

FRANCE: Abuses to Religious Freedom

Dr. Susan J. Palmer, Research Affililate and Lecturer in Religious Studies, Concordia University; Professor in Religious Studies, Montreal Quebec, Canada.

Affiliation: The European Network for Religious Tolerance and Non-Discrimination (with Human Rights Without Frontiers, Willy Fautré, Director, Brussels, Belgium)

France: Report on Research Findings regarding Abuses of Religious Freedom – Susan J. Palmer (Ph.D.)

1. I am Canadian researcher, teacher of religious studies and recipient of a standard research grant from the Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) that provided travel funds and release time for my 3 year project (2005-2008) to study the “public management” of religious minorities in France. On the basis of my research findings, through the standard research methods of interviews, field research and studying media reports, and primary and secondary literature, I have found that religious freedom in France is seriously compromised. I have published my research findings in seven venues: three edited volumes, two journals, one conference paper available on the www.cesnur website, and I have a book forthcoming with Brill. (The New Heretics of France). I attach my most recent (February 2008) Nova Religio paper: “Field Notes on France, a Post 9/11 Update” that contains references to the other publications.
2. I have found that members of new religious movements (NRMs), and immigrants belonging to “oriental import” religious (e.g.the Sikhs) have suffered from six strategies of social control:
 - a) Deviance labeling (“sects”) and stereotyping in the media (*mediabolization* is the French term).
 - b) Discrimination in the workplace, through being fired, denied promotion, or an application for a job rejected due to the employee’s affiliation with a “secte”.
 - c) Ostracization from, or marginalization in the public space. Many leaders have complained they were refused a booth in a public market or festival, and their contracts to rent hotel rooms for a conference would be cancelled at the last minute.
 - d) Public humiliation of spiritual leaders. Many founders/leaders of NRMs have been denied entry into France (e.g. Chinmoy, Rev. Moon). Many have been demonized by the mass media’s broadcasting of unfounded allegations that are later dismissed or overturned in the courts. Many have been called “escroc”, “manipulateur,” “pedophiles’ teacher” in Sanskrit) is actually an abusive stigmatizing word in France. Several have been arrested and held for questioning.
 - e) Many parents affiliated with unconventional religions are discriminated against in custody disputes, where the secular or Catholic parent is preferred, and many have had their visiting rights cancelled or curtailed.
 - f) Members of NRMs who practice faith-healing, healing prayers, massage, herbal medicine, chanting as supplement to conventional

medicine have been arrested and held for questioning or actually charged and sometimes convicted for “practicing medicine without a license” or “depriving a person of medical care”.

3. Since the old government ministry to “fight cults” (MILS) was dissolved and replaced with MIVILUDES in 2003, whose strategy does not attack “sectes” directly, but instead focuses on “derives sectaires” a new threat to religious freedom has emerged: the criminalization of NRMs and leaders through the new About Picard law, passed in the National Assembly in May 2001. My study of the first application of this law to the case of Arnaud Mussy of Neo-Phare discusses the complex issues of brainwashing theory, and the problems and prejudices in making manipulation mentale a delit is available on the www.cesnur.org website (2006 CESNUR Conference in San Diego).
4. The stifling and censorship of academic research and expert opinions in France means that the general public has access to information regarding religious minorities only through the mass media, the anticult organization (UNADFI) or government reports. Since journalists and government officials rely heavily on UNADFI for their information, this means there is only one, oppositional and biased source. My February 2008 article in Nova Religio features interviews with French academics who have been punished for free speech – and venturing their opinions on the “sects problem”. Professor Antoine Faivre of the Sorbonne was actually arrested and held behind bars for 5 hours for asking why the Guyard Report was based exclusively on auditions with anticultists and ex-members, and not one academic was interviewed. Nathalie Luca of EHESS resigned from her position on MIVILUDES because her objective, academic opinions were disregarded. Dr. Maurice Duval, Dr. Christian Paturol and other scholars have been sued for criticizing members of the anticult movement in their books. There is almost no research in the area of NRMs in France.
5. Although France has an excellent legal system, the administrative and appeals courts appear to be biased against unconventional religions. Several NRMs have launched aggressive lawsuits for defamation, but nearly always lose. It is striking that UNADFI officials and Scientologists often call the other identical epithets (“Gestapo” or “Nazi”) – but only the UNADFI lawsuits win, and Scientology always loses! Many NRMs have demanded a *droit de reponse* in newspapers, but have been disregarded. The level of prejudice against “sects” and secte members is so deep and pervasive, the level of ignorance is so high, that French citizens who are associated with an unconventional religion are handicapped when they appeal to Justice. However, there have been some significant victories in the European Court. My forthcoming book, [The New Heretics of France](#), discusses this issue and offers examples from the histories of various NRMs in France: Mandarom/Aumisme, Church of Scientology, Raelian Movement, Twelve Tribes, Horus, I.V.I., Jehovah’s Witnesses, United Sikhs, Unification Church, Enfants de Dieu, Neo-Phare, Anthroposophie, New Acropolis, Lectorium Rosicrucianum, Soka Gakkai, Mahikari, SHY and others.