

The Anti-Cult Ideology and FECRIS: Dangers for Religious Freedom A White Paper

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1. The Anti-Cult Ideology

In 2020, the USCIRF (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom), a bipartisan commission of the U.S. federal government, identified the anti-cult ideology as a major threat to international religious liberty (USCIRF 2020).

The anti-cult ideology, or anti-cultism, is based on the idea that “religions” and “cults” are different. “Cults,” it claims, are not religions, although they may falsely claim to be religious. While religions are joined freely, “victims” join “cults” because of the latter’s coercive practices.

International terminology needs a preliminary clarification. The derogatory English word “cult” should not be translated with “culte” in French, and similar words in other languages. As scholars of religion have noticed from decades, the French word having the same derogatory meaning of the English “cult” is “secte,” rather than “culte.” “Cult” should be translated with “secte” in French, and in turn “secte” should be translated with “cult”—not with “sect,” which does not have the same negative meaning (for example, the different mainline Buddhist schools are often referred to in English as “Buddhist sects,” with no negative judgment implied).

In its present organized form, anti-cultism emerged in the late 1960s, but its origins are much older. From time immemorial, human societies have regarded religion as something positive and necessary. In each society, what was meant by “religion” was the dominant religion. In many ancient societies, this religion existed without competition. When competition arose, society was confronted with both cultural and terminological problems.

Many came to believe that newly arisen religions presenting a challenge to the majority religion and culture were so “strange” that nobody can embrace them freely. Romans believed that Christianity was such an absurd superstition that it cannot be considered a bona fide religion and those who had converted to it had been bewitched through black magic techniques.

Romans were hardly alone. In China, when it initially appeared, Buddhism met the same opposition Christianity encountered in Rome. It looked like a strange religion, and a subversive one with its message of equality and peace.

The words *xie jiao* (heterodox teachings), used to this very day in China to designate “cults,” were coined in the Middle Ages to designate Buddhism. They were later applied to a great number of religions perceived as hostile to the Imperial power, including Christianity (Wu 2016). Their critics believed that they could only gain converts through black magic, and listed a number of techniques through which the *xie jiao* were able to bewitch their victims into conversion (Wu 2017, 57–92).

In the West, when Christians became a state-supported majority, they adopted the same explanation for conversion to “heretical” faiths such as the one preached by the Waldensians, which were in turn accused of “bewitching” their converts (de Lange 2000, 49).

After the Enlightenment, belief in black magic declined but the idea that strange religions could not be joined voluntarily but only through bewitchment was secularized as hypnosis. Mormons, in particular, were accused of hypnotizing their “victims” into conversion (Ward 1855, 230).

Anti-Mormonism also introduced another claim promised to a bright future, that movements using hypnosis to convert their followers could not be bona fide religions. In 1877, in an article in the popular *Scribner’s Monthly*, anti-Mormon John Hanson Beadle (1840–1897) confessed that, “Americans have but one native religion [Mormonism] and that one is the sole apparent exception to the American rule of universal toleration [...]. Of this anomaly two explanations are offered: one that the Americans are not really a tolerant people, and that what is called toleration is only such toward our common Protestantism, or more common Christianity; the other that something peculiar to Mormonism takes it out of the sphere of religion” (Beadle 1877, 391).

Beadle’s observation held the reader hostage, forcing him to conclude that Mormonism was not a religion. It was only by asserting that Mormonism was not “really” a religion that the image of the United States as the country of religious freedom could be reconciled with the American reality of anti-Mormon discrimination.

In the 20th century, ideas that some believed were so “strange” and dangerous that nobody could embrace them freely emerged in a field different from religion, politics. German Socialist scholars, at loss for an explanation of how not only the bourgeois but also workers and the poor

could convert en masse to Nazism spoke of “mass hypnosis” or “mental manipulation.” Later, with the Cold War, the same explanation was used in the United States to explain why some can embrace such an absurd ideology as Communism (Anthony 1996).

In the case of Communism, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), founded in 1947, believed they had found a smoking gun in techniques used in Chinese and North Korean Communist jails against arrested Western missionaries and, later, American prisoners of war captured during the Korean War. American psychiatrists and psychologists such as Robert Jay Lifton and Edgar Schein were asked to interview those who had been liberated from Communist jails and camps. Their conclusions were very cautious, as they noticed that in fact Chinese techniques had not converted many, and the majority of those who had signed declarations of allegiance to Communism had done so to escape torture or mistreatment in jail, and had not really been persuaded (Lifton 1961; Schein, Schneier, and Barker 1961). They were also criticized for their psychoanalytic approach and, in the case of Lifton, for a libertarian idea of human agency that later led him to support the anti-cult movement. However, they maintained that Chinese mental manipulation techniques either worked in a very limited number of cases, when they were accompanied by the use of mind-altering drugs and torture, or did not work at all.

The CIA, however, decided to present the thesis that people did not convert freely to Communism in much simpler, black-and-white terms, claiming in its propaganda that both the Chinese and Soviet Communists had developed an infallible technique to change the ideas of their victim “like a [vinyl] disc was changed on a phonograph,” as CIA director Allen Welsh Dulles (1893–1969) explained in 1953 (Dulles 1953).

The CIA instructed one of its agents whose cover job was that of a journalist, Edward Hunter (1902–1978), to “invent” and spread the word “brainwashing,” presenting it as the translation of an expression allegedly used by the Chinese Communists (Hunter 1951). In fact, the CIA and Hunter had taken the concept of “brainwashing” from the novel *1984* by George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair, 1903–1950), where Big Brother “washes clean” the brains of the citizens (Orwell 1949, 113) of a fictional regime modeled after Soviet Russia.

Paradoxically, the CIA came to believe in its own propaganda, and tried to replicate the Communist brainwashing in experiments carried out largely in Canada (since they would have been illegal in the United States) by psychiatrist Donald Ewen Cameron (1901–1967), which came to be known as the infamous MK-Ultra Project. Through electroshocks, heavy drugs, and sleep deprivation, Cameron tried to “wash” the brains of his victims clear of their previous ideas and habits, and to instill new ones. As he admitted, he only succeeded in creating “vegetables” and “zombies,” and in subsequent court cases the CIA had to pay heavy damages to the victims—or their relatives, since some of them had died. But nobody was “converted” to new beliefs (Marks 1979).

But how did the accusation of practicing brainwashing traveled from Communists to the “cults”? The first author who applied the CIA’s rhetoric of brainwashing to religion was English psychiatrist William Walters Sargant (1907–1988) in his 1957 book *The Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing* (Sargant 1957), which became an international bestseller. Sargant did not believe that there was a difference between mainline religions, which did not use mental manipulation, and “cults,” which did. On the contrary, Sargant was decidedly anti-Christian, and he mentioned the Roman Catholics and the Methodists as two groups typically using brainwashing, and accused of the same sin the first Christians (Sargant 1957, 121). The English psychiatrist believed that only brainwashing could explain the rapid growth of early Christianity.

Many read Sargant’s book, and it certainly fueled a hostile attitude to religion in general. However, its target was too broad to make the book of any use for promoting public policies. It was in the United States that a handful of psychologists re-elaborated the ideas of Sargant claiming that not all religions used brainwashing, only some newly founded that were not exactly religions but “cults.” This happened in the climate of the 1960s and early 1970s, when the anti-cult movement was just being created, mostly among parents of college students who had decided to drop out of their universities to become full-time missionaries for the Unification Church or the Children of God, or shaved Hindu monks for the Hare Krishna Movement. Once again, their parents did not believe that their choices had been voluntary, and psychologists such as Margaret Thaler Singer (1921–2003) offered brainwashing to them as a convenient explanation. Brainwashing also

justified the illegal practice of deprogramming, created by Ted Patrick in California. If their sons and daughters had been brainwashed, these parents felt justified in hiring “deprogrammers” who claimed to be able to kidnap the “cultists,” detain them, and persuade them, more or less violently, to abandon the “cults” (Shupe and Bromley 1980).

In the same years, the academic study of the new religious movements was born, both in the United States and the United Kingdom. The scholars who studied the movements criticized as “cults” found that conversion to them happened much in the same way as conversion to any other religion, and only a small percentage of those attending the courses and seminars of groups like Unification Church, where allegedly miraculous techniques of brainwashing were used, joined the groups (Barker 1984). Empirical evidence confirmed that there was no brainwashing or mental manipulation, and these labels and theories were not less pseudo-scientific than the ancient claims that “heresies” converted their followers through black magic (Richardson 1978).

The scholars were successful in marginalizing the use of the word “cult” and the brainwashing theories in the academic community, but the controversy moved to courts of law. Deprogramming had become a very lucrative profession, and a cover for other illegal activities (Shupe and Darnell 2006), some law firm believed former members can sue new religious movement claiming damages for brainwashing, and substantial financial interests had entered the field.

It took a good decade for the majority scholarly opinion, that brainwashing and mental manipulation were pseudo-scientific theories, to prevail in courts of law. The decisive confrontation happened in the US District Court for the Northern District of California in 1990, in the *Fishman* case. Steven Fishman was a “professional troublemaker,” who attended the stockholders’ meetings of large corporations for the purpose of suing the management with the support of other minority stockholders. He then signed settlements and pocketed the money paid by the corporations, leaving the other stockholders who had trusted him empty-handed. In a lawsuit brought against him for fraud, Fishman claimed in his defense that at the time he was temporarily incapable of understanding or forming sound judgments, because he was a member of the Church of Scientology since 1979, and as such had been subjected to brainwashing. Scientology was not a part of the suit, and had

nothing to do with Fishman's wrongdoings (although years later Fishman would falsely claim otherwise).

Having examined in detail the documents of the scholarly discussion about brainwashing, Judge S. Lowell Jensen concluded that brainwashing and mental manipulation "did not represent meaningful scientific concepts," and while defended by a tiny minority of academics, had been rejected as pseudo-scientific by an overwhelming majority of the scholars studying new religious movements. Singer's testimony was declared not admissible, and Fishman went to jail (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990).

Fishman was the beginning of the end for the use of brainwashing anti-cult theories in American courts. For anti-cultists, worse was to come in 1995, when deprogrammer Rick Ross was involved in a civil trial after he had unsuccessfully tried to deprogram Jason Scott, a member of the United Pentecostal Church, a 5-million strong Christian denomination few would regard as a "cult" or a new religious movement. Scott was supported by Scientology lawyers and detectives, which proved that his mother was referred to Ross by the Cult Awareness Network (CAN), at that time the largest American anti-cult movement. CAN was sentenced to pay millions in damages (United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit 1998), and went bankrupted. CAN's name and assets were purchased by a Scientology-related group, which allowed sociologist Anson D. Shupe (1948–2015) and his team free access to the CAN archives. They concluded that the former CAN's practice of referring the parents of "cult" members to deprogrammers was not an occasional, but a habitual occurrence. In turn, the "deprogrammers" kicked back to the "old" CAN hefty (and probably illegal) commissions (Shupe and Darnell 2006).

The *Fishman* and *Scott* decision did not totally eliminate the use of brainwashing and mental manipulation arguments in American courts, but they became rare, and appeared mostly outside the field of religion, in family litigations connected with the controversial theory of parental alienation syndrome (PAS: Reichert, Richardson, and Thomas 2015). The idea that "cults" practice mental manipulation or brainwashing survived in the American popular media. It also survived outside the United States, particularly in France. However, the arguments formulated by a large majority of the leading scholars of new religious movements, and mentioned

in the *Fishman* decision, do not refer to the United States only. Brainwashing and mental manipulation remain concepts rejected as pseudo-scientific by a vast majority of the scholars of religion.

As Chinese scholar Wu Junqing has argued by comparing the Medieval accusations against Buddhism and the contemporary campaigns against Falun Gong in China, accusations of brainwashing are in continuity with the old theory that heterodox religions “bewitched” their “victims” through magical spells (Wu 2017, 156–57). Although presented (falsely) as scientific, brainwashing is a secularized version of the theory that evil religions may bewitch potential members, overcome their free will, and compel them to convert through magical techniques (Wu 2017, 157). James T. Richardson came to similar conclusions with respect to “brainwashing” theories advanced by anti-cultist in the West: they are surprisingly similar to Medieval and early modern claims that heresies used black magic to gain new followers. Only the language has been modernized (Kilbourne and Richardson 1986).

The pseudo-scientific theory of brainwashing (sometimes called mind control or mental manipulation by those who want to avoid the embarrassing historical associations with a word invented by the CIA) is the cornerstone of anti-cultism. “Cults” are accused of other wrongdoings, such as enriching the leaders at the expense of the followers, separating families, harassing critics and ex-members, and so on. However, these accusations are ancillary to the main one of brainwashing. Members commit acts harmful to themselves and others and obey the leaders before they have been brainwashed. And this is also how anti-cultism claims to be able to distinguish “cults” from religions. “Cults” brainwash, where religions use legitimate techniques of persuasion.

One of the reasons why the ideology of anti-cultism and brainwashing was rejected by an overwhelming majority of the academic scholars of religion is that it is based on a fraud. Anti-cultism claims to be only interested in deeds, not in creeds. “We never pass judgement on beliefs,” anti-cultists repeat. This is, however, not true. When he first applied political theories of brainwashing to religion, William Sargant (a much more important name in the history of psychiatry than the mental health practitioners who later joined the anti-cult movement) already warned that it was futile to distinguish religions from “cults” on the basis of brainwashing. He stated that brainwashing was used “at every time in man’s long religious history” (Sargant 1971, 25), from the

ancient Roman and Greek religions to Christianity, Islam, and beyond. The account of Paul the Apostle' sudden conversion to Christianity was read by Sargant as clear evidence that he had been brainwashed by the Christian Ananias (Sargant 1957, 121).

In reading the anti-cult literature, we encounter time and again evidence that anti-cultism, without confessing it, cares very much about creeds, not deeds only. In fact, the brainwashing/"cult" model is applied only to groups whose beliefs are regarded as bizarre, ridiculous, abhorrent, or unacceptable to the anti-cultists. High-intensity commitment, devotion to the leader (who may be regarded as a living incarnation of the Divine), requests for significant donations, are all elements found in groups within mainline traditions that anti-cultists do not include in their lists of "cults" (the Dalai Lama is regarded as a living Buddha, yet Tibetan Buddhism is not normally referred to as a "cult," except by some extreme anti-cultists). Why one group is labeled as a "cult" and another, similar movement escapes this label is never really explained. And labeling is applied because certain *doctrines* appear as unacceptable to the anti-cultists, based on their own prejudices.

2. The Case of FECRIS

As mentioned earlier, the anti-cult movement was created in the United States by parents dissatisfied with the fact that children had joined new religious movements as full-time members or missionaries, renouncing the prospects of a secular career. In some European countries, the origins of the anti-cult movement were similar. The French ADFI (Association for the Defense of the Family and the Individual, later UNADFI) was created in 1974 by the Champollions, a couple whose son had joined the Unification Church. Another French anti-cult movement, the CCMM (Center of Documentation, Education, and Action Against Mental Manipulation) was founded in 1981 by Roger Ikor (1912–1986), a writer whose son had joined Macrobiotic Zen and later committed suicide (Duval 2012). Although no connections between the younger Ikor’s affiliation with Macrobiotic Zen and his suicide were proved, the writer claimed that a “cult” had “murdered” his son (Ikor 1981, 36).

In Austria, Friedrich Griess, an engineer who became a prominent Austrian and European anti-cultist, was initially motivated by the fact that his daughter had joined the Brunstad Christian Church, an Evangelical church established in Norway by Johan Oscar Smith (1871–1943) (Brünner and Neger 2012). Griess’ conflict with his daughter appears to be the main reason why the Brunstad Christian Church became a significant part of the European controversies about “cults.”

As it happened in the United States, parents were soon replaced by professionals such as lawyers, psychologists and psychiatrists as the most visible voices of the anti-cult movement in Europe. By 1994, anti-cult associations had been founded in most European countries, and an umbrella organization was created in Paris, FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), whose office was originally at UNADFI’s address in the French capital. It now includes associations, large and small, in more than 30 countries, some of them outside Europe.

In 1993, Italian scholar Massimo Introvigne introduced a distinction between a sectarian “counter-cult” and a secular “anti-cult” movement,

which has been widely adopted since (Introvigne 1993). The counter-cult movement started in the early 19th century, when Protestant and, later, Roman Catholic theologians systematically criticized what they considered heretical “cults” departing from Christian orthodoxy, continued into the 20th century, and is still active today. Counter-cultists are mostly interested in doctrines they identify as heretical, and want to convert “cultists” back to the orthodox Christian fold. They may be reluctant to rely on brainwashing theories, since they know they have also been used to criticize Christian groups. Anti-cultists, on the other hand, claim they are not interested in doctrines, and simply want to free “cultists” from the “cults” that brainwashed them, rather than converting them to any Christian church.

A distinctive feature of European anti-cultism, and of FECRIS, is the cooperation between secular anti-cultists, some of them openly promoting atheism, and religious counter-cultists. This cooperation seems to be contradictory, and has generated some tensions, yet it also explains how FECRIS was able to influence politicians, governments, and media of very different religious and non-religious orientations.

French organizations affiliated with FECRIS offer an interesting case study. Roger Ikor was a self-styled atheist. In 1980, he stated that “there isn’t between a cult and a religion a difference of nature, or rather of principle; there is only a difference of degree and dimensions... If it was up to us, we would put an end to all these nonsenses, those of cults, but also those of large religions.” He also quoted “Muhammad, the Christ, and Moses” as precursors of the “cult” leaders active today (Ikor 1980, 76, 87, 89).

On the other hand, ADFI/UNADFI, at least in its first years, included many Catholics, and was hosted for several years in a Catholic parish (Notre Dame de Lorette) in Paris. However, something changed in the 21st century. Janine Tavernier, who was president of UNADFI from 1993 to 2001 and left the association in 2001, told *Le Monde* in 2006 that UNADFI “was founded by people coming from the Catholic Church, yet open-minded. I tried to move towards even more openness. But gradually, several Freemasons came into the UNADFI, giving it an orientation it did not have originally.” In the end, UNADFI became engaged in a “witch hunt” against groups that, according to Tavernier, had nothing to do with “cults” but were attacked for ideological or political reasons (Ternisien 2006). In the same years, she wrote that she “was shocked when I heard a person very much involved in the anti-cult activism

stating emphatically that ‘we should eradicate the idea of God’” (Tavernier 2006, 7).

Tavernier was referring to the well-known anti-Catholic orientation of the largest French Masonic organization, the Grand Orient. In 2009, sociologist Olivier Bobineau also noted within French anti-cultism the co-existence of a “Catholic conservative group, which designates evil based on its own criteria,” and “an atheistic left-wing group, for which freedom of belief is evil in itself.” The two groups “only agree in identifying a common enemy, the movements labeled as ‘cults.’” By 2009, according to Bobineau, the atheistic group was prevailing in the “power struggle” (Albertini 2009).

The uneasy coexistence between an anti-cult and a counter-cult component continues in FECRIS. Secular humanists and freethinkers such as the leaders of CCMM do not seem to have objections to be in an organization that elected as its vice-president Alexander Dvorkin, an employee of the Russian Orthodox Church. Dvorkin is a particularly egregious example of a FECRIS leader criticizing creeds of religions he dislikes, but there are other cases in Serbia (Jankovic 2012) and even in France (Duval 2012).

In post-Communist countries, Communists and Orthodox Churches, both conservative institutions in their own ways, opposed the free political and cultural choice of the new times, and used anti-cult movements (and funded them) to fight unwanted competitors, which appeared in the ideological and religious fields.

Among the non-European correspondents of FECRIS is the Israeli Center for Victims of Cults (ICVC), which (like Dvorkin’s organization) is allegedly secular but, while also including secular humanists, has deep ties with arch-conservative Jewish institutions that are mostly interested in preventing Jews from converting to other religions. In 2018, a report by Human Rights Without Frontiers exposed ICVC’s connection with Yad L’Achim, an organization officially denounced by the U.S. Department of State (United States Department of State 2017) as a radical expression of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, which promotes discrimination against religious minorities in Israel and violence against them. The report also evidenced Yad L’Achim’s support of the Chinese government in its persecution of Falun Gong (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2018).

Dvorkin, by the way, who is one of the most visible FECRIS leaders internationally, also offended believers of historical religions. He created considerable problems in the relationships between Russia and India by attacking the *Bhagavad-Gita* as an “extremist” book and stating that “We won’t be mistaken if we say that, from the Orthodox viewpoint, Krishna is one of the demons” (CAP-LC 2014, 13). He called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church, “a coarse neo-Pagan occult sect with fairly serious totalitarian tendencies” (Dvorkin 2002, 146). As for the Prophet of Islam, Dvorkin claimed that “either Mohammed suffered from a disease and it was a delirium vision; or it was a demonic obsession; or, once again, the Byzantine fathers claim that he was a sort of fantasizer who made it all up and then, which he hadn’t expected, his relatives believed in it. But of course, the combinations of all the three are possible as well” (this generated a strong reaction by Muslims: see *Goloslama.com* 2012).

This coexistence between counter-cult and anti-cult elements within FECRIS explains which groups are designated as “cults” and accused of “brainwashing.” On the one hand, there are those mainline churches, such as Dvorkin’s Russian Orthodox Church, that consider as competitors and “sheep stealers” the religions that convert members from their fold. On the other hand, high-commitment movements that manage to succeed in a secularized society disturb these secular humanists and anti-religious activists whose presence, according to Tavernier, had become so important in the milieu. One has, however, the impression that the criterion to designate one group as a “cult” and leave another alone is largely capricious. FECRIS affiliates claim to operate on the basis of complaints received by relatives of members or ex-members. Of course, this method is open to all sort of manipulations: everybody who dislikes a group may manage to have two or three complaints sent to the FECRIS associations, which would quickly declare the group a “cult” and claim it uses brainwashing. By following the social media accounts of FECRIS affiliates, we are also impressed how quickly, when the media report that the leader of a religious movement has been accused of sexual or financial abuses, the anti-cultists, knowing precious nothing about the group, immediately confirm that yes, this is a “typical cult” brainwashing its members.

FECRIS and its affiliates are the main relay to spread the anti-cult ideology in Europe. Since FECRIS was granted participatory status with the Council of Europe in 2005, and special consultative status at the ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) of the United Nations in 2009, it is also able to spread the same ideology in international fora, although its efforts are vigorously resisted and denounced by other accredited NGOs.

As the USCIRF stated in 2020, FECRIS represents a danger for religious liberty (USCIRF 2020). We will list several reasons why its activities cause harm.

1. FECRIS systematically spread the **anti-cult ideology about “cults” and brainwashing**, a pseudo-scientific theory that falsely claims to distinguish between deeds and creeds but in fact accuses of the imaginary crime of brainwashing, or mental manipulation, religious organizations that, for whatever reason, FECRIS members dislike.

2. FECRIS spread **false information** about dozens, if not hundreds, of religions and religious movements, which some media and governments take seriously and use since FECRIS members are allegedly “experts” in the field. International scholars have evidenced some egregious examples of this way of proceeding. In Serbia, Zoran Luković, a police captain and a representative of the local FECRIS affiliate Center for Anthropological Studies, publicly stated that two homicides committed in 2007 by a madman (who was found by the court as having no connection with any “cult”) were clearly “modelled after the Satanist rituals of Count Dracula” (Jankovic 2012, 371). Neither the historical nor the fictional Dracula of Bram Stoker’s (1847–1912) novel was a Satanist. The same Luković wrote a manual on “cults” where he listed among the “Satanist cults” both Heaven’s Gate and Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple (Jankovic 2012, 366), which ended their history with mass suicides but whose ideology had nothing to do with Satanism. Dvorkin’s false claims about different new and old religions might be the subject of an entire book.

That FECRIS affiliate organizations, their leaders, and FECRIS itself spread false and defamatory information about several religious groups is not only an opinion held by scholars of new religious movements. It has also been confirmed by court decisions. Lawyers know that defamation cases are difficult. Not all false statements constitute defamation. Some statements may be inaccurate, yet the courts may regard them as protected by free

speech and falling outside the scope of statutes against defamation. Organizations and tabloids that resort to systematic defamation know that they will be often sued, about several statements, and that they will be sentenced for some and found not guilty for others. Their strategy is normally to downplay the negative decisions and claim victory when only some of the statements for which they were sued, but not all, are found defamatory (a common occurrence even in the most successful defamation cases). They would also falsely claim that, when their statements have been found as non-defamatory, the courts have “certified” that they are “true”—while in fact a statement may be both false and outside the scope of defamation.

This strategy has been used to downplay the scope of a landmark decision by the District Court of Hamburg of November 27, 2020, which found FECRIS itself, rather than its affiliates only, guilty of 18 counts of “untrue factual allegations against the Jehovah’s Witnesses.” (Landgericht Hamburg 2020). Since the Jehovah’s Witnesses had claimed that 32 FECRIS statements were defamatory, and the court found 17 of them defamatory, one partially defamatory, and 14 non-defamatory, FECRIS claimed in a press statement—published only after one scholar had reviewed the Hamburg decision in a large-circulation magazine on religious liberty (Introvigne 2021), while before FECRIS had been silent on the issue—that it had “won” the German case. Obviously, they had not, as evidenced by the fact that FECRIS was sentenced to pay some money to the Jehovah’s Witnesses rather than vice versa, but they claimed that the 14 statements declared non-defamatory were “essential” and the 18 points for which they were sentenced were “ancillary” (FECRIS 2021).

FECRIS’ press release also gave the false impression that the Court of Hamburg had validated the 14 statements it had considered non-defamatory as true. In fact, the Court itself had warned against such an interpretation, noting that in German law “expressions of opinion enjoy extensive protection. Accordingly, inaccurate opinions also share in the scope of protection.” One clear example of an “inaccurate opinion” regarded as non-defamatory, which FECRIS mentions in its statement as if it had been confirmed as true by the Hamburg judges, is that “all claims of persecution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia are just primitive propaganda.” We even wonder whether FECRIS really believes this statement to be true, after the persecution of the

Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia has been repeatedly denounced by the United Nations, the European Union, and several Western governments.

In Austria, the already mentioned obsession FECRIS-connected anti-cultist Friedrich Griess has against the Brunstad Christian Church led to several court cases, which Griess settled by repeatedly undertaking to refrain from making further defamatory statements against the church, only to start again and be sued again (Brünner and Neger 2012, 323–28).

In France, the Appeal Court of Rouen sentenced the President of UNADFI, Catherine Picard, for defamation of the Jehovah's Witnesses through what the court called “a fallacious presentation” of their organization. The decision was later quashed for a procedural flaw (Picard was not summoned in due time for the appeal case) by the Court of Cassation, which however did not contradict the substantial finding of the Appeal Court. The same Court of Cassation in 2007 regarded as defamatory statements by Picard against the Rosicrucian movement AMORC (Duval 2012, 251–52).

Local leaders of ADFI/UNADFI have also been sentenced. In 1997, the Court of Appeal of Douai found Lydwine Ovigneur, then president of ADFI-Nord, guilty of defamation against the Jehovah's Witnesses (Forget 2010, 141). Another president of ADFI-Nord, Charline Delporte, had been found not guilty of defamation against the same Jehovah's Witnesses, but the case was sent by the Court of Cassation for re-examination to the Court of Appeal of Paris, which in 2003 concluded that Delporte had indeed defamed the religious organization (Forget 2010, 141–43).

Scientology has also won several cases against UNADFI leaders (Fautré 2021). On November 20, 2001, the Paris Criminal Court condemned the president of UNADFI, for public defamation regarding a member of the Church of Scientology. On February 5, 2003, the Paris Court of Appeal confirmed this judgment. On November 20, 2015, UNADFI was convicted by the Court of Appeal of Paris for “abuse of legal process,” for having joined, and persisted unlawfully and in bad faith as a plaintiff against the Church of Scientology, while UNADFI knew perfectly well that this action was inadmissible, its sole purpose being to “harm the Church and to illegally influence the judicial proceedings in progress” (Cour d'Appel de Paris 2015). This conviction was upheld by the Court of Cassation on January 12, 2017.

In Germany, Heide-Marie Cammans, the founder of FECRIS affiliate Sekten-Info Essen (later Sekten-Info NRW e.V.) was sentenced in Munich in 2001 for spreading false information about the group of Sant Thakar Singh (1929–2005), a spiritual teacher in the Sant Mat tradition (Dericquebourg 2012, 191).

In 2018 even the Odintsovo Court in Russia, a country where the judiciary normally cooperates with anti-cultists, found that Dvorkin’s Russian FECRIS affiliate went too far, and sentenced it to remove defamatory statements against Hindu spiritual teacher Prasun Prakash (Matharu 2019).

These are only some examples of lawsuits lost by FECRIS affiliates. No doubt, these anti-cult organizations can also mention that they won lawsuits against new religious movements that compared them to the Nazi police Gestapo, or otherwise used a language transcending the limits of freedom of expression, and that in other cases their statements were regarded as non-defamatory.

However, there is no real balance here. FECRIS seeks a public role. It claims to provide reliable expertise on “cults,” and to offer the services of “experts.” In many cases throughout Europe, these “experts” have been found by courts of law to offer not factual reports, but fake news and slander, with the deliberate aim of defaming and discriminating religious movements they do not like. The number of cases clearly leads to the conclusion that this is a systematic, rather than occasional, behavior by FECRIS and its affiliates.

3. **FECRIS supports totalitarian regimes** that have incurred the world’s condemnation for their persecution, torture, and extra-judicial killing of members of minority religions. Alexander Dvorkin, the main architect of the Russian persecution of new religious movements, was elected Vice President of FECRIS and is a main force within the organization. Worse still, FECRIS members (Dericquebourg 2012, 193), including Dvorkin (Human Rights Without Frontiers International Correspondent in Russia 2012, 284) have participated in conferences organized in China to justify the persecution of Falun Gong. Dvorkin stated that “Falun Gong is a tough totalitarian sect whose members are used by its leader in his vendetta against the Chinese government, and which, in turn, is used by the American special services for their foreign policy goals” (Dvorkin 2013).

While the democratic world is engaged in a struggle to denounce the persecution of Falun Gong in China, with dozens of governmental and

international documents mentioning torture, killings, and organ harvesting, the support by the leaders of FECRIS is a precious weapon the Chinese Communist Party may, and in fact does, use to justify its atrocities.

4. **FECRIS has been involved in violence** against new religious movements. It is not only that hate speech usually ends up generating physical violence. While cautious about deprogramming, which led to the end of the Cult Awareness Network in the United States, FECRIS leaders have occasionally justified it (Duval 2012, 240–42). Sometimes, they went beyond mere justification. The case that clarified that deprogramming is illegal in Europe was the European Court of Human Rights’ decision *Riera Blume and Others v. Spain* of 1999. The decision clearly stated that FECRIS affiliate Pro Juventud (later AIS, Atención e Investigación de Socioadicciones) had “direct and immediate responsibility” in the deprogramming (European Court of Human Rights 1999).

Again, this is not an isolated incident. In Switzerland, members of both the local FECRIS affiliate SADK (Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft gegen destruktive Kulte) and the UK FECRIS affiliate FAIR (later the Family Survival Trust) were involved in a 1989 attempted deprogramming of a member of the Hare Krishna movement, which led to suspended prison sentences against the leading deprogrammer and the two parents of the victim (Dericquebourg 2012, 192).

As late as 2018, the program of a FECRIS board meeting of June 1 in Riga, Latvia, indicated among those present “David Clark, representative of FECRIS to the United Nations, New York.” David Clark has long been known as a deprogrammer (Shupe and Darnell 2006, 88, 98, 189).

5. **FECRIS actively promotes a gatekeeping strategy against the most senior scholars of new religious movements**, labeled “cult apologists.”

In 2018, American scholar William M. Ashcraft published an authoritative textbook on the history of the academic study of new religious movements. He noted that those recognized as the leading scholars of the subject, whose work shaped the field, were all harsh critics of the anti-cult ideology. A handful of scholars (the most well-known of whom was Canadian sociologist Stephen A. Kent) seceded from the majority of their colleagues to create a new discipline they called “cultic studies,” which accepted the distinction

between religions and “cults,” and the theory that “cults” were identified by their use of heavy psychological manipulation techniques, for which some of them kept the word “brainwashing.” As Ashcraft noted, “cultic studies” were never accepted as “mainstream scholarship.” They continued as “a project shared by a small cadre of committed scholars” but not endorsed by “the larger academic community, nationally and internationally” (Ashcraft 2018, 9).

While some of its exponents may occasionally publish interesting contribution, Ashcraft wrote, “cultic studies is [sic] not mainstream” (Ashcraft 2018, 9). FECRIS, however, has consistently engaged in what sociologists call gatekeeping, i.e. a practice of “closing the gates” trying to block certain books or authors from exerting a social influence. FECRIS, of course, does not have any influence on academic journals and presses, where those scholars it labels as “cult apologists” continue to publish regularly and indeed dominate the field. However, it promotes among the media and certain politicians a false narrative, reversing what Ashcraft described in its manual about the academic consensus. While Ashcraft noted that “new religious movement studies,” which are “anti-anti-cult,” represents overwhelmingly the majority view in the academia, and “cultic studies” are regarded as “not mainstream,” FECRIS tries to give the impression that the opposite is true, that the tiny minority of cultic studies scholars are the “academic experts,” while the scholars in the field of new religious movements are a group of “cult apologists” whose works should not be relied upon by governments and media.

FECRIS also promotes the equally false theory that for mainstream new religious movement scholars each group that claims to be religious is by definition innocent of any crime it may be accused of. This is obviously not true. Virtually all scholars of new religious movements recognize that there are “criminal religious movements,” both among the newly established religions and within the old religions (such as rings of pedophile Catholic priests or terrorist organizations who claim to act in the name of Islam). Only, they refer to groups committing real crimes such as terrorism, physical violence, and sexual abuse, rather than the imaginary crimes of “being a cult” or “using brainwashing.”

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Spreading false information about both religious organizations and scholars, hate speech, support of totalitarian regimes and physical violence against members of “cults,” defamation: this is a behavior that justify the USCIRF’s assessment of FECRIS as a main danger to international religious freedom. Governmental and other institutions that cooperate with FECRIS should seriously consider whether such an organization really deserve their support.

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