French community radio and television station RTBF, Joël Labruyère

president of Omnum des Libertés* and Dr Erick Dietrich, victimologist.

The large audience was made up of Belgians who either individually or as part of an organisation, had decided to break the code of silence surrounding the harassment they had undergone as members of a minority religion after the publication of the parliamentary report on sects.

The tone of the conference was set from the outset by Joël Labruyère, "when principles that the State was founded on are threatened, bearing witness to this is a civil duty and validates the good faith shown by victims of discrimination and intolerance".

As they recounted their experiences in front of fellow victims, many individuals and groups realised that they had not been alone in experiencing the sinister effects engendered by the Belgian sect report. Their testimonies will be transmitted to national and international Human Rights instruments by Omnum des Libertés.

After hearing the presentations, Professor Morelli stated that she was very concerned by the deterioration of freedom of conscience and religion in Belgium. She revealed that when her book "Lettre ouverte à la secte des adversaires des sectes" (An open letter to the sect-fighting sect) was published, she herself had received similar reports, that large-scale operations to "reveal" supposed scandals were being mounted by the media. Although

such stories were later shown to be greatly inflated versions of the truth, or even completely false, she added, "the public only remembers the initial image and message put out by the media". "I hope there will be a maximum amount of publicity covering what is said during this conference" she stated, "because I think that this cause is really worth it, and I hope that the findings will be documented, allowing those who want accurate information to be honestly informed".

To Pastor Hostetter "the positive aspect of this forum is that finally the wall of silence has been broken". He emphasised that all those present had gone beyond simply the abstract principles of human rights, penetrating into the daily life of victims of intolerance and discrimination, their daily difficulties at work and in the family, simply because of their philosophical or religious convictions, way of life or belief. He concluded by saying "my

hope is that one day all humanists, whether believers or not, can work together to eliminate that which is unacceptable and prevents us from having a stable and happy society, that is to say the culture of exclusion".

Dr Dietrich analysed the victims' statements and demonstrated the mechanisms of the so-called "anti-sect" groups, which in fact try to destroy any spirituality within the spiritual minorities and their members. He explained how these groups attack both individuals and groups, using all the techniques of psychological destabilisation. Willy Fautré, president of Human Rights Without Frontiers presented an exposé of the institutionalised discrimination within the current system of state financing of religions and secularism in Belgium, a system "firmly rooted in Belgium's history" and suggested an alternative system which would respect both the equality of Belgium's citizens and State neutrality.

"Opportunities for dialogue must be created. A large regrouping is not necessary, but we must keep communicating with each other", concluded Joël Labruyère.

It was with this goal in mind that the committee rounded off the session by setting up the 'Co-ordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience'. This organisation will ensure that the fundamental rights of believers and non-believers are respected, and aims to bring the Belgian state into compliance not only with its own constitution, but also all the international documents it signed guaranteeing human rights and freedom of conscience.

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[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

Cults strike back

A travelling "courthouse" has been hearing statements from assorted followers who feel they have been unfairly bullied

By Valérie Colin

Le Vif/ L'Express (01.06.2000)/ HRWF (20.06.2000) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email info@hrwf.net - "If you have been, either individually - or as part of a group, the target of discrimination because of your beliefs or your therapeutic practice, your testimony will be publicly heard and transmitted to the international human rights instruments" ... The poster was tempting. And in fact, after Paris, Marseilles, Lille, Lyons and Rennes, a small group of about a hundred people came to Brussels on May 26 to express how unhappy they were with the "intolerance", and also their feelings of helplessness after years of being labelled fearsome sects. Among them, many proponents of alternative medicine, representatives from Krishna, Sahaja Yoga, Universal Energy, the Humanist Party and other lesser known movements. But also a large number of demonstrative Raelians and the more discreet Scientologists, represented by the European heads of the organisation. In Brussels, the followers of these two "churches" acted as a relay to the Belgian section of this strange courthouse, set up by an "European Inquiry Commission into violations of human rights" placed under the aegis of the "Friends of the United Nations"... Suspicious, the French newspaper Le Monde had in March checked with the information department of the United Nations whether this foundation existed, and the existence of a "very small NGO" carrying this name had been confirmed.

One after the other, those present aired their grievances. All the individuals seemed sincere and distressed. All had the same story to tell; the vicious circle of rumors "that kill", the "permanent harassment" (from the administration, justice and the media) and its frequently disastrous consequences: perhaps an "abusive" dismissal and problems finding a new job, or a breach of contract and a "biased" divorce settlement. Among the "international experts" flanking the plaintiffs, Professor Anne Morelli (Université Libre de Bruxelles) didn't seem surprised: "I am frequently consulted by lawyers that want the list of the 189 Belgian sects (Editor's note: published by Parliament in 1997). By demonstrating that their adversary's client is a Moonie or Seventh Day Adventist, they hope to get a judgment against him, or to take away custody of the children." Anne Morelli added accounts of several cases of refused adoptions where the individuals concerned belonged to one of the listed movements. And finally the disgrace of a man interested in demonology, a former civil servant for the French Community who had to leave his job after the police had searched his home, around the time of the investigations of alleged Satanist groups. "It is often like this, the investigations bolster the media publicity. But when nothing is found, no-one sets the record straight ..."

Brandishing a gigantic photocopy of an identity card showing the words "Krishna missionary", a Flemish follower had come to explain the shift between how the Belgian

authorities present the group ("a dangerous sect") and the real perception of the public ("a bit odd but harmless"). "Every year, thousands of tourists and the whole classes of schoolchildren visit our center in Petit Somme (Durbuy). But not one member of the parliamentary inquiry commission came in 1997". Astonishment from the French Joël Labruyère, one of the "religious experts" overseeing the session: "In France it would be unthinkable to send classes of schoolchildren to visit a sect HQ". "Who harasses you?" he

asked the assembly. In France, it was the Association for the Defense of the Family and the Individual (ADFI) and the special branch of the police force.

But in Belgium? Silence from the audience. Without wanting to be too aggressive, the sect hunt allegedly comes from ... almost everywhere. From the "political world" aided by the "unthinking" support of the media. From the anti-sect associations. But in a rather distant manner, finally "we are all lumped together and no-one knows why", denounced an anonymous spectator. "We're told there's no smoke without fire" retorts a Raelian, wearing an armband with a yellow star to mark the discrimination. "But who is lighting these fires?"

Once gathered, the promoters assure that all these statements should be transmitted to appropriate Ministries in France and Belgium, as well as to the European Court of Human Rights.

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

Controversial Movements Discuss Internally how they Can Handle their Dark Sides

Peter-Jan Bogaert

DE MORGEN (29.04.2000)/HRWF International Secretariat (16.05.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - It was one of the recommendations and three years after the publication of the notorious report, the information and advice center for dangerous sectarian organizations (IACDSO) is nearly operational. After the summer, the center will move into a spacious building at the Berkendaalstraat in the south of Brussels.

There the public can get help for all possible information about new religious movements. The center collects documents from the movements as well as on the movements. "So, information coming from the movements as well as critical information that has been published about the movements will be collected president Adelbert Denaux (KUL) says.

On top of that, the center will not work "in a vacuum". Therefore, the library will also have general works about religion and information about the traditional religions.

The IACDSO will not publish a list of dangerous sects. The goal is rather to describe a religion as objectively as possible.

With it, there will also be given a list of possible delicate areas.

The center doesn't want to express a value judgement about the movements. "We give rather criteria as a kind of help, whereafter the court or the individual can judge if the movement is harmful or not." Denaux realises that making up the criteria is a delicate assignment in which matter the center didn't find the correct handling yet.

"To make information available for a broad public is a very good matter" says Louis Vanden Wijngaert sect expert and chairman of the association for the defense of person and family. Besides, the work of the commission produced a few good evaluations, states Vanden Wijngaert. "Society became more alert. A lot of people realise now what are possible dangers of a fanatic movement. Especially when one member of the family changes a conviction, this can bring about tensions.

Vanden Wijngaert also indicates, just like Denaux, that the police are more aware now of the phenomenon. Complaints are now also seriously examined and the offices of the public prosecutor are now more than ever willing to prosecute : Proof of this is the investigation in the Church of Scientology.

The focused attention of the government concerning religions - a trend which is observable in whole Europe - isn't accepted everywhere. It remains difficult for the government both to respect the constitutional freedom of religion and to guarantee the security of the State and his citizens.

The job of the parliamentary commission has often been criticized. Not only for the notorious list of 189 Movements which was published at the end of the report, but "also for her unscientific" method of working. These critics have on the contrary taken away the attention of more important things in the report. Like the description of the mechanisms of how sects are manipulating, is done as well by Denaux as Vanden Wijngaert. Denaux : "To make publicly known the essentials of the report is in fact one of the missions of the organization". Some movements which are mentioned in the list of 189 movements, were understandably not happy with it. This had led to a remarkable evolution : a certain number of movements became more open to handle better the critics from outside. Vanden Wijngaert : "I know a couple of movements - from a Japanese religion to the Jehovah's Witnesses - which are internally thinking about how they would be able to handle the dark sectarian edges of their working methods.

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

State Security finds 50 sects dangerous

Peter Jan Bogaert

De Morgen (29.04.2000)/HRWF International Secretariat (04.05.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - State Security has recently extended the list of the dangerous sects and is doing now actively the follow up of 50 movements. *De Morgen* obtained this information from a reliable source. On the list is amongst others Scientology, Sahaja Yoga, the Universal Church of God (which was active in the former Antwerp cinema Rubens) and a couple of apocalyptic sects and the satanists. Remarkably : state security still follows closely one Anthroposophic association which has nothing to do with the well known Steiner schools.

This weekend it is three years ago since the parliamentary investigation commission on sects presented her final report. Especially the list of 189 "sectary" movements that was published by the commission caused a lot of reactions. Later on it was decided that State Security, as the only institute, would publish a new list.

Which criteria are used by State Security to decide which movements have to be considered as dangerous, is unknown. It is remarkable however that State Security considers the majority of the list as not dangerous. State Security is also part of the just elaborated coordinationcel which needs to fight against sects. The president will be the national magistrate Serge Bremmertz. The coordinationcel obtained from Minister of Justice Verwilghen the task to elaborate an actionplan against dangerous sects.

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

Court of Arbitration confirms the law creating a Sect Observatory

Anthroposophical Society (21.03.2000)/HRWF International Secretariat (27.03.2000)-
Website: www.hrwf.net – Email: info@hrwf.net - In May 1999 the Anthroposophical Society in Belgium objected to the 2 July 1998 law, which created an Information and Advice Centre concerning the harmful sectarian organisations. The Anthroposophical Society is examining the possibility of appealing on the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

The Society thinks that this law contradicts the constitution and the international human rights treaties, because it discriminates against citizens and groups that profess minority beliefs is created, because they are subjected to special observation by a specific Centre at the Ministry of Justice.

This Centre defines a harmful sectarian organisation as 'every movement with a philosophical or religious purpose, or any organisation that pretends to be as such, and which activities are unlawful and harmful, damage the individual, the society or the human dignity. The harmful character of the sectarian organisation is examined on the basis of the principles, which are enshrined in the constitution, in laws, in decrees, in edicts and in the international treaties concerning the protection of human rights which are ratified by Belgium'. The Centre can thus give its own appreciation to what is harmful, without consulting the judicial power, and this only about belief groups.

The Anthroposophical Society protested against this parallel form of justice, against the linkage of the Centre with the executive power of the authorities, against the lack of guarantees with regard to the independence and the neutrality of the Centre, against the lack of legal defence means against possible unfair accusations made by the Centre, against the fact that the Centre will provide the population with information about (according to the Centre) harmful organisations, that it can also grant preventative labels, and that it may also deal with personal data concerning the religious and philosophical beliefs of the citizens.

The Arbitration Court, which among other things must check that the laws are not discriminatory, declared that the petition was admissible but unfounded, especially because of the following arguments. First of all, the specific danger posed by the harmful cults is an objective criterion and therefore allows a specific treatment. Apart from the authorities and the judicial power, other organisations may also observe and combat harmful illegal activities. Also, the Centre will not prohibit anything on a preventative basis with regard to freedom of expression, freedom of religion and association, but will only inform the public, on a preventative basis, about the activities of an association, so that anybody will be able to evaluate opinions, which can be dangerous although they are not illegal. Moreover, the Centre is advised to hear the associations with regard to the objectivity of the information. With regard to the treatment of personal data, the controversial law remains within the limits of the law and privacy is protected by sufficient guarantees.

Such argumentation raises a number of serious questions about the interference of the state in spiritual life. Moreover, the decision remains silent about the independence of the information centres from the states, which has been recommended by the Council of Europe, about the lack of a clear legal definition of the concept 'sect', about the distinction between 'sect' and traditional religion or philosophy, about the interpretation of the concept 'harmful' by the Centre, about the lack of appeal procedure to defend oneself and to restore one's honour in cases of unfair accusations made by the Centre, and about the discrimination which is included in all these elements.