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Best practice for society in dealing with cults

ABSTRACT

Freedom of religion has challenges of its own. One particular aspect that presents a challenge is the nature of religion in the sense that the actions and practices of religion are not prescribed or measured by human criteria except that it may not be against the law. Another aspect that cannot be underestimated is the susceptibility of people when it comes to religion. Both these aspects create opportunity for abuse in religion. When members of society become aware of religious groups that are believed to be exploitive for selfish aims it creates tension between society and these groups. With no recognisable, credible organisation to turn to for assistance society tends to take matters in their own hands that mostly result in an even more fragile situation. A solution is to set up an information centre that can provide information to the public. It is important to align the approach of the centre with workable practices in other parts of the world that have been dealing with this issue for many years. Practices in some European countries are investigated and the best practices suitable for South Africa are determined and suggested.

1. INTRODUCTION

The inevitable right to freedom of religion afforded every world citizen is not an absolute right but applies within the wider context of human rights. Despite the purpose of human rights to ensure a harmonious functioning of society, the right to freedom of religion has also proven to be a right that can lead to tension in societies. The “cultic group” known as “Abanyakabera” in Rwanda, is a recent example of a religious group whose practices and beliefs have an impact on the harmonious functioning of society. As a result of their belief system, members of the group defy development policies and resist the national census claiming that it is better to obey God’s commands than to obey human beings’ (Bucyensenge 2012:1). Religious cults, as they are generally referred to, are believed to misrepresent themselves to their members and society. Such misrepresentations create suspicion about the true nature and intentions of these groups that in turn lead to tension between them and society. Ways must be found not only to address the tension but also to educate the general public about lesser known minority religions easily referred to as cults. A better understanding of these groups will ensure objectivity when it comes to determining if they are harmful or harmless and if they pose any threat. The objective of this article is to find a suitable approach and best practices for dealing with and informing society about cults believed to be exploitive to its members and in tension with the wider society. Information on the approaches of different organisations in Europe¹ that have dealt with these groups over decades will be presented to propose the way forward in South Africa.

¹ The author has visited a number of Cult Information Centers in Europe in October 2012 to gather information.

2. DISTINGUISHING CULTS FROM MAINSTREAM RELIGION

Scholars are faced with a challenge regarding the criteria to be used when attempting to distinguish cults from mainstream religion. Scholars are unable to reach a consensus when looking for a suitable definition that clearly differentiates cults from mainstream religions.

2.1 Cults and new religious movements

Scholars from different disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology and theology have attempted to unearth the dynamics and practices of cults in an attempt to distinguish them from other religions. It soon became evident that defining these groups present a challenge based on their complexity and diversity. The different definitions presented for cults also portray traits of mainstream religions, which complicate a clear distinction between so-called main religions and cults.

The terms sect and cult are at times used interchangeably. In some European countries, including France, Belgium, Germany and Austria the term “*secte*” or “*sekten*” is used. Sect, in the contexts of these countries, designates a branch that has split off from an established religion and in this sense the word is not pejorative. However, sect is also used to refer to a group or organisation whose beliefs or behaviour are considered suspicious and harmful by the rest of society. It is further believed that leaders of these groups infringe on the individual liberties of the members in the group or mentally manipulate their followers and take ownership of their property. These leaders keep their members under control and pose a threat to the social order.

The terms church and sect have a long history in the writings of church historians. Max Weber deserves credit for the attachment of the terms to sociological concepts. The German theologian, Ernst Troeltsch altered Webers’ church-sect typology with the aim of distinguishing between three types of religious behaviour namely: church religion, sect religion and mysticism. The first two are identified with religious organisation and the third type a form of “anti-associational individualism” (Swatos & William 1998:90-91). In 1932 the American sociologist Becker developed two of the three types of Troeltsch into four types, namely “church religion” into “ecclesia” and “denomination and sect” into “sect and “cult”. The term cult referred to the “private and personal character of the adherents’ beliefs” and the unstructured nature of these organisations (Swatos 1998).

The term cult has since been developed by a number of theorists (Richardson 1993:348) from an umbrella term under which all “troublesome and idiosyncratic religious experiences of mystics and other religious deviants” (Richardson 1978:29) could be placed to a widely used popular term that refers to an unfamiliar group that is disliked or feared. The popular use of the term cult has unfortunately cluttered the neutral historical meaning used by sociology of religion to become a pejorative term (Richardson 1993:348). Other definitions of cult from different disciplines followed to describe entities not fitting the descriptions of church, sect and denomination well.

Sociologists initially arrived at an operational definition that describes cults as deviant groups, which exist in a state of tension with society that offer something new and radically different to their members. The tension with society is fed by the general belief that cults pose a threat to the harmonious functioning of society because of their misrepresentation to society and the exploitation of members (Stark & Bainbridge 1979:125). Apart from the tension with society

sociologists' definition developed and included the notion that cults are groups that "broke with tradition" and further also incorporated mystical and individual, or ecstatic experiences. Cults were studied concerning the change in organisational form, modes of social control and relations with social environment and surroundings. Richardson (1978:38) has developed an "oppositional" concept of cults according to which a cult is described in terms of its opposition to the dominant culture and religious traditions.

Melton (2004:83-84) added an interesting perspective of defining cults in relation to dominant religious traditions, which can be called a relational approach. Instead of studying cults as a group of religions that share particular attributes he proposes that new religions must be studied as a *set of religions* that are viewed as outsiders by the dominant religious tradition and by elements within the secular culture. Cults can therefore be described as a set of religions that do not enjoy legitimate acknowledgement in the religious and social culture of society. Based on the church-sect typology each religious tradition has a hierarchical structure, namely a dominant group – the church. The religious groups that have dissented within limits from the church are viewed as sects, but religious groups that have dissented beyond those limits that can no longer be considered as fellow believers are viewed as cults. In most countries that have a single religious tradition to which the majority of people belong the dominant religious community determines what religious group will be accommodated and which one will be opposed. All alternative or emergent groups may experience opposition and be labelled as "outsiders" or cults. In the West it is always some form of Christianity that dominates. New religions can be described as "those religious groups that have been found, from the perspective of the dominant religious community to be not just different, but unacceptably different" (Melton 2004:78-79). This also implies that the list of cults may differ from country to country depending on the dominant religious tradition.

From a psychological or mental health perspective cults are generally described as "a group or movement that to a significant degree (a) exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to leadership, or a group or movement (b) utilises unethical manipulative techniques to persuade, control and socialise members and systematically induces members to states of psychological dependency and isolation from former friends and family (c) is authoritarian in leadership and aggressive in proselytising" (West & Langone 1986:119-120; Robbins & Anthony 1982:283). The practices and techniques utilised by cults are viewed as dangerous and harmful not only to members but also to society as a result of the underlying psychological techniques used. The International Cultic Studies Association is a prominent organisation dealing with the effects of cultic groups. It supports the view of mental health practitioners, namely to deal with the effects cultic groups have on members and family of members rather than labelling groups as cult or non-cult (Langone 2011:1).

In a theological context the word cult is understood to be closely related to the word "sect" (*hairesis* in Greek) and means "a body of men following their own tenets", "a group with distinctive theories with an acknowledged founder" or "a strong, distinctive opinion of individual "parties" (sects) that operated in Judaism. Hairesis developed further and in the second century became a term to refer to a body of false beliefs (*Dictionary of Spiritual Terms* [Sa]:1). In a theological context the word cult is generally used in an apologetic sense to distinguish between "true beliefs" and "false belief" (Saliba 2003).

Unfortunately, despite the context in which the word cult is used it generally conveys a negative connotation. Saliba (2003) explains that the word cult has taken on diverse meanings

as a result of the negative connotations attached to the word and emphasised by the media, psychologists, lawyers and anti-cult groups. The term cult thus no longer conveys accurate and useful information.

The word “new religious movements” was introduced to address the controversy around the word cult. The term new religious movement (NRM) was originally coined by Eileen Barker (Hadden [Sa]). The aim with the term NRM, according to Barker, is not to indicate whether a movement is good or bad, or true or false, or genuine or fraudulent. The term is an umbrella term that includes a wider spectrum of groups namely, “alternative religions”, “nonconventional religions”, “cults” or “contemporary sects” (Barker 1989:4-5). Although the supporters of the term NRM believe that the term signifies a neutral connotation it still does not provide a clear definition to distinguish cults from mainstream religion and the other groups included in this category. Instead this wide description complicates a general definition as a result of the inclusion of the different groups that vary in beliefs, practices and dynamics. The term only seems to be helpful when used to refer in general to all groups outside mainstream religion.

When considering the variety of approaches in defining cult it is clear that different aspects are considered. From a theological perspective the lack of biblical orthodoxy considered as “truth” is a point of concern. However, this viewpoint does not fully deal with the impact of other particularities and practices of cults on members and society. The psychological approach focuses on the psychological methods or dynamics at work in cults through which they recruit and maintain their members. This approach places strong emphasis on addressing the harm caused by cults. However, it does not fully deal with the reciprocal interaction of cults and society and the consequential impact and influence they have on one another’s behaviour. Sociologists focus on the functioning of cults in society considering the reciprocal relationship between cults and society. However, they do not pay attention to the “truth” aspects as pointed out by the theological approach and take a relatively neutral stance on the negative effects cult practices may have on individuals (Garde 2006:45).

In light of the above and lacking consensus on a definition for cult, it is evident that the different definitions of cult cannot simply be used as a yardstick to distinguish between a cult and non-cult. In addition, it is difficult to demonstrate the abusiveness of environments behaviourally and according to scientific methodologies. A general classification of groups outside mainstream religion based on some of the aspects in the definition tends to give less weight to the role of individual differences in evaluating groups and over-generalises the entire group (Langone 2011:1). Although the definitions of cult are not suitable to classify groups as cults, they remain helpful in studying and understanding a phenomenon and its impact on people and society.

2.2 The phenomenon of cultism

As was indicated above, the word cult was initially intended to make a distinction between certain deviant groups and mainstream religion, but changed over time. It became a pejorative word especially when attributes such as violence, abuse, control, illegal weapon transactions and exploitation were added that are used to classify groups as harmful and a threat to society. The situation was further agitated by the general referral to any group outside mainstream religion as a cult and lead to antagonism between society and these groups. Despite the fact that the use of the word cult is frowned upon especially from a human rights point of view, it does not mean that some groups are not guilty of exploiting members and may be harmful to

the harmonious function of society (Pretorius 2012). Another approach is needed to study and evaluate the practices and dynamics imbedded in cults without labelling groups.

Hughes (1993:354) proposed an approach through which the phenomenon of cultism should be studied. The word "cultism" is a suitable term to use to describe the beliefs, practices, dynamics and impact of cults without labelling particular groups. This approach is aimed at studying the cult phenomenon, in other words, to describe a specific mentality, particular dynamics and practices present in a group. This mentality and these dynamics are also not confined to specific groups – issues of cultism can be found anywhere even in one's own affiliations – and therefore addresses the accusations of being biased (Garde 2006:53).

Cultism is the belief in or the study of harmful practices and dynamics as a result of the abuse of authority. Tourish and Irving (1996) conceptualise cultism as a continuum: at the one end of the spectrum people are voluntary cooperating to work out their ideas and develop a shared sense of purpose. At the other end of the continuum people are manipulated and compelled to uncritically accept the theories and orders of leaders who are unchallenged, infallible and cannot be corrected.

The abuse of authority present in cults became evident in a clinical observation between psychotherapists and patients. It was found that psychotherapists through the misuse of psychotherapy may produce a mentality similar to that of cults. Psychotherapists may fail to maintain professional boundaries and instead of viewing their patients "idealisation" of them a result of their treatment, may use it to encourage submission, obedience and adoration, as in a cult. Although psychotherapy cult membership may be rare, a psychotherapy cult mentality is not. Patients became "true believers," with totalistic patterns of thought, increased dependence and paranoia. "Both therapist and patients became trapped in a closed system that encouraged mutual exploitation and corruption" (Temerlin & Temerlin 1982:131). The increased dependency and paranoia are demonstrated in a "desperate need for the reassurance offered by impregnable belief, reliance on instant friendships, and the idealisation of reference groups" (Tourish & Irving 1996:190).

Another important value embraced by cultism is separateness from the world necessitated by the belief that members are "specially chosen". This isolation from the world is of vital importance to the nature of a cult's continuance. Wilson (1959:10) points out that the aim of this separateness is to keep them "unspotted from the world". Two important principle types of mechanism are present to create separateness, namely *isolation* and *insulation*. *Isolation* can be consciously designed by the group dynamics and unconsciously accepted by the members, and can entail physical isolation like in a commune. It can also be social isolation. Although members are not physically isolated they are expected not to socialise with anybody outside their own group. *Insulation* consists of certain behavioural rules that are prescriptive to protect the values of the sect or cult when contact with outside influences does occur. Insulation may also be a "latent moral function based on revealed biblical scripture or the teachings of the group" (Wilson 1959:10-11).

The separateness of cults creates two aspects of tension. Firstly, internal tension is created when the demand for separateness and the other cult values are challenged by the command of all cults to evangelise. This means exposure of the cult member to the outside world that could lead to contamination and alienation. The admittance of new evangelised members into the cult that may not be completely socialised in terms of the cult prescriptions also pose

a threat to the smooth controlled functioning of the group. The second tension is an outward or external tension between the ideals of the cult and the ideals of the wider society and ultimately the state. The deviance in ideals can lead to tension and the hostility of the cult against the world. If less hostility is portrayed it suggests accommodation of the world values. Wilson (1959:12) identified the typical issues of tension between cults and wider society:

- disagreement between cults and society on what constitutes true knowledge
- refusal of cults to accept the legitimacy of the legal arrangement of society
- refusal to accept conventional sacred practices, including oath swearing
- non-compliance with political arrangements such as to salute national emblems, conscientious objection to military activities of state
- disproof of marital and family regulations imposed by the state
- objection to the medical policies of the state
- disregard of economical institutions
- refusal to register land ownership

For cults to continue, they need to develop means to deal with the tension in the wider society. Although the cult departs from the accepted moral rules of the wider society, conflict beyond a certain point does appear as a result of the cults' teachings, practices and dynamics that develop over time. At this stage the need arises to either adopt agencies to take care of the situation that may include making contact with worldly organisations or fighting its case in court (Wilson 1959:12). The most recent remedy readily utilised by cults is the claim that their right to freedom of religion and belief is infringed upon when they experience tension with society or the state.

Two aspects seem to be pertinent for cults to persist, namely to function separate from the world and to maintain their uniqueness in terms of their own values from those of the secular world. The more fully the cult views itself as a chosen people in possession of the truth, the more it will resist the process to become a denomination.

An important aspect that deserves attention is the tension between society and cults as a result of the belief that cults oppose and resist conventional rules aimed at ensuring harmonious functioning of society. Based on their particular belief that they are a chosen people submissive to another set of prescriptions that supersedes the earthly prescriptions, they are apathetic to worldly institutions of society or the state. This tension between cults and society is addressed in different ways in countries. Different approaches in dealing with cults are evident when evaluating the practices of organisations dealing with cults in Europe.

3. APPROACHES IN DEALING WITH CULTS IN SOME EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Globally, governments have adopted different approaches towards religious groups guilty of practices that are believed to be harmful or in violation of the basic human rights of members and society. These approaches vary from actions to address violations and the trespassing of laws, as in France, to no official reactions, as in the United Kingdom and Denmark (Kropveld 2007:3-4). Interference by government in religious matters is complicated and limited by the very nature of the bill of rights. Legal intervention based on concrete evidence is more

challenging in the light of the underlying transcendental nature of religion that allows for a freedom immeasurable in concrete visible terms.

In Europe different organisations were established as a direct result of the killing of 932 members of the People's Temple in 1978, followed by killings of members of the Solar Temple in Switzerland and France in 1994. Reports were served before the European Parliament and resulted in the creation of governmental organisations in some European countries as well as nongovernmental organisations with the aim of dealing proactively with the possible threat of cults. A number of the approaches followed by some of these countries will now be discussed.

3.1 Miviludes – *Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires* (Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances) a French governmental organisation based in Paris, France

France is a secular state and in a system of separation between state and religion there is no formal recognition of religious communities (Fautré [Sa]:1). No legal definition exists of what constitutes a cult or a religion in French law. This is partially the result of the fact that, in virtue of the Laïcité law (Laïcité also translates as secularity or secularism) of 1905, the concept is embraced of no religious involvement in government affairs and no involvement of government in religious affairs; thus, a separation of state and church (Rémond 1999). According to this law three principles apply: the neutrality of the state, the freedom of religious exercise and public powers related to the church. The French Constitution of 1958 states that the Republic does not recognise, pay any salary to or subsidise any religion (Fautré [Sa]:7). Since the French Revolution, France has refused to define or to limit the religious and spiritual phenomena, thereby avoiding the risk of infringing upon the absolute principle of freedom of belief (Machi 2010:2).

However, after the tragedy of the members of the People's Temple in 1978, the phenomenon of cults and sects was investigated seriously, and France legitimised the need for political initiative to address this issue. The first public report called "Cults in France: moral freedom of expression or manipulation of factors" was submitted to the prime minister in February 1983. The report describes a number of groups that posed a risk because of their political ideology and their financial empire maintained through the isolation of their members within a rigid structure. The first reports in France and Europe were used to consider preventative policy.

In 1984, the European Parliament pointed out the contradiction between "protection of the law and the right to believe and the concerns about the consequences of beliefs." The first parliamentary inquiry held in 1994 was repeated in 1995 to deal with the killing of members of the Order of the Solar Temple in Canada, Switzerland and France. In 1996 the report "Sects in France" was submitted. The Interministerial Observatory on Sects was established in 1996, followed by the Interministerial Mission to Fight against Sects (MILS) in 1998.

The second parliamentary inquiry was held in 1999 when the report entitled "Sects and money" was published. This report demonstrates the importance of money for sects. On 12 June 2001, the parliament passed the law called About Picard: The About Picard law aims at preventing harmful movements (not only sectarian movements) from infringing on human rights and fundamental freedoms of people. It protects people from psychological or physical influence applied through strong and repeated pressure to alter people's judgement in order to commit acts of abstentions that could have negative consequences for the person (Machi 2010).

This law is not without its critics and is criticised for the inconclusive definition of what constitutes a “dangerous cult” as well as for the expansive language which is so broad that any legal entity construed as engaging in psychological subjection could be banned. This legislative incentive to ban harmful cults was explained as a broad consensus; the necessary intention must be to protect individual liberties and fight for the right of each individual to freedom of religion (UDSBDHRL 2009).

The Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviance (Miviludes) was created in 2002 by the Raffarin government (Miviludes). For more than 25 years, the French government has strongly affirmed its will to protect the victims from deviant behaviour of sectarian movements. According to Machi (2010:1), secretary general of Miviludes, the French government developed its action against cults and combat organisations step by step, as a result of parliamentary reports through the involvement of successive prime ministers.

Miviludes is an interministerial governmental department under the auspices of the French prime minister. The view of the French government is that the impact of cults stretches across different spheres of life. The dynamics of cults can have an impact on young people and their development, therefore the department of education is involved. Child abuse and sexual abuse can be present in cults and the health of their followers can be in danger. Cults in many cases are involved in illegal financial transactions or other criminal activities such as illegal weapon transactions, drugs and different forms of abuse and can disrupt the social order of a community through acts of terrorism. Cults may also infringe on the basic human rights of their followers through their strict prescriptions. Thus, to ensure a holistic approach appropriate action awareness information pertaining to cults and their activities needs to be channelled to all ministerial departments including education, justice, police services, finance, health, social service, interior affairs and foreign affairs. Each department should be aware of the activities of cults, the impact they have on the different administrations and what intervention is required. In this regards Miviludes fulfils the role of receiving and disseminating information as well as distributing the information to the different ministries. Miviludes also receives feedback and coordinate actions that may be taken by the different ministries. Miviludes does not take any action but ensures that through the information obtained commissions are set up to investigate cult-related issues. Another important role of Miviludes is reciprocal information sharing in terms of media reporting in France (Barbureau 2012).

Miviludes receives information from nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) dealing with cults in France. One such important organisation is the *Union Nationale des Associations de Défense des Familles et de l'Individu* (UNADFI). This French anti-cult association (a public utility association) was founded in 1974 and is subsidised by the French government. The function of UNADFI is to gather and coordinate the *Associations de Défense des Familles et de l'Individu* (ADFI), that acquire information on the cult phenomenon to prevent possible harm and to assist victims.

Once a complaint or concern is received about a particular group that poses a danger, the specific police force responsible for the handling of aberrant behaviour by sectarian movements – *Cellule d'Assistance et d'Intervention en Matière de Dérives Sectaires* or Assistance and Intervention Unit for Sectarian Abuses (CAIMADES), will be called in order to determine the validity of the complaint or concern and to investigate. The special unit is made up of nine policemen. Another unit of the special police monitors internet activities to gather intelligence on cults.

Miviludes further conducts public information sessions to inform the general public about cults and their impact. Miviludes receives more than 2 500 requests and concerns about cults per year. Some of the information and cases are referred to other associations working with cults to provide advice and assistance (Barbureau 2012). Some recent legal or administrative advances have been made to the French government system for monitoring and combating sectarian deviations. Some recent developments at Miviludes include the creation of a legal regulation of the status of “psychotherapist” and a better legal framework for all professional training centres (Machi 2010:8).

3.2 Dialogue Ireland – Ireland

Dialogue Ireland operating from Dublin in Ireland is an independent trust with the aim of promoting awareness and understanding of cultism in Ireland (www.Dialogueireland.org). Dialogue Ireland initially started in 2001 as an ecumenical body working with the churches in Ireland to promote awareness about cultist groups and to assist the victims and their families. However, since 2009 Dialogue Ireland has started to function as a human rights (non-sectarian, non-religious) organisation studying the influences and dynamics of cults. This phenomenon generally referred to as cultism cuts across different organisations, religious and non-religious. It can be as large as a country and as small as an individual.

The main function of Dialogue Ireland is to gather information about cultism and to make it available to the general public by means of posts on the Dialogue Ireland website. This information pertaining to cultist groups is shared in a multi-lateral manner creating a platform for dialogue about issues that may pose a danger to society (Garde 2012).

Dialogue Ireland follows a human rights approach in dealing with cultism. However, Garde (2012) stresses the importance of integrating the different approaches, including theological, mental health, sociological and legal approaches to determine the full reach of undue influence processes.

Literature on cultist groups, which is an essential source in the study of such groups, seems to be difficult to obtain seeing that cultist groups succeed in keeping it out of the public domain. To resolve this challenge Dialogue Ireland has through the years established an online library containing important literature on different cultist groups available to the general public. In addition, conferences and lectures are arranged to inform and discuss issues.

Another very important role Dialogue Ireland fulfils in the education of the public about cultism is its school education project scheduled for religious education classes. This project is aimed at final-year learners to inform them about cultism and the dangers it poses before they go to university.

Utilising the social media such as Facebook is another effective method in communicating important information about cultism but also to provide directions where more information and assistance can be obtained. Dialogue Ireland has established a good relationship with the media to ensure reciprocal exchange and verification of information on cultism.

As is the case with any organisation informing on dangers of cultist groups, Dialogue Ireland has also encountered legal threats assuming them to be involved in hate speech and libel (Garde 2012).

3.3 CIAOSN – Centre d’information et d’avis sur les organisations sectaires nuisibles (Centre for Information and Advice on Harmful Sectarian Organisations) – Brussels, Belgium

In Belgium there is separation between church and state and freedom of religion. Some religions are legally recognised as religions based on certain criteria, such as membership, number of years of existence and loyalty to the constitution. Interestingly the term sect (interchanged with “cult”) in Belgium does not denote a negative connotation seeing that it is used to refer to religious groups in general. The term sect is used to refer to religions that have branched from established religions. Some religions that originated from the Christian tradition are in fact sects (cults) of Christianity. For example, Catholicism originated from the Christian tradition and is therefore a sect (cult) of Christianity. Other sects/cults of Christianity are Protestantism, Anglicanism and Presbyterianism. State-recognised religions receive a state subsidy. This subsidy is obtained through the income tax system (Fautré [Sa]:8). All other religious entities not recognised by law that function in Belgium such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unification Church of Christ (Moonies) and Scientology are also referred to as cults or sects. They are, however, further distinguished in cases where they are believed to be harmful or dangerous by the adjective “harmful” cults or “dangerous” cults.

CIAOSN is a Belgian federal centre that was established by act of law on 2 June 1998 as a result of inquiry recommendations about sects to parliament. The inquiry recommendations included a request for the establishment of an observatory for harmful sects in Belgium and the development of a policy to prevent and fight against the illegal practices of sects that pose a threat to society and minors. The centre also provides information to the public through the library that has reference books, encyclopaedias, magazines, and reports, folders of documentation, videos and CD-ROMS (www.CIAOSN.be).

CIAOSN is a government organisation operating under the department of justice and funded through the state budget. The purpose of the centre is to protect the citizens of Belgium against harmful sectarian groups and their practices. CIAOSN is not a militant organisation but obtains as much information as possible on harmful sectarian groups to make this information available to society. The centre’s approach to possible events of sectarian groups that may be harmful is a careful analysis without unnecessary media coverage to reduce unnecessary panic. Information about sectarian groups is obtained from different sources and the facts of cases are put forward. In Mr Brasseur’s (2012) own words “we call a cat a cat and a not a dragon”. Citizens are thus kept informed about different harmful sects and can also get information on psychological and family support. The role of the church is important and viewed as an agent of public order (Brasseur 2012).

Files with facts about sectarian groups as well as references are maintained but no specific opinion about sectarian groups is expressed by the centre. All information is made available to the public and other governmental administrations to decide on future action if needed. Requests for more information pertaining to groups are received from the public daily and CIAOSN responds by providing as much information as possible on the groups enquired about. CIAOSN only exchanges open information and judicial information is not released. In cases where crimes are expected, the results of such investigations by the federal police special unit are handed to the state attorney for prosecution. The centre has good relationships with other organisations in Europe such as Miviludes and the federal office against harmful sects in Austria and Germany. Information is exchanged on a regular basis between these offices.

The centre maintains good relationships with NGOs dealing with harmful sectarian groups and believes that it fulfils an important role in two ways. Firstly, it receives information and is an important source of information. Secondly, it is in touch with developments in society. The centre views its relationship with the umbrella organisation in Europe (FECRIS) *Fédération Européenne des Centres de Recherche et d'Information sur le Sectarisme* (Federation of European Centres for Research and Information on Sectarism) as important. FECRIS arranges for meetings with the different organisation in Europe to share knowledge on this subject.

Belgium has a specific unit dealing with investigations into harmful sectarian groups known as “group dealing with sectarian organisations” that resort under the anti-terrorism branch of the federal police. All information on harmful sects is received at a central office from where it is referred to the specific group dealing with sects. The police service is involved in two ways:

1. Information gathering – this happens when information is received on groups that can be harmful or dangerous. Information gathering takes place based on specific criteria such as isolation of members from society, alienation from family members, the use of money and abuse of members to determine whether the group is dangerous.
2. If a complaint is received pertaining to criminal activities a criminal investigation follows. Emphasis is placed on the importance of gathering evidence to build a case (Lesciauskas 2012). Crimes associated with these groups include fraud, abuse, health, money laundering, tax evasion, sexual abuse and murder. The state security and the federal police in Belgium work closely together and completed investigations are referred to the state prosecutor.

The Belgian government implemented a law similar to the About Picard law in France on 26 November 2011. This law is known in Dutch as “Wet to wijziging en aanvulling van die strafwetboek ten einde het misbruik van de zwakke toestand van personen strafbaar te stellen, en de strafrechtelijke bescherming van kwetsbare personen tegen mishandeling uit te breiden” (Belgisch Staatsblad 2012).

3.4 Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen (Federal Centre for Sect Issues [FCSI]) – Austria

Austria is a secular state and the Roman Catholic Church is the predominant religion. The Austrian government’s approach to the right to freedom of religion is clear when it states that individuals have the right to express themselves in their belief that gives higher meaning to their own lives. That having been said it does not mean that some beliefs on:

... the new “supermarket of religiosity” (which includes sects) should [not] be checked to see if it preserves the personal freedom of the individual, even if strident claims are made to the basic rights of freedom of opinion and freedom of religion. If that should not be the case, then this could have consequences for both society and for the individual. One can never rule out the risk of psychic dependency or being cut off from one’s own freedom. Freedom and self-determination are commodities which should not be given away thoughtlessly (Austria 1999:6).

Two interpretations of the term *sekten* (sect) are evident in Austria. Sect is used to describe religious groups that have split from known religious traditions and still maintain some form of contract with the original mother religion. Sect (also described as cult) is also used to refer to groups whether religious or non-religious that are believed to be harmful to its members and society.

In 1998 a Federal Centre for Sects Issues in Vienna was instituted by government with the purpose of gathering and supplying information to the public on harmful sects. The office has a library that provides information on sects. The information provided by this office is presented as a comparison between the teachings and practices of a specific group, obtained from documentation of the particular sect groups, and other views that will also indicate the impact of the teachings and practices of the group on a person's health and wellbeing. Empowered with the information the enquirer can make a decision. For example, some individual groups have a fundamentally different view of health and illness and have a predominantly critical assessment of traditional medicine, and encourage members to stop using traditional medicine or treatment. The alternative methods of treatment offered by these groups are without the appropriate medical training and can be problematic if they hinder the effective treatment of people. With regard to children and their development, teaching and practices in these groups can influence children from an early age in a certain direction that may cause problems in the formation and maintenance of a relationship with reality (Austria 1999:10-11).

Provision is also made in the curriculum of schools to provide 14-year-old and 17-year-old learners with information on all religions including sects/cults. Teachers and pupils are also invited to visit the Federal Centre for Sect Issues in an attempt to not only introduce them to the existence of such an office and the services it provides but also to stimulate the learners to critical thinking. All information gathered by this office is open and transparent (Müller 2012).

The Federal Centre for Sect Issues also provides the services of a psychotherapist for counselling and psychotherapy. No specific approach of exit counselling is followed; instead sect issues are placed into context by thorough investigation of the teachings and practices of the particular sect in question. No opinion is expressed and participation of members of a sect and family members are encouraged to create a mutual understanding. Counselling also follows the comparative approach of information sharing as described above enabling the persons to make informed choices (Neuberger 2012).

The Austrian police does not have a special unit to investigate cult-related issues like in Belgium – all criminal activities of cults are dealt with according to the legal system in Austria. In the few cases where cults were prosecuted no court ruling on cults were made in Austria – when it seems that cults will lose a case they settle out of court.

Müller (2012) indicates that providing information to the general public does not always produce the expected result. Providing information has a double-sided dynamic. On the one side members of the public not affected by cults display an ignorant and reluctant attitude towards cults believing only stupid people get involved in such groups. On the other hand cults react to such information as an infringement on their rights succeeding in making anyone cautious to provide information. Some sects may even obtain the sentiments of a human rights organisation to propagate their rights.

In Austria there are a number of NGOs dealing with cult issues that are in good standing with the Federal Centre for Sect Issues. *Verein zur Wahrung der geistigen Freiheit* founded in 1977 is one such society. It was established as a result of the increase of destructive cults in Austria from the early seventies and consists of concerned family members and experts with the aim of assisting people who fall prey to harmful sects and cults. The name of the society was changed to *Gesellschaft gegen Sekten- und Kultgefahren* (Society against the Dangers of Sects and Cults) in 1992. The society is areligious and apolitical, renders assistance to relatives

and former members and provides information to the public (Gesellschaft gegen Sekten- und Kultgefahren).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The aforementioned actions by European countries were not without criticism. During her visit to France, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Asma Jahangir, said that the French government's policy of distributing a list of sects had contributed to a climate of general suspicion and intolerance and infringement on the freedom of belief of those communities and individuals (E/CN.4/2006/5.Add.4 para. 109) In 1997, her predecessor said that beyond legal remedies to deal with criminal and illegal activities the state or community may not act as guardians of peoples' consciences nor encourage, impose or censure any religious belief or conviction (E/CN.4/1997/91, para 99). Although it is the intention of the bill of rights to ensure freedom of religion to all citizens, society still plays a vital role in being vigilant about any force or group that poses a threat to its harmonious function. It further has the responsibility to alert and even warn against these forces or groups to ensure that a society does not become the subject of such a disruptive force or group.

Visits to the different federal centres in Europe emphasised the following important aspects about cults or harmful sects:

- It is important to have a structure to deal with enquiries on religions, including other groups that could fit the classification of cults. If no structure is in place and limited or no information is available, members of the public will jump to their own conclusions which will increase the tension between society and these minority religions.
- The most suitable manner of dealing with enquiries is through an information centre that gathers information on religion in general, including so-called sects and cults, and makes this information available to the public.
- Information should be balanced and obtained from different sources. Information about a particular group should primarily be obtained from the documents or website of the particular group. Other sources that can be used are the media, ex-members of the specific group, academics that have done research on a particular group and other literary sources such as books and articles available on a particular group.
- The information should be provided in comparison to other realities in life to enable the public to consider the teachings of a particular group against other perspectives.
- Children and teenagers are the most vulnerable target groups and should be informed in school about religion as well as the different branches and development in religion, including sects and cults, that can be harmful and exploitive.
- The information centre should have a good relationship with the media for the exchange of information to ensure that the information is correct and does not lead to unnecessary sensation causing uneasiness in society.
- Assistance in the form of counselling should be available for those victims who need more specialised assistance and guidance.
- Government should also be informed of possible situations that can disrupt a community and need to be vigilant to act if needed to protect and ensure the wellbeing of society.

Although South Africa has not yet experienced a serious threat from cults, numerous media reports about cults necessitate the need to establish a structure to deal proactively with issues to prevent serious occurrences. South Africa needs to take note of the recommendations and ensure that the issue about cults are addressed in this structure to ensure unfair labelling of groups as cults which can lead to tension in society. Through a proper structure consolidated and accurate information can also be provided to the society and the media on harmful activities of groups. The ultimate goal of the aforementioned is to ensure that each group enjoys its right to freedom of religion but at the same time to keep society informed of possible dangers or harm that may be lurking disguised in the form of religion. At the same time it can also provide assistance to those in need.

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TREFWOORDE

Kulte
Sekte
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Cult
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