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Contents

Articles

- 3 Anti-Cult Ideology and FECRIS: Dangers for Religious Freedom
Luigi Berzano, Boris Falikov, Willy Fautré, Liudmyla Filipovich, Massimo Introvigne, Bernadette Rigal-Cellard
- 25 Sympathy for the Devil: The Anti-Cult Federation FECRIS and Its Support for Russian and Chinese Repression of Religion
Luigi Berzano, Boris Falikov, Willy Fautré, Liudmyla Filipovich, Massimo Introvigne, Bernadette Rigal-Cellard
- 68 “Secretophobia”: The Modern Prejudice Against Religious and Spiritual Secrets
Rosita Šoryté
- 83 The Secret of the Confession: A Thing of the Past?
Massimo Introvigne

Research Notes

- 101 Emic Perspectives on the Tai Ji Men Case
Annie Cheng and Liu Yin-Chun

Anti-Cult Ideology and FECRIS: Dangers for Religious Freedom

Luigi Berzano

University of Turin, Torino, Italy

luigi.berzano@tin.it

Boris Falikov

Moscow State University for the Humanities, Moscow, Russia

falikov@yandex.ru

Willy Fautré

Human Rights Without Frontiers, Brussels, Belgium

w.fautre@hrwf.org

Liudmyla Filipovich

*Department of Religious Studies, Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences,
Kiev, Ukraine*

lfilip56@gmail.com

Massimo Introvigne

Center for Studies on New Religions, Torino, Italy

maxintrovigne@gmail.com

Bernadette Rigal-Cellard

University Bordeaux Montaigne, Bordeaux, France (em.)

brcellard@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The anti-cult ideology has been denounced by scholars and organizations that work on behalf of religious liberty, including the bipartisan commission of the U.S. federal government USCIRF, as a major threat to freedom of religion or belief. One of the main agencies disseminating the anti-cult ideology throughout the world is FECRIS, the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects, an umbrella organization created in 1994 in Paris. The paper (written before the war in Ukraine, whose effects on FECRIS are discussed in another article by the same authors in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*) reconstructs the history of FECRIS and its involvement in various court cases where it was accused of defamation, concluding that there are indeed good reasons to regard FECRIS as a major international danger for freedom of religion or belief.

KEYWORDS: FECRIS, European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects, CCMM, ADFI, UNADFI, Anti-Cult Ideology, Anti-Cult Movement.

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 1991).

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 bankrupt. 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* decisions 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 because 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’s (ca. 5–65 CE) 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 Claire (1920–2003) and Guy Champollion (1921–1975), 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, one of the authors of this paper, 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 Golosislama.com 2013].

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 spreads 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 spreads 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 co-author of this paper had reviewed the Hamburg decision in a large-

circulation magazine on religious liberty (Introvigne 2021), while previously 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 (1928–1997), 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 2008).

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.”

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 deserves their support.

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**Sympathy for the Devil:
The Anti-Cult Federation FECRIS and Its Support for Russian
and Chinese Repression of Religion**

Luigi Berzano

University of Turin, Torino, Italy

luigi.berzano@tin.it

Boris Falikov

Moscow State University for the Humanities, Moscow, Russia

falikov@yandex.ru

Willy Fautré

Human Rights Without Frontiers, Brussels, Belgium

w.fautre@hrwf.org

Liudmyla Filipovich

*Department of Religious Studies, Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences,
Kiev, Ukraine*

lfilip56@gmail.com

Massimo Introvigne

Center for Studies on New Religions, Torino, Italy

maxintrovigne@gmail.com

Bernadette Rigal-Cellard

University Bordeaux Montaigne, Bordeaux, France (em.)

brcellard@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The war in Ukraine created a problem for the international anti-cult movement and for the European anti-cult federation FECRIS, which had Russian organizations that had supported campaigns of slander against Ukraine and the invasion in 2022 among its most visible affiliates and representatives. Reportedly, the Russian affiliates were expelled or suspended in March 2022, but without any press release or official communication to non-members. FECRIS and other anti-cult organizations and individuals, however, have a long history of supporting non-democratic regimes, including Russia and China, in their campaigns of repression of religious minorities. The paper argues that organizational interests are not enough to explain this symbiotic relationship, and the connection is in fact ideological.

KEYWORDS: FECRIS, Alexander Dvorkin, Anti-Cult Movement, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, Xie Jiao, Anti-Cultism, Anti-Cult Movement in China.

Introduction

Last year, we published a White Paper on the anti-cult ideology and FECRIS, the European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sects (*Bitter Winter* 2021). We concluded that there are no criteria accepted by the mainline community of scholars of religion to distinguish “bad” “cults” from “good” “religions,” and that anti-cultism is just an ideology used to deny religious liberty to minority religions labeled “cults” by their opponents.

While we will not repeat here what was already included in the 2021 White Paper, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, which had some consequences also inside FECRIS, and the continuing deterioration of the situation of religious liberty in China under Xi Jinping, have persuaded us that a supplemental White Paper is needed to address a complementary issue. To what extent Western anti-cultists, including those associated with FECRIS, support the bloody repression of religious minorities in Russia and China?

Some preliminary observations and disclaimers are in order. We have read statements by individuals anti-cultists, some of them associated with FECRIS, condemning the war of aggression waged by Vladimir Putin in Ukraine. FECRIS itself has published a short statement where it “joins in the condemnation of the Russian military aggression against the Ukrainian population and legitimate authorities” (FECRIS 2022a). We have not read anything similar condemning what the most recent report of the bipartisan and bicameral U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China described on March 31, 2022, as “the horrors

the Chinese government and Communist Party perpetrate against the Chinese people” (Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2022, 3), but perhaps we missed something.

We have also noticed that the Russian organizations that are, or were, part of FECRIS, still listed as such on March 31, 2022 (FECRIS 2022b) disappeared from the list of its member organizations on its Web site in April (FECRIS 2022c). Seeking clarification, one of us (Introvigne) emailed FECRIS’ board member Luigi Corvaglia, who kindly answered on April 6 that “we [FECRIS] voted on March 8 the expulsion of CRS [Center for Religious Studies, the umbrella organization federating the Russian FECRIS affiliates].” Another FECRIS activist we contacted used the word “suspension” rather than “expulsion.”

We have no reasons to doubt the sincerity of the organizations or individuals associated with FECRIS who have condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine. As for FECRIS itself, we await an official position, which should also address the question of the presence on its board of directors of Alexander Dvorkin, which is not only the most notorious Russian anti-cultist but one who has consistently supported the politics of the Putin regime on Ukraine.

This White Paper, however, is largely about a broader problem. We argue that the position of Russia about “cults” cannot be separated from the Russian position about civil society, dissent, and democracy in general. Decades of support by FECRIS and other anti-cultists for Russian anti-cult policy also supported its general ideology of “spiritual security.”

Similarly, the Chinese position on *xie jiao* (an expression translated by the Chinese authorities in English documents as “evil cults” but in fact meaning “heterodox teachings”) cannot be separated from the Chinese position about controlling religion and surveilling the daily life of citizens in general. Whoever supports Chinese anti-xie-jiao policy supports, implicitly, its broader persecution about all forms of dissent. How this support by organizations that proclaim their love for democracy became possible is the subject matter of this White Paper.

A final disclaimer is that we are aware that not all anti-cultists are members of FECRIS. We agree that FECRIS as an organization is not responsible for statements by anti-cultists who are not affiliated with it. We know, for example, that Canadian anti-cultist Gerry Armstrong is not a member of FECRIS, and his

statements do not represent FECRIS. However, articles by Armstrong appear on the official FECRIS's web site (Armstrong 2009), and he has spoken at conferences organized both by FECRIS and by its affiliates, including in Russia. Even such a bizarre character as American deprogrammer Rick Ross, whom we mention here because of his connections with China, gets a link to his website on FECRIS's links page (FECRIS 2022d).

We know, a note has been included that "FECRIS is not responsible for the contents of the following websites." However, why would they include Ross' website if they did not share a common ideology with him? Our purpose here is to note that the Western anti-cult movement, a broader camp than FECRIS, supports totalitarian repression of religion in Russia and China. When we will mention anti-cultists not affiliated with FECRIS, we will direct the attention of our readers to this fact.

1. Three Models of Anti-Cultism—or One?

a. Problems of Terminology

Two terminological precisions should be first offered. The first is that as scholars of religion we all struggle with translators who try to translate the English "cult" with the Italian and Spanish "culto," the French "culte," and similar words in other languages—or, vice versa, they translate the Italian "setta," the Spanish "secta," the French "secte," the German "Sekte," the Russian "секта" (sekta), and so on, as "sect" in English.

These translations may be at first sight regarded as correct, but they are substantially wrong. In contemporary English language, "cult" is a negative word, indicating an organization that manipulates and harms its followers and whose activities are objectionable and perhaps even criminal. "Sect" is not a negative word. Several Buddhists would indicate in English that they belong to a certain "Buddhist sect," i.e., one among the many Buddhist schools. They would strongly object if somebody would accuse them of belonging to a "Buddhist cult."

In France there is a "Bureau central des [Central office of] cultes," and in Italy a "Direzione generale per gli affari dei [Central Direction for the affairs of] culti," both parts of the Ministries of Internal Affairs in the respective countries. They deal with mainline religions recognized by the governments, including the Roman

Catholic Church. Both in France and in Italy, there are also official agencies keeping a watch on supposedly dangerous religious organizations called “cults” in English. However, the name used by these agencies for the targets of their surveillance is “sectes” in French and “sette” in Italian, not “cultes” or “culti.”

The unavoidable conclusion, and one reached by academic scholars decades ago, is that the English word “cult” should be translated as “setta,” “secte,” “секта,” and similar, and these words in turn should be translated into English as “cult,” not as “sect.” For the same reasons, the organizations called in English “anti-cult movements” are designated in French as “mouvements anti-sectes,” and the same, again, happens in other languages where the words designating “bad” religions are similar to “setta.”

The second terminological precision concerns the Chinese expression *xie jiao*. As we will see, how this expression is used is at the center of the anti-cult ideology prevailing in the People’s Republic of China. In official Chinese documents in English, *xie jiao* is translated as “cults” or “evil cults.” This translation is in itself political, and is used to attract the sympathies of those hostile to “cults” in democratic countries. In fact, *xie jiao* has been used since the Middle Ages, should be more correctly translated as “heterodox teachings,” and is traditionally interpreted as indicating religious movements hostile to the regime or government in power. This is different from what “cult” normally means in English.

After reading articles by Western scholars criticizing the translation of *xie jiao* as “cults,” Zhang Xinzhang, a professor at the School of Marxism of Zhejiang University regarded as an authority on *xie jiao* in China, stated that he agreed that the translations “cults” and “evil cults” should not be used. To him, these translations are misleading. He recommends not to translate *xie jiao*, and to simply transliterate it, as is normally done for *qigong*, *kung fu*, and similar (Zhang 2020). We agree, although political reasons may prevent Chinese authorities from following his suggestion.

b. The Chinese Model

China has a draconian legislation making the mere fact of being active in a religious group labeled a *xie jiao* a crime, punished by Article 300 of the Chinese

Criminal Code. Scholars of law and religion in China have collected and analyzed hundreds of court decisions demonstrating that, contrary to what is sometimes argued by Chinese embassies in propaganda materials, any activity within or on behalf of a *xie jiao* is a crime in China. Sometimes, Chinese texts argue that the mere fact of being members of a *xie jiao* is not punished, only “criminal activities.” The fact of the matter, however, is that under the official interpretation of Article 300, expressed in circular letters by the Supreme Court and the Supreme Procuratorate and derived from Chinese case law, attending worship meetings of a *xie jiao*, sharing its faith with co-workers or relatives, and even keeping at home a certain quantity of books and videos of a banned movement are “criminal activities” leading to severe jail sentences (Introvigne, Richardson, and Šorytė 2019). Obviously, these activities are not illegal in democratic countries, and are protected by international conventions as typical expressions of religious liberty.

It is also not true that only leaders of the *xie jiao* are prosecuted and sentenced under Article 300. Professor Zhang, whom we already quoted, states that while from his personal point of view it would be desirable that only leaders would be punished, what currently happens in practice is that also “‘normal’ members [i.e., not ‘leaders’] receive heavy sentences” (Zhang 2020, 95).

But what is a *xie jiao*? When he agreed with Western scholars that *xie jiao* should not be translated as “evil cults” or “cults,” the main argument used by Zhang was political. He noted that the core feature of the *xie jiao* in China is being perceived as hostile to the government, which is not necessarily part of the meaning of the word “cult” in English. We believe that another strong argument in support of his idea not to translate *xie jiao* comes from history, as evidenced by the studies of Wu Junqing, a Chinese scholar currently teaching at the University of Liverpool (Wu 2016, 2017).

Translating *xie jiao* as “cults” is anachronistic. “Jiao” means “teachings” and “xie” means “twisted,” “bent,” and when applied to ideas “incorrect” or “wrong.” This application predates the Christian era. However, the compound *xie jiao* was first used by an identifiable historical figure, Fu Yi (555–639), a Taoist intellectual and Tang courtier. Fu was persuaded that Buddhism was a mortal threat for China and should be eradicated altogether, if necessary by exterminating Chinese Buddhists. In two texts written in 621 and 624, he

explained why this was necessary and Buddhism was a *xie jiao*, a term he coined to indicate “heterodox teachings” (Wu 2016, 8–9; Wright 1951).

Already in the first use of the term by Fu Yi, we may see that theological criticism of Buddhism was secondary. For Fu, the two key features of a *xie jiao* are not theological. First, a *xie jiao* does not recognize the absolute authority of the Emperor and does not support the state. Second, *xie jiao* are expression of a “barbarian wizardry” which is not part of the great Chinese religious tradition. Fu had nothing against magic in general. In fact, he was the Great Astrologer of the Tang court. What he meant was that Buddhism was using *black* magic (Wright 1951).

While Buddhism was finally not eradicated in China, although it was periodically persecuted, the Medieval Song and Yuan dynasties continued to use *xie jiao* to indicate movements they planned to eliminate. The two features of a *xie jiao* remained being perceived as antigovernment and being accused of using black magic, including raising goblins and casting malevolent spells (Wu 2017).

It was during the late Ming era that the prohibition of *xie jiao*, with the death penalty for those involved in their activities, was officially legislated, and movements were officially declared *xie jiao* first at the local and then at the national scale (Wu 2017, 94–6). In the 17th century, they included indigenous Chinese groups but also Christianity as a whole. Christians were also accused of practicing black magic, including tearing out the eyes and internal organs of children and using them in alchemical rituals (Folk 2017, 101). The Qing dynasty repeated almost verbatim the Ming provisions against the *xie jiao* (Seiwert and Ma 2003, 457).

Later, the case of Christianity continued to prove that listing a religion as a *xie jiao* or removing it from the corresponding list largely obeyed to political motivations. The Qing listed Christianity as a *xie jiao* in 1725 but took it off the list in 1842 due to pressures by the Western powers (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 27–31). Communist China did not invent the category of *xie jiao* but inherited it from a century-old tradition, which had very little to do with Western controversies about “cults” (Melton 2021).

The use of *xie jiao* in contemporary Chinese political discourse, as Wu notes, remains coherent with this tradition. The old accusation of “black magic” has been secularized as “brainwashing” (Wu 2017, 157), which creates a similarity

with Western anti-cultism but is also paradoxical, considering that the word “brainwashing” was created by CIA propaganda during the Cold War to designate allegedly infallible psychological manipulation techniques used by Communist China (Anthony 1996).

However, the core feature of a *xie jiao* for the Chinese authorities is that it is a religious movement (or, more precisely, a movement that claims to be religious) that actively opposes the government and refuses to fit, as “legitimate” religions do, into the model of a spiritual organization that supports the political power and conveys its directives and slogans to the believers. Although this approach to the *xie jiao* is presented in Marxist terms, in fact the idea that *xie jiao* are politically subversive organizations derives from Imperial China. A *xie jiao*, i.e., in the official English translations a “cult,” is a religious (or “pseudo-religious”) movement that actively or passively opposes the government.

c. The Russian Model

Russian anti-cultists use the expression “destructive cult” or “totalitarian cult” (as mentioned earlier, they use “секта” [sekta] and translate this word into English as “sect,” but it should be translated as “cult.”) Although in international conferences where Chinese colleagues are also present, Russian “cult experts” claim that their respective definitions of “cults” are the same, in fact they are very much different.

While often coached in deceptively secular terms, in fact the definition of “cult” prevailing in Russia is deeply rooted in the theology of the Russian Orthodox Church. A “cult” (секта) is an “extremist” religious organization. “Cults” are mostly punished and banned by applying legislation against extremism.

Anti-extremism provisions were introduced in Russia after 9/11 and amended in 2006 after the “Russian 9/11” or “the 9/11 of children,” i.e. the terrorist attack in Beslan, North Ossetia, of September 1–3, 2004, where 354 were killed, including 186 children. The law was originally intended as a weapon against radical Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. With the amendment of 2006, however, “extremism” can be found even without actual violence or incitement to violence (Kravchenko 2018).

“Experts” and courts in Russia have elaborated “religious extremism” as a subcategory of “extremism.” According to them, are “extremist” these religions and movements that claim that they preach the only way to salvation, and that all the other religions (including Christianity as taught by the Russian Orthodox Church) are false or limited (Kravchenko 2018).

Of course, all religions claim that they preach a way to salvation or enlightenment that offers something more than other religions—otherwise, why should anybody join them? However in Russia “extremism” is used as a falsely secular label to designate religions and movements that actively compete with the Russian Orthodox Church and try to convert Orthodox to their faith—or are perceived as such by the Orthodox hierarchy.

In Russia, a “cult” is a religious group that preaches its faith to Orthodox believers and creates a competition the Russian Orthodox Church is not prepared to tolerate. This explains why, for example, anti-cultists label as “cults” or “extremist” organizations Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian churches that very few people would designate as “cults” in the West. What these labels, which needs to be decoded, really mean is that these churches proselytize in what the Russian Orthodox Church calls its “canonical territory.” Russia tolerates Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Catholicism if they cater to historical ethnic minorities and have no proselyting activities targeting the Orthodox. When movements within these religious traditions try to convert Orthodox believers, they are immediately labeled as “cults” or “destructive cults” and persecuted.

There is a clear difference with China. The Chinese anti-cult (anti-xie-jiao) apparatus protects the ideological monopoly of the state against any religion that would presume to act independently of the state. The Russian anti-totalitarian-cults system protects the religious monopoly of the Russian Orthodox Church. The state is theoretically secular, but in practice, at least since Vladimir Putin came to power, there is a strict connection between the regime and the Russian Orthodox Church based on an unwritten but faithfully kept bargain. The Russian Orthodox Church organizes the consensus for the Putin regime, and the regime protects the Orthodox monopoly by cracking down on, or “liquidating” (as happened to the Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2017), any religious organization perceived as threatening it. There are some Orthodox theologians and laypersons who have elaborated a Christian discourse on religious liberty and disagree with this attitude. But their voices are silenced.

d. The Western Model

Western scholars distinguish between a counter-cult and an anti-cult movement. The old counter-cult movement presents some similarities with the Russian model. Counter-cultists were—and are, since they still exist—Christians who try to get rid of “heresies,” also labeled “cults,” which in their opinion preach a false Gospel and “steal their sheep” by proselyting among mainline Christians. There is a variation of this model in Israel, where Orthodox Jews call “cults” groups that try to convert Jews. The influence of these Orthodox Jews in the main Israeli anti-cult association, and local correspondent of FECRIS, the Israeli Center for Victims of Cults, is important, although the Center also includes some secular humanists (Fautré 2018).

However, for reasons explained in our first White Paper on FECRIS, since the last decades of the 20th century, a secular anti-cult movement became much more important in North America and Europe than the traditional Christian counter-cult movement. In fact, anti-cultists, sometimes with success, tried to exert their hegemony on religious counter-cultists, and include them in organizations and coalitions where the religionists became the junior partners.

The anti-cult movement built a secular discourse (illustrated in our previous White Paper) that establishes a distinction between “cults” and “religions” based on the pseudo-scientific theory of “brainwashing.” It maintains that “cults” are not religions. One joins a religion through a free choice. One joins a “cult” because of techniques called mental manipulation, mind control, or “brainwashing.” Some anti-cultists would say that the test for them is whether a group causes “harm” to its followers, but the tool for the harm is in fact “brainwashing” or mental manipulation.

We will not repeat in this second White Paper the criticism of “brainwashing” and the Western anti-cult ideology. This criticism is a main theme of the scientific study of new religious movements, as it developed in the late 20th and in the 21st century (Ashcraft 2018).

What interests us here is the different origins of the Chinese, Russian, and Western anti-cult models. Chinese anti-cultism wants to protect the regime, the government, and the Communist Party against the threat represented by uncontrolled religion. Russian anti-cultism wants to protect the monopoly of the

Russian Orthodox Church and its alliance with the regime. Western anti-cultism wants to protect individuals from themselves.

As Dutch scholar Wouter Hanegraaff has demonstrated for the opposition to esotericism—but the same is true for opposition to “cults”—this ideology has its roots in a Protestant criticism of both Roman Catholicism and magic, and was developed first by the Enlightenment and later by Marxism (Hanegraaff 2012). The core idea is that when irrational beliefs are not confined to the periphery of life and become the dominant influence determining the main choices of one’s existence, they are dangerous and harmful. In particular, strongly held irrational beliefs may lead to the voluntary sacrifice of a part of individual liberty and to a relationship of “voluntary servitude”—to borrow the expression of Étienne de la Boétie (1530–1563: La Boétie 2016 [1576])—with a religious organization or a religious leader, be this leader an Indian guru or the mother superior of a convent of cloistered nuns. The modern secular society does not believe that a normally rational individual may choose voluntary servitude, hence the belief that this happens because of brainwashing.

“Cultists” do not know that their choices are wrong, harmful, and caused by brainwashing. Anti-cultists supposedly know better, and they see themselves as being on a mission from rationality and the common good. If some do not believe in their idea of freedom, then paradoxically their freedom should be denied and they should be “rescued” and “liberated” both from “cults” and from themselves.

e. Why They Cooperate

At first sight, the three models are incompatible. The individualistic concept of liberty at the core of Western anti-cultism seems far away from the Chinese totalitarian approach calling for a strict control of religion by the government, and from the Russian theocratic idea that one church represents the national identity and should be protected from competition.

However, slowly but effectively, the three anti-cult movements have decided to cooperate and struck a bargain. The Chinese and Russian anti-cult movements need Western anti-cultists for propaganda purposes. Without this cooperation, their crackdown on groups they decide to label as *xie jiao* or “totalitarian cults” would be seen for what it is, part of a broader brutal repression of any dissident

voice. On the contrary, if the Chinese and Russian regimes may claim that “cults” are an international problem, what they do may seem less unique and even justified. This is the very reason why the Chinese regime, when it publishes documents in English, translates *xie jiao* as “cults,” even if it is told that the translation is wrong by its own scholars.

It is clear why the Chinese and Russian regimes find the support of Western anti-cultists useful. It may appear as less clear why Western anti-cultists believe they have something to gain by associating with disreputable regimes with abysmal human rights records. In fact, there may be different reasons for this unholy alliance.

We would not insist or speculate on possible financial motivations. Although both Russia and China are well-known for their generous support of fellow travelers, as mentioned in our previous White Paper FECRIS is funded by the French government, and some FECRIS affiliates outside of France also receive official support. When somebody in the West roots for totalitarian regimes, money is always a possible hypothesis. In this case, however, it is possible that money is not the main reason for the cooperation.

While anti-cult movements in the West are small, the China Anti-Xie-Jiao Association (again, advertised abroad as the “China Anti-Cult Association”), which is basically a department of the Chinese Communist Party, claims to be the largest anti-cult association in the world. The claim is not false. It has thousands of members and associates in all Chinese provinces and regions. More importantly, local authorities are asked to cooperate with it. This is also true for the public security, and the association has an important role in designating what groups will be listed as *xie jiao*. Russian anti-cult organizations may have a smaller number of activists, but they also have an important official role. Russia’s most visible anti-cultist, Alexander Dvorkin, a board member and the former Vice President of FECRIS, became at one stage the President of the Justice Ministry’s Expert Council for Conducting State Religious Studies Expert Analysis, a key actor in Russian cases for banning groups and books as “extremist” (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012, 274–76).

Most Western anti-cult organizations have been able to develop a good relationship with the media, but remain in themselves small and struggling. By arguing that they are part of a larger international coalition including the

mammoth Chinese anti-cult organization and its powerful Russian counterpart, they may hope to be regarded as more important than they actually are.

There is also, despite the differences, a common point in the ideology. Even if they occasionally cooperate with American “cult experts,” most anti-cultists are anti-American, and believe there is an American conspiracy to weaken the national identities of secular post-Enlightenment Europe through “cults.” We find it surprising that after more than 20 years anti-cult and FECRIS publications continue to quote a book written in 1996 and an article published in 2001 by French anti-cult journalist Bruno Fouchereau, whose title says it all: “The Cults, Trojan Horses of the United States in Europe” (Fouchereau 1996, 2001). The article was published in *Le Monde diplomatique*, a militantly left-wing and sometimes conspiracy magazine that was in 2001, as it is today, independent from the more respected *Le Monde*.

Perhaps the article keeps being quoted because it accused some of us (Introvigne and Fautré) of being part of the alleged American conspiracy, but we are afraid that some if not most FECRIS anti-cultists really believe in the theory. This brings them close to Chinese anti-xie-jiao activists, who believe that *xie jiao* are promoted in China by the United States to undermine the regime, and Russian ideologists who also claim that Russia’s “spiritual security” is threatened by American conspiracies infiltrating “cults” into the Russian Federation (and Ukraine).

Actually, in Russia this is an old idea. Timothy Snyder has called the attention on how much Putin’s ideology owns to Ivan Ilyn (1883–1954), a well-known Russian philosopher who called himself a “fascist,” and was expelled from the Soviet Union for his monarchist and anti-communist positions (Snyder 2018). Snyder’s theory has been challenged for insisting too much on a comparison between Ilyn’s fascism and Putin’s anti-democratic ideas. In fact, it is not Ilyn’s fascism that exerts influence on Putin. It is Ilyn’s vision of Russia as a nation persecuted by the West through its propaganda of democracy, its heresies and “cults,” and its homosexual lobbies, and at the same time as a nation with a mission similar to Jesus Christ: it is persecuted, dies, resurrects, and saves the world (Ljunggren 2014, 115–23). Putin asked for and obtained from Switzerland the remains of Ilyn and had them reburied in Moscow in a tomb in front of which he went to pay his respects and draw inspiration (Snyder 2018). The Russian President has also expressed his personal concerns about “cults”

that come to steal “the souls and the property” of the Russians, vowing to eradicate them (“Путин: Тоталитарные секты растут как грибы” 2012).

The conspirationist belief in parallel American plots against Western European secularism, Russia, and China is probably the main motivation why Western anti-cultists, who claim to be liberal and democratic, are not ashamed to cooperate with the propaganda of totalitarian regimes that regard Western-style democracy and “cults” as twin evils.

2. FECRIS and Western Anti-Cult Cooperation with China

a. The Beijing Conference (2000)

The cooperation between FECRIS affiliates and China dates back to the very beginning of the current phase of Chinese crackdown on *xie jiao*. As all scholars of Falun Gong have pointed out, before 1999 the movement was not regarded as a *xie jiao* and even entertained good relations with the Chinese Communist Party, which regarded it as a group promoting traditional health practices rather than as a religious organization or a “cult.” It was only after Falun Gong, which had grown to several million devotees including high-ranking officers of the Communist Party, was attacked by militant atheists in government-controlled media as religion in disguise, took to the streets to protest, which in China is forbidden, and, worse still, staged a demonstration in the area of Beijing where the main Party leaders live, that in 1999 the regime decided to liquidate Falun Gong, and a merciless campaign of persecution started (Ownby 2008).

As the United States and leading human rights NGOs protested the arrests, the torture, and extra-judicial killing of Falun Gong practitioners, the Chinese regime sought to present the movement as a “cult,” and sought the caution of Western anti-cultists.

FECRIS French affiliate CCMM (Center of Documentation, Education, and Action Against Mental Manipulation) obliged, and went to Beijing to attend an “International Symposium on Destructive Cults” on November 9 and 10, 2000. How the CCMM bulletin for November–December 2000 tells the story is an extraordinary mixture of naivete and self-importance (“Invitation du CCMM en Chine” 2000).

The starting point is that the Chinese did not have the experience French anti-cultists had gained on “cults” (probably, the CCMM ignored that the Chinese discourse on *xie jiao* dates back to the Middle Ages).

How could they even be sure that a movement deserved to be qualified as a “cult” just as those we know? The Chinese, however, did make the connection, and decided to anchor their reaction to the emergence of this movement [Falun Gong] on an experience common to other countries, all of which are confronted with cultism. This is why the Chinese authorities decided to hold an international symposium.

We learn from the bulletin that

the organization was entrusted to the “Chinese Association for the Promotion of International Friendship.” Founded in 1985, this non-governmental association wants to be an open window on the outside world and strives to establish cultural, economic and technological links with foreign countries.

In fact, the association is well-known as the “public face” of China’s United Front for international propaganda (Edwards 2021).

The CCMM proudly reported that France was “cited as an example because of the scope and coherence of the measures taken to respond to the cults’ threat. The French representatives invited to the symposium received a warm welcome and were listened to with particular attention.” “The CCMM delegation was composed of Jean-Pierre Bousquet, who was also responsible for representing the president of FECRIS, Patricia Casano, and Hayat El Mountacir.” Note that FECRIS was, thus, officially represented.

There were also “other foreign speakers,” but unfortunately according to the CCMM “many of them continued to maintain the all-too-familiar controversy, immunity of the cults in the name of freedom of religion, which did not contribute to advance the debate.” “Finally the president of the symposium announced that other symposiums would be organized in the future and that China will try to establish information exchange streams as soon as possible.” “The Chinese expressed their desire to also create a non-governmental association, similar to the CCMM in its objectives and structure.”

The CCCMM-FECCRIS delegates went home persuaded that the Chinese needed to learn from French anti-cultists and FECCRIS how to crack down on “cults,” an art China’s governments have practiced since the 7th century. What the Chinese really needed from FECCRIS was a political caution that their bloody persecution against Falun Gong practitioners and other “cultists” was legitimate

and approved by Westerners. They got it, and the CCMM bulletin even reproduced part of a Chinese document claiming that the conclusion that Falun Gong was a “cult” was supported by “documents about foreign cults taken from books regarded as authoritative throughout the whole world,” by which the Chinese meant anti-cult literature.

The head of the French governmental Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sectes (Inter-Ministerial Mission for Combating Cults), Alain Vivien, also attended the Beijing symposium, although as an “observer” and without speaking. It was a family holiday of sort, as CCMM delegate Patricia Casano was Vivien’s wife. In the words of a French scholar,

in addition to the dispute over whether the trip was funded by the French or the Chinese government, the moral result was disastrous, as the French “support” for a government that persecutes the Falun Gong movement and many other religions made a detestable impression outside of France, even if it received very little media coverage in this country (Chélini-Pont 2004, 192).

b. Israeli FECRIS Associates and China

On September 4, 2018, the Belgian NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) released a report on the Israeli Center for Victims of Cults (ICVC), the Israeli correspondent of FECRIS (Fautré 2018).

The report demonstrated that the allegedly secular ICVC (which also includes some secular humanists) has in fact deep ties with Yad L’Achim, an organization officially denounced by the U.S. Department of State as a radical expression of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, which promotes discrimination against religious minorities in Israel and violence against them (U.S. Department of State 2017).

The HRWF report (Fautré 2018, 13–4) notes that

in 2009, Yad L’Achim published a press release in which they boasted the fact that one of their organization’s representatives was invited to participate in a congress in China devoted to the fight against Falun Gong. The propaganda of Yad L’Achim against Falun Gong is accessible on their website,

which also offers

an article on Benjamin Kluger, a convert from Christianity to ultra-orthodox Judaism and a Yad L’Achim activist, who worked in the Department for the Fight against Missionary

Activity with Rachel Lichtenshtein, the current director of the ICVC. He was invited by the Chinese embassy in Israel as “an expert from Yad L’Achim about destructive cults”

to a CCP conference in China. The title of the article said it all, “Assisting the Chinese in the Struggle Against Cults” (Sheila 2009).

Rabbi Shalom Dov Lipschitz, chairperson of Yad L’Achim, was quoted in the article as stating that the government in Israel should have “learned from the Chinese authorities how to forcefully fight dubious and destructive cults” (Sheila 2009).

c. FECRIS Vice-President Alexandr Dvorkin in China

Alexander Dvorkin, one of the leading public voices of FECRIS and its Vice President from 2009 to 2021, supported the Chinese repression of *xie jiao* so publicly and consistently that listing all what he did would become tedious. Some examples would be enough.

While attending an event in Beijing in 2008 (at a time when he was not yet the Vice President of FECRIS), Dvorkin stated that Falun Gong operated with the support of “the governments and parliaments of some western countries.” He said that cultists

would turn individuals into tools of cults, and destroy their families... Cults make no contribution to the society. But they kept absorbing human resources and wealth from it. Like cancerous cells, they obtain nutrition from the healthy body of society until it collapses (Xinhua 2008).

These statements sounds particularly sinister if one considers that they came in the middle of a ferocious repression of Falun Gong. By comparing “cults” to “cancerous cells,” Dvorkin dehumanized Falun Gong practitioners. Cancers have no rights, and the cancer comparison in fact legitimizes eradication through detention and even murder.

In 2016, Dvorkin attended in Wuhan a symposium on “cultic studies,” and reiterated that, “Absolutely, Falun Gong is one of the most destructive cults, which destroys human minds and physical health” (Liu and Zhang 2016).

In 2017, Dvorkin went to Harbin to lecture against “totalitarian cults” as enemies of both the Orthodox Church and government (Center for Religious Studies in the name of Hieromartyr Saint Irenaeus of Lyons 2017).

The relationship between Dvorkin and the Chinese repression of *xie jiao* may be described as symbiotic. On the one hand, Dvorkin publishes attacks against religious groups that have a very limited presence in Russia, other than by operating websites in Russian language, but are among the main targets of Chinese repression, such as The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a Chinese Christian new religious movement. While he pretended to be concerned because of the alleged growth of the CAG in Russia, where in fact it had only a handful of followers, what Dvorkin was obviously doing was supporting the Chinese repression. Parroting Chinese propaganda, he called the CAG a “Chinese-American cult,” and claimed it grew because of “strong political support from the United States” (Dvorkin 2021: note that in the video of his speech Dvorkin emphasized his affiliation with FECRIS). No scholar of the CAG would take this statement seriously.

On the other hand, the website of the China Anti-Xie-Jiao Association regularly reports about Dvorkin’s activities and conveys China’s support for the repression of “totalitarian cults” in Russia. In 2017, Chinese governmental media and scholars published articles supporting the “liquidation” of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia (e.g., Zhou 2017). Although the Jehovah’s Witnesses were not part of the official list of the *xie jiao*, Russian precedents played a role when several of them were arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced to heavy jail terms in Xinjiang in 2020 (Korla City People’s Court 2020).

Dvorkin makes no mystery of the fact that he considers the presence of “cults” in both China and Russia (and in France and Germany as well) as the result of an American conspiracy. In a lecture in 2008, Dvorkin stated that

Falun Gong is a tough totalitarian cult 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 2008).

He added in an interview that,

Cults have long been a political factor that is actively used primarily in the foreign policy of the United States of America... The United States now supports a variety of cults around the world: in Russia, France, Germany, China, and so on. There is, for example, “Falun Gong”—a destructive Chinese cult.... If such a cult did not exist, the American intelligence services would have to invent it, this is a very convenient method of influencing China (Davydov 2010).

d. Chinese Cooperation with Rick Ross

American deprogrammer Rick Ross is not a member of any FECRIS affiliate. We quote him as an example of the broader support offered by Western anti-cultists to Chinese repression of *xie jiao*. Deprogramming has been banned by courts of law in almost all democratic countries, with the exception of South Korea, where it is still practiced, although not without legal challenges, by some Christian counter-cult ministers (Fautré 2020). It consists in kidnapping adult members of “cults,” who are then detained and bombarded with negative information about their “cult” in the hope they will collapse and surrender their faith. Deprogrammers charged high and sometimes exorbitant sums of money, and several of them physically abused their victims (Shupe and Darnell 2006).

Some deprogrammers, such as Steven Hassan, had learned the trade by having been themselves deprogrammed. Rick Ross was a different case. He had a past in petty criminal activities, which had nothing to do with “cults.” He had been convicted for burglary and grand theft before discovering that posing as a self-styled specialist in “cults” and offering deprogramming services was less dangerous than robbing jewelries, an activity he had engaged into before re-inventing himself as a “cult expert.” On 10 January 1975, Ross was charged for attempted burglary and pleaded guilty in exchange of an agreement lowering the charge to conspiracy (Justice Court, Northeast Phoenix Precinct, Maricopa County, Arizona 1975; Superior Court of the State of Arizona in and for the County of Maricopa 1975).

On July 23, 1975, Ross, with a store clerk as an accomplice, was able to steal 306 pieces of jewelry from a Phoenix shop, pretending he had a bomb in a box ready to detonate (Kastrow 1975). On April 2, 1976, Ross was sentenced to four years in jail for the robbery (Superior Court of the State of Arizona, Criminal Division 1976).

He later resurfaced as a “cult expert” and deprogrammer, and in this capacity he went to China to support the crackdown on Falun Gong. In 2010, he visited deprogrammed ex-members of Falun Gong in Beijing, and compared experiences with the Chinese about deprogramming (*Kaiwind.com* 2010). In China, deprogramming is carried out in state-sponsored facilities (Zhao 2021), and in Russia in “rehabilitation centers” managed by organizations affiliated with the

Russian Orthodox Church (Human Rights Without Frontiers International Correspondent in Russia 2012, 279–80).

e. A Sympathy for China

China is seen so much as an example in the anti-cult fight that FECRIS associates often defend it also on issues only partially related, or not related at all, with “cults.”

We would not revisit here the controversy on “organ harvesting,” i.e., the accusation that China “harvests” organ from executed prisoners of conscience and uses them for transplants. It is a sensitive issue, and to grasp all the facets of the controversy a knowledge of how the procurement of organs for transplant generally works is needed. It is true that this question was first raised by Falun Gong, which claimed that its detained practitioners were victims of organ harvesting, but a look at what is now a large literature on the issue would easily lead to the conclusion that similar claims have been made on behalf of Uyghur Muslims, Christians, and many other inmates of Chinese jails with no relations with Falun Gong. Governments and Parliaments continue to take these claims seriously (see e.g. U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2022, 76).

It is not surprising that Dvorkin in Wuhan in 2016 stated categorically that the organ harvesting claims are part of “a campaign, which has been spread by Falun Gong with the help of people in agencies that help them overseas” (Liu and Zhang 2016). In their blogs and Facebook postings, other FECRIS leaders have also denied the organ harvesting charges in general, and even ridiculed theories that the COVID-19 virus escaped accidentally from a Wuhan laboratory. This is again a controversial issue, but the interesting question is why these FECRIS fellows feel an urge to defend China’s totalitarian regime every time it is under attack. Perhaps leading the world in the fight against “cults” justifies many other peccadillos.

3. FECRIS and Russia

a. FECRIS in Russia

As mentioned above, until the expulsion, or perhaps suspension, of March 2022, the Russian affiliates were among the most visible branches of FECRIS. We have mentioned the activities of Aleksander Dvorkin and of his Center for Religious Studies in the name of Hieromartyr Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, founded in 1994 under the aegis of the Russian Orthodox Church, in our first White Paper on FECRIS, and do not need to discuss them again here.

The Saint Irenaeus Center is the head center of the Russian Association of Centers for Religious and Cultic Studies (РАЦИРС/RATsIRS), later called “Center for Religious Studies,” whose Moscow and Saratov branches were listed among the FECRIS affiliates until the war in Ukraine (FECRIS 2022b).

There are two essential documents we recommend to read on the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Center, the Center for Religious Studies, and FECRIS. One is the chapter “FECRIS and Its Affiliates in Russia: The Orthodox Clerical Wing of FECRIS,” in the book *Freedom of Religion or Belief. Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality. A Case Study: FECRIS*, published in 2012 as a special issue of the respected German academic journal *Religion–Staat–Gesellschaft* (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012). The other is the 2020 report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) *The Anti-cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union* (USCIRF 2020). The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Its Commissioners are appointed by the President and by Congressional leaders of both political parties.

These documents demonstrate that the Russian FECRIS affiliates were at the very core of the repression of dozens of religious minorities, including the “liquidation” of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Center for Religious Studies also denounced as “extremist organizations” or “cults” a number of religions it called “non-traditional,” including Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, whose sole sin was to be perceived as competitors by the Russian Orthodox Church. And, as we mentioned in our first White Paper, Dvorkin did not stop at that. He also offended believers of historical religions. As we wrote, 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 cult 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 Golosislama.com 2013].

b. FECRIS’s Support of Russian Religious Repression

In short, the massive repression of religious minorities that took place in Putin’s Russia was not only supported, but was often organized by the Russian FECRIS affiliates. Before the war in Ukraine, this situation was known, and had been denounced in dozens of international human rights reports and scholarly works about religion in Russia. Yet, FECRIS never distanced itself from its Russian affiliates and Dvorkin. In fact, it continued to give Dvorkin a podium in its international conferences, and actively supported the Russian narratives on the crackdown on religious minorities in Russia.

The extent of this support was revealed in a court case decided by the District Court of Hamburg on November 27, 2020. FECRIS had been sued there by the Jehovah’s Witnesses for thirty-two statements published on the FECRIS’s website they regarded as defamatory. The court found seventeen of these statements defamatory, one partially defamatory, and fourteen non-defamatory (Landgericht Hamburg 2020). On March 24, 2021, the magazine *Bitter Winter* (with which some of us are associated) published a commentary of the decision (Introvigne 2021a). The article led FECRIS, which had until then remained silent on the case, to issue a press release on March 30 (FECRIS 2021) where it tried to persuade the most gullible of its followers that it had “won” the case since not all its statements were declared defamatory (but seventeen out of thirty-two were). Later in 2021, on September 13, *Bitter Winter* published an internal document

of FECRIS where FECRIS's legal consultant admitted that the organization had been taught "a lesson" in the Hamburg case, and should learn that in the future FECRIS speakers "should be able to prove what they assert" (Introvigne 2021b).

The Court of Hamburg also warned against any use of its decision to argue that the fourteen statements it declared non-defamatory were true, explaining that statements can be at the same time "inaccurate" and not defamatory. Ignoring this warning, FECRIS implied in its press release that the Court of Hamburg had certified that these statements were not false. Among them, there was one numbered as 1.6 in the court case, which read: "All tales of alleged 'persecution' against Jehovah's Witnesses [in Russia] are nothing more than a primitive propaganda stroke. This information is not true."

This is a clear example of a statement that it is obviously "inaccurate" but was regarded as not constituting defamation by the German judges; stating that somebody who is clearly persecuted is not persecuted is silly and immoral, but is not defamatory. However, what is interesting here is that as late as March 2021, after documents from several international institutions and governments had condemned Russia for its persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses, FECRIS was still claiming that there was no persecution and that reports of persecution were "nothing more than a primitive propaganda stroke." This attitude is highly significant, and indicates that support for the Russian persecution of religious minorities labeled as "cults" was so crucial for FECRIS that it would defend it even in court.

Just as they went to China to support persecution of Falun Gong and other religious minorities, FECRIS representatives went to Russia to support persecution of groups labeled as "destructive cults" there. The fact that FECRIS disassociated itself from its Russian affiliates in 2022 over the war in Ukraine does not change its decade-long support for the Russian aggression against religious liberty, nor have these positions been publicly repudiated.

On May 15–16, 2009, a FECRIS symposium was organized in St. Petersburg, during which Dvorkin became FECRIS' Vice President. Significantly, we read in a press release that

during the conference, the Minister of Justice of the Russian Federation A.V. Konovalov, met with the leadership of FECRIS and the Rector of St. Petersburg State University N.M. Kropachev, in a meeting which took place in the office of the latter. A similar meeting was also held in the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, where a

group of conference participants was received by the Judge of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation S.M. Kazantsev. During these meetings, the parties exchanged information and discussed ways to prevent the negative consequences of the activities of totalitarian cults (Dvorkin and Semenov 2009).

The then President of FECRIS, Friedrich Griess, later noted, as if it was not a coincidence, that

A few days later, on 20 May 2009, FECRIS was granted Special consultative status by the United Nations Organization's Department of Social and Economic Affairs, ECOSOC (Griess 2009).

At the same conference, Pastor Thomas Gandow from Germany presented the case for an American conspiracy and asked:

Is the USA using such pretexts with an anti-European political slant because of the organization or for them, or do the USA only use such organizations and cults as a pretext and means for interventions? (Gandow 2009).

A paranoid version of the same argument was offered by a representative from Belarus, Vladimir A. Martinovich. He claimed that the American CIA decided “to exploit missionaries in the interest of the secret service,” and connected the infiltration of “cults” into Belarus with the birth of local democratic movements criticizing the Lukashenko regime (Martinovich 2009). Hailing the Russian anti-cult campaign, Dvorkin said,

We felt that we are not alone and that the most sincere, responsible, honest, and wise people in Europe [meaning the FECRIS representatives] support our work and offer us to work together (Dvorkin 2009).

c. Gerry Armstrong's Letter to Putin

One speaker at the 2009 FECRIS conference in St. Petersburg was Canadian anti-cultist Gerry Armstrong (FECRIS 2009). He is not a member of any FECRIS affiliate, but showed up repeatedly at lectures and conferences in Russia organized by the Russian FECRIS organizations. He was a speaker even in remote Salekhard, on the Arctic Circle, in 2017 at an anti-cult conference, together with FECRIS leaders such as Dvorkin and the Italian Luigi Corvaglia, and Pastor Gandow (Lukashkin 2017).

Armstrong is not a representative of FECRIS, but is an interesting character. He is a former Scientologist who in 1986 entered into a settlement where he

received \$800,000 (Court of Appeal, First District, Division 4, California 2005; reportedly, \$300,000 went to his lawyer) against his undertaking to maintain in the future

strict confidentiality and silence with respect to his experiences with the Church of Scientology and any knowledge or information he may have concerning the Church of Scientology, [Scientology's founder] L. Ron Hubbard [1911–1986], or any of the organizations, individuals and entities

associated with Hubbard and Scientology, and to return to Scientology documents the Church claimed he had stolen (“Mutual Release of All Claims and Settlement Agreement” 2016; for details about the Armstrong case, see Introvigne 2021c, 54–58).

By his own admission, Armstrong breached the agreement hundreds of times, lost several court cases for this reason, and a warrant for arrest was issued against him in California (see e.g. Armstrong 2014).

Armstrong, thus, cannot go to the United States, but he can go to Russia. And he had been there several times (see e.g., Filippov 2011). While his anti-cult lectures are of no great interest, what is more interesting is his political propaganda on behalf of the Putin regime, which is propagated both by Armstrong's own web sites, which have a certain audience within the anti-cult circuit, and by Russian Orthodox and anti-cult media outlets (Armstrong 2014).

Going well beyond the issue of “cults,” Armstrong wrote in 2014 a letter to “Dear President Putin,” telling him that

US propaganda has been inciting enmity toward Russia with the sort of war level rhetoric and claims that were used to ratchet up support and pave the way for US military action in Iraq, Libya, Syria, etc. US media has worked assiduously to turn the term “pro-Russian” into something automatically negative.

“I am dead set against the west and the US's superpower hypocrisy,” Armstrong told Putin. Speaking about Russia's actions in Syria, Armstrong called Putin's attitude “highly intelligent, reasonable and presidential.” He wrote to Putin that his actions in Syria “averted a catastrophe in the region, and brought relief and hope to many other people like me around the world. Thank you” (Armstrong 2014).

This is another example of how the anti-cultists' support of totalitarian regimes tend to move from “cults” to a broader approval of their non-democratic attitudes

and even wars of aggression. Perhaps some anti-cultists believe that only by eliminating democracy and democratic control on the governments' actions, if necessary destroying one Syrian city or two in the process, may crackdowns on "cults" become really effective.

d. Russian FECRIS' Anti-Cultism Exported Abroad

The Russian FECRIS has also made a concerted effort to export its model of anti-cultism and governmental repression of "cults" into countries friendly to Russia. This has created serious problems for religious liberty in the countries of Central Asia, Armenia, and elsewhere, where Russian anti-cultists participated in conferences and lectures, and disseminated an ideology that led to the repression of Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups. Moscow-based rights advocate Sova Center confirmed in a 2020 report that "Russian extremist legislation has been and remains the model anti-extremist legislation for Central Asian countries" (Sova Center for Information and Analysis 2020a, 60).

In Kyrgyzstan, in 2021, when the Prosecutor General's Office tried to ban books and brochures of the Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist," it largely relied on material produced by the Russian FECRIS affiliates, although it eventually lost the case at the Pervomayskiy District Court of the City of Bishkek (see Introvigne 2021d). On March 22, 2022, the European Court of Human Rights, ruling against Armenia in a case concerning the Jehovah's Witnesses, noted how this material had reached even the war-thorn Nagorno-Karabakh and was used to promote religious repression there (see Introvigne 2022).

In May 2020, President Vladimir Putin approved a new version of the "Strategy to Counter Extremism Until 2025," which included the promotion and funding of "international anti-extremist cooperation," including in the field of "religious extremism" and combating organizations endangering "traditional Russian spiritual values" (Sova Center for Information and Analysis 2020b).

e. The FECRIS Affiliate in Serbia

One country where the Russian FECRIS' and Dvorkin's material has been largely disseminated is Serbia. There is a FECRIS affiliate in Serbia too, the

Center for Anthropological Studies, which during the course of its history had among its leaders some curious characters. One is Colonel Bratislav Petrović, a neuropsychiatrist by trade who, according to a critical report published in 2005, had been also involved in the ethnic hate propaganda of the regime of President Slobodan Milošević (1941–2006) (Duval and Jankovic 2005).

Another is Zoran Luković, a police captain who 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). Among “cults” (“секте” in Serbian) in general, Luković listed the Baptists, the Seventh-day Adventists, the Mormons, the members of the Theosophical Society, and the Freemasons (Luković 2000). He characterized “cult members” as “mental manipulators,”

mentally ill people, alcoholics and drug addicts who end up in psychiatric institutions or in cemeteries, perpetrators of the worst criminal acts like murder, robbery and rape, people who deal in prostitution (Luković 2000, 34 and 37).

Once again, there is no evidence that FECRIS has ever disassociated itself from the outrageous claims of its Serbian affiliate.

f. Russian Anti-Cultists’ Support for the 2022 War of Aggression Against Ukraine

After the Ukrainian war started, the groups listed until the end of March on FECRIS’s web site as FECRIS Russian affiliates unequivocally supported the war.

Some of the texts they published were truly disturbing, such as the comment in an article republished on the website of Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, who is or was the Vice President of the FECRIS affiliate Center for Religious Studies, that Mariupol after 2014 was “occupied by pure, unalloyed Nazis,” which is the usual Russian propaganda argument to justify the atrocities perpetrated there (Kozyrev 2022). It would be no defense, in this as in other cases quoted in this paragraph, that Novopashin only reprinted articles from Russian media. Reprinting is in itself a political act, and implies approval.

On the same Novopashin’s website, echoing again the usual propaganda, another article explained that

Ukraine’s problem is fascism... fascism must be destroyed... Fascists cannot be defended. One of the main tragedies of Ukraine is that the neo-Nazis seized power and forced the army to fight for their ideology. Ordinary Ukrainian boys are dying—not for their land, no. No one takes the land from the Ukrainians, and even the leadership of the cities does not change when Russian troops enter there. The guys are dying defending the interests of the Nazis (Komarov 2022).

Yet another text republished on the same website, titled “May God Help Give Peace to Ukraine By the Hands of Russian Peacekeepers,” argued that

in reality, there is no Ukrainian statehood. There is, on the one hand, a gang of thieves and international speculators, and on the other hand, a gang of fanatics and murderers (Vasilik 2022).

As for the website of the St. Irenaeus Center, Dvorkin’s own organization, it summarized on March 18 an interview given by another leading Russian anti-cultist, Roman Silantyev, who mused about “the upcoming parade of victory over Ukrainian Nazism,” and claimed that what the media described as school shootings by disturbed teenagers in Russia had been in fact organized by “the centers of information and psychological operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.” Silantyev stated that “so far the majority of the population of Ukraine considers themselves Christians, but this was also the case in the openly anti-Christian Third Reich.” In fact, he claimed, the real religion in Ukraine is a ritualized hatred of Russia with the intention of destroying Russia. For Russians, it was “better to hit first” (“С началом операции на Украине в РФ заметно снизилась напряженность в межрелигиозной сфере – эксперт” 2022).

The Saratov branch of the Center for Religious Studies, still a FECRIS affiliate at that date, published a letter to its supporters and friends on March 2 claiming that “the West has long understood that we cannot be defeated in a war on the battlefield,” but was waging a proxy war through the “cults,” which contribute to spread such absurd theories as that “Russia is an aggressor” and it “bombs civilians.” The Saratov anti-cult center tried to recruit police informants

to help in monitoring the activities of this kind of provocateurs. Please send screenshots, the data indicated by them (names and surnames, phone numbers and e-mail addresses) for further analysis, which is carried out by our anti-cult organizations together with law enforcement agencies of the Russian Federation (Saratov Branch of the Center for

Religious Studies 2022; by the way, at the time of this writing the website still mentions that the Saratov Branch is affiliated with FECRIS).

FECRIS may tell us that the Russian FECRIS branches have been expelled or suspended. However, at the time of this writing Dvorkin is still a FECRIS board member. More importantly, the aggressive attitude against Ukraine is not something the Russian FECRIS branches developed only in 2022. It went on for many years before the 2022 war, without any criticism by the FECRIS leadership.

g. The Contribution of the Russian FECRIS to the Pre-2022 Campaigns Against Ukraine

The Russian policy on Ukraine was not created all of a sudden in 2022. It developed from 2004 on, when Russia built a narrative that the “Orange Revolution” was an American-Western anti-Russian conspiracy, and continued in 2014 when the second popular revolt against the filo-Russian politician, then President, Viktor Yanukovich, was again branded as an American plot, which justified the Russian invasion of Crimea and of Donbass, where the two pseudo-“independent republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk were proclaimed.

The role of the Russian FECRIS and the anti-cult movement was to insist that the American-Western conspiracy against Russia included “cults” as a tool to Westernize Ukraine. The importance of FECRIS’ role, of course, should not be exaggerated. “Cults” were certainly not the main theme of the Russian rhetoric about a Western plot whose aim was to separate Ukraine from Russia. However, the importance of the “cult” argument should not be underestimated either. As we have seen, Putin’s ideology derives from an old nationalist tradition dating back to Ilyn and the beginning of the 20th century, which promoted the idea that Russia is under siege and the West tries to destroy the Russian spirit through three main tools, the propaganda of democracy, the apology of homosexuality, and the “cults” used to undermine the Orthodox identity of Russia and the Russosphere. “Cults” are not the only element of this alleged conspiracy, but are a significant part of it.

Since the Orange Revolution of 2004 the Russian FECRIS devoted considerable resources to prove that “cultists” maneuvered by the United States were playing a key role in the creation of a Ukrainian identity separate from

Russia. They mentioned three smoking guns allegedly proving the Western conspiracy.

The first was that Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who was Ukraine's Prime Minister between 2014 and 2016, after Yanukovich was removed from the presidency, was a Scientologist, or at least he was "controlled by the CIA through Scientology," as Dvorkin told in 2014 a Serbian web site. "Behind the Ukrainian crisis, there is a secret plan of a group of religious cults and sects in which the political leadership of Ukraine itself is participating," Dvorkin claimed ("The CIA Controls Arseniy Yatsenyuk through Scientology" 2014). In an interview published in his own web site, Dvorkin offered more details. Scientologists

put Yatsenyuk into a trance, pumped out all compromising information about him. And the person passed under the control of the Scientologists. Scientology concluded a secret agreement with the U.S. CIA; therefore, it is clear under whose control Arseniy Yatsenyuk is (Shatilova 2014).

That Yatsenyuk is "controlled by Scientology" has been repeated time and again. There is only one problem about this story, it is not true. Not even Tony Ortega, one of the most extreme anti-cultists and critics of Scientology in the United States and one who would normally believe all sort of anti-Scientology propaganda, bought Dvorkin's story. From the beginning, he wrote in February 2014,

we had serious doubts about that story, which was thin on details. For its allegation about Scientology, it pointed to Yatsenyuk's Wikipedia entry, which claimed that Yatsenyuk, 40, was primarily involved in Scientology through his sister Alina Steel, 47, who lives in Santa Barbara and was supposedly an auditor and heavily into the church. But shortly after the Dallas story appeared, that allegation was scrubbed from the Wikipedia entry in English (the assertion still exists in Wikipedia's Russian-language version).

Ortega found no evidence of Alina's involvement in Scientology, either, and her daughter dismissed it as "crap" (Ortega 2014).

Perhaps because he became aware of criticism even within the international anti-cult network, Dvorkin later offered the version that "we cannot directly call Yatsenyuk a Scientologist. We can only say that, according to many experts, he had connections with them." But he insisted that,

There is a curious fact: As soon as the Kiev junta, which came to power as a result of a coup, where the prime minister is suspected of having links with Scientology, began to have problems, the director of the CIA arrived incognito in the capital of Ukraine and held secret meetings (Chernykh 2014).

The Atlantic also investigated the matter and concluded that Yatsenyuk was not a Scientologist. “Despite popular online rumors that he is either a Scientologist or Jewish, Yatsenyuk identifies himself as a Ukrainian Greek Catholic,” i.e., a “Uniate,” as Orthodox call those who maintain a Greek liturgy but are united with the Holy See. But perhaps, *The Atlantic* noted, for Russian propaganda “it’s a difference without a distinction” (Shamanska 2014). In fact, Dvorkin claimed in 2014 that

Euromaidan is an explosive religious mixture. Secretly influenced by Scientologists. Uniates, neo-Pentecostal, neo-pagan, Baptists spoke openly. First of all, Euromaidan was Uniate. The Uniate Church is one of the aggressive parts of Roman Catholicism (Chernykh 2014).

The second smoking gun was the fact that some Ukrainian anti-Russian politicians were Evangelical or Pentecostal. Oleksandr Turchynov, who was Acting President of Ukraine for a few months after Yanukovich’s fall in 2014 and held other important political positions, is a Baptist minister. He is associated with Word of Life Ministries, a missionary organization founded in 1940 by Jack Wyrzten (1913–1996), which has a considerable success in Ukraine. Very few people, even in the anti-cult camp, would call Baptist churches or mainline missionary groups such as Word of Life “cults.” However, this is what Word of Life is according to the Russian FECRIS. They maneuvered to have it banned as “extremist” in Russia, as well as in the pseudo-republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Dvorkin’s website still calls it a “totalitarian cult” (Vasiliev 2022). Dvorkin acknowledges that Turchynov has internationally recognized credentials as a Baptist minister, but claims he “preaches not like an average Baptist pastor, but much more harshly, manipulatively,” and uses techniques of “manipulation of consciousness” (Shatilova 2014).

The Russian FECRIS also mentions that Leonid Chernovetskyi, another political opponent of Yanukovich, who was mayor of Kiev between 2006 and 2012 (and later moved to Georgia and became a Georgian citizen) was a member of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations, known in short as Embassy of God, a Pentecostal denomination established in 1993 in Ukraine by Nigerian pastor Sunday Adelaja. The Embassy of God claims some 100,000 members in Ukraine and has expanded into several foreign countries.

Pastor Adelaja supported the Orange Revolution in 2004, something the Russians did not forget. After the Russian invasion of 2022, according to his

Facebook page, he was informed by the Ukrainian authorities that he had been placed on a Russian hit list, and had to leave the country. On the other hand, judging from the same Facebook page, Adelaja does not fit the profile of a rabid anti-Russian. He praised Putin for his opposition to same-sex marriage and criticized those who believed Ukraine should join the NATO.

Nonetheless, the fact that the Embassy of God has converted thousands of Ukrainians baptized in the Orthodox Church is enough for the Russian FECRIS activists to identify it as a “cultic” organization. The fact that Adelaja is a “Black native of Africa” is also regularly mentioned, with easily detectable racist implications. “Ukrainian Neo-Pentecostals” such as those in the Embassy of God, Dvorkin’s website proclaimed, are not Ukrainian at all. They are “Americans” and evidence that “the West has been diligently introducing, encouraging and financing cultic groups in Russia and the post-Soviet space” (“Зарубежные религиозные организации и современная ситуация в России и на Украине” 2015).

The third “evidence” the Russian FECRIS organizations offer of the presence of “cults” infiltrated by the West into Ukraine with anti-Russian purposes is that some of the right-wing Ukrainian nationalists opposing Russia are neo-pagans or even “Satanists.” Speaking in November 2014 at a conference in Stavropol, Dvorkin stated that “the neo-pagans were very active on the Maidan,” and that “the neo-pagan project is also sponsored from abroad. This is a very, very serious danger.” At the same conference, as Dvorkin’s website reported, Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk, also spoke, and claimed that neo-pagan movements have their “funding roots in the West: this is the work of special services, this is the same as the creation of the NGOs that prepared the Maidan” (“Дворкин: неоязыческий проект спонсируется Западом” 2014).

Neo-pagans who dream to restore pre-Christian traditional religions do exist in Ukraine, as they exist in Russia and other countries. Scholars have evaluated their strength in Ukraine between 0.1 and 0.2% of the population (Ivakhiv 2005). The interest of mentioning Ukrainian neo-pagans for the Russian FECRIS affiliates is that some of them (not all) have right-wing political ideas, and neo-pagan symbols have been used by nationalist militias. Specialized scholars have warned that, apart from the symbols, neo-pagans are a minority (as are neo-Nazis, although they do exist) within nationalist Ukrainian militias (Umland 2019), and that there are as many, if not more, neo-Nazis and right-wing neo-

pagans fighting for, rather than against, Russia in the Donbass war (Likhachev 2016).

Yet, the Russian FECRIS affiliates offered their supports as “experts of cults” to the campaign depicting Ukraine as dominated by “neo-pagan Nazis” busy destroying its Christian, Orthodox, and Russian identity. They added the preposterous claim that Ukrainian neo-pagans are “sponsored” and “funded” by “the West.” In 2021, Father Alexander Kuzmin, signing as Executive Secretary of the umbrella organization gathering the various FECRIS affiliates in Russia, insisted about the alleged connection between neo-pagan movements and Western intelligence services. He wrote that

some ten years ago, when we, experts on cults, talked about the fact that intelligence services were involved in destructive cults, their creation, promotion and direction of their missionary activity, it sounded like exotic, like declassified counterintelligence information. Now information wars are not surprising to anyone, just as it is not surprising that cults have long become an instrument of political struggle (Kuzmin 2021).

Even Satanists were said to be part of the picture. In 2014, Dvorkin’s website reported that a “Church of Satan” was building a place of worship in the Ukrainian village of Pasty’rskoe. It claimed the temple was being built with the authorization of Ukrainian authorities, and commented that Ukraine was becoming a “laboratory for cults,” and “they are trying in every possible way to reduce the popularity of Orthodoxy” (Sokolov 2014). Unmentioned was that Satanists exist in Russia too. In 2016, a Satanic Church of Russia, established in 2013 and whose leader goes by the name of Oleg Sataninsky was legally registered in Russia—perhaps because Sataninsky expressed his support for Putin’s anti-extremism and anti-proselytization laws (“Official Russian Satanist Church Declares Opposition to Religious Extremism” 2017).

The triple infiltration into Ukraine, allegedly organized by “the West,” of the Church of Scientology, Evangelical or Pentecostal “totalitarian cults” such as Word of Life or the Embassy of God, and neo-pagans and Satanists, was used by the Russian FECRIS affiliates to slander the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan. The Greek Catholic Church was also attacked as an accomplice. “Maidan was compared by many experts of cults to a well-organized destructive cult,” Dvorkin’s website proclaimed (Sokolov 2014). In 2016, Dvorkin gave a lecture on “Totalitarian Cults and Color Revolutions,” where he explained that

the first Maidan [2004] was made by neo-Pentecostals and they got their own mayor of Kyiv, Leonid Chernovetskyi. The composition of the second “Maidan” is more complex: the Uniate [Greek Catholic] Church, Scientologists, and neo-pagans participated in it (Dvorkin 2016).

FECRIS Russian affiliates did not create the propaganda against Ukraine’s democratic movement. Yet, as “experts on cults” they provided the necessary caution to the theory that “cults” were one of the tools “the West” used to organize this movement, whose aim is to separate Ukraine from Russia. In 2014, they also immediately went to the newly proclaimed pseudo-republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, where “cults” and several Evangelical and Pentecostal churches were banned with the cooperation and applause of the Russian FECRIS (Slyusarenko 2015), giving a taste of what would happen in a “Russified” Ukraine.

Conclusion

FECRIS, whose role in spreading anti-cultism throughout the world we noted in our first White Paper, has consistently supported the crackdown of China and Russia, two totalitarian and anti-democratic regimes, against religious minorities labeled as “cults,” a crackdown that international organizations and democratic governments have denounced and which has involved arrests, torture, and extra-judicial killings.

From the infamous participation of French anti-cultists to the Beijing “International Symposium on Destructive Cults” in 2000, FECRIS and its affiliates have supported the merciless repression of Falun Gong and other groups labeled as *xie jiao* in China. As evidence of atrocities piled up, FECRIS and its affiliates never criticized the Chinese regime’s anti-cult policy. In fact, a symbiotic relation has continued, and FECRIS representatives have even defended Xi Jinping’s regime against criticism in fields unrelated to religion.

The most notorious Russian anti-cultist, and the main architect of the Russian repression of minority religions, Alexander Dvorkin, has been Vice President of FECRIS for twelve years, from 2009 to 2021, and one of its most visible public faces. At the time of this writing, he remains in the FECRIS’ Board of Directors. The Russian affiliates have remained among the most active branches of FECRIS until March 2022, when during the war in Ukraine they were reportedly expelled

or suspended—but somewhat secretly and without public announcements to the date of this writing.

Before March 2022, FECRIS never distanced itself from Dvorkin or its Russian FECRIS affiliates. At the 2009 FECRIS symposium in St. Petersburg, FECRIS leaders even met with the Minister of Justice of the Russian Federation, exchanging information and suggestions on how to better combat “cults.” Later, FECRIS went to great lengths to defend even the most absurd statements of its Russian affiliates. In Germany, in 2020, FECRIS defended in court the statement that the persecution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia is just the invention of “a primitive propaganda.”

For eighteen years, from the Orange Revolution of 2004 to the start of the 2022 war, FECRIS’ Russian affiliates contributed to the Russian policy and campaign of slander against Ukraine and the Ukrainian democratic movement, claiming that as “cult experts” they were in a position to prove that a Western conspiracy had infiltrated into Ukraine “cults” that had a crucial role in the first and the second Maidan. This demonization of Ukraine paved the way for the 2022 war and its atrocities. All this went on for almost two decades, during which the Russian affiliates were hailed by FECRIS for their activism and successes, and Dvorkin was promoted by FECRIS as one of its main leaders.

We hope that the “expulsion” or “suspension” of the FECRIS Russian affiliates will be followed by the expulsion and public denunciation of Dvorkin. But it will be, at any rate, too little too late. The problem is not only organizational. It is ideological. Expelling Dvorkin would be of little use without expelling from FECRIS Dvorkin’s ideology. This White Paper has raised the question whether Dvorkin’s ideology is not simply the ideology of FECRIS itself.

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“Secretophobia”: The Modern Prejudice Against Religious and Spiritual Secrets

Rosita Šorytė

FOB (European Federation for Freedom of Belief)

rosita_soryte@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT: Secret is often perceived today as something intrinsically maleficent, sinister, and non-democratic. Psychologists, however, recognize that secret is an essential component of human relations. Simmel’s famous indictment of the secret in fact distinguished between different forms of “secret societies.” For some, secret is a necessity caused by external hostility. For others, secret derives from an esoteric or gnostic content of the teachings. What has mostly passed from Simmel to subsequent critics of secrecy is that the secret may function as an “adornment,” a status symbol without intrinsic value. Hugh Urban has applied this criticism to both Freemasonry and Scientology. However, the criticism seems to posit that esoteric and gnostic teachings are worthless by definition, which is itself a value judgement that should not be part of value-free social science.

KEYWORDS: Secrecy, Secret Societies, Georg Simmel, Hugh Urban, Freemasonry, Scientology.

The Secret and the Self

Why is the secret today perceived as carrying an aura of maleficence? Hunting secrets to eliminate them has become almost a principle, a right that guarantees our safety and even our democracy (Lévy-Soussan 2008, 119).

These words by French psychoanalyst and academic Pierre Lévy-Soussan capture a trend of our present Western world I would call “secretophobia,” the idea that secrets are something dangerous that needs to be denounced and eliminated.

Conversely, writes Lévy-Soussan, “transparency and the absence of secrets became the standard to measure the quality of a discourse or an information” (Lévy-Soussan 2008, 119–28). This “secretophobia” is, Lévy-Soussan argues,

wrong, and carries potentially destructive consequences for both individuals and societies (Lévy-Soussan 2010).

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how a society can function without secrets, although “secret,” “restricted,” “private,” and “confidential” are not synonymous. Political documents, for example, may belong to each of these categories. Sometimes they are not disclosed because the public may not know their context and, as a consequence, may misunderstand them. It is true that we live in a world of Wikileaks and other Anonymous, where a significant number of secret governmental documents are leaked and appear on the web, sooner rather than later. Recent events have proved that a world where diplomatic documents are leaked and published is not a safer world nor one where diplomacy’s efforts, including those aimed at preventing wars, are made easier.

Spiritual groups have their own secrets. In this context, “secret” is connected with “sacred,” something that cannot be grasped by the mind and requires a deeper understanding. That secrecy is a part of many, if not most, forms of spirituality was taken for granted for millennia. But now “secretophobia” misunderstands the secrecy of spiritual and religious movements as well, and depicts it as something sinister, possibly hiding abuses and crimes.

Secret, however, does not exist in social movements only. It starts with the smallest society, the family or the couple. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) wrote in 1913 “Two Lies Told by Children” (Freud 1953 [1913], 303–9), where he claimed that the idea that small children should never lie is both unnatural and wrong. Children understand early enough that parents lie to them to make them behave. In turn, the children’s first lies, according to Freud, are their first secrets—although (my comment, not Freud’s) arguing that all secrets are lies would certainly be wrong.

Secrets, Freud wrote, are very important, because they mark the children’s separation from the parents. Now that the child has a secret, an individual perception emerges, separated from the flow of the parents’ thoughts. Thus, the secret is essential for the process of individualization. The etymology of the Latin word “secretum” is controversial, but Freud (as many still do) believed it came from the perfect passive participle of the verb “secerno,” which means “to separate.” A secret is separated from what is open to everybody. By keeping their first secrets, children separate their selves from the parents’ selves.

We continue to need secrets to preserve the individuality and coherence of our inner selves until the end of our lives. According to Lévy-Soussan trauma, failure, and even suicide in our modern societies may come from the myth of total transparency. Because of the pervasiveness of this myth, we feel guilty if we keep our secrets, and we reveal secrets, or trespass the boundaries of our privacy, without being ready to confront the consequences.

How many believing they should “always tell the truth,” “live a transparent life,” and “never lie,” failed to respect their psychological time and made “public announcements” they were not ready to defend: that they had a “secret” child, an illness, a “secret” sexual orientation. The subject matters of the announcements are as numerous as individual stories are. These announcements have effects that are devastating, traumatic, violent, beyond everything they might have imagined beforehand (Lévy-Soussan 2008, 120–21).

Those who preach for transparency and against secrets often rely on a famous article published in 1906 by German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918), “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies” (Simmel 1906, 441–98). Simmel wrote the article in German, but it appeared in English translation in 1906 before a different version was published in 1908 as part of his major work, *Soziologie* (Simmel 1908). The chapter on the secret of *Soziologie* was in turn translated into English in 1950 (Simmel 1950, 307–76). I am not a sociologist, and I read the article by Simmel from the simple point of view of common human experience.

In a way, Simmel is the father of “secretophobia.” However, his article of 1906 is often read selectively. When it comes to interpersonal relations, Simmel agrees that some secrecy is necessary. He idealizes a classic idea of friendship, where friends were totally open to each other (or so the Greek and Latin eulogies of friendship said), but believes modern processes of differentiation made this friendship impossible.

The complete intimacy of confidence, he writes, probably becomes, with the changing differentiation of men [sic], more and more difficult. Perhaps the modern man has too much to conceal to make a friendship in the ancient sense possible; perhaps personalities also, except in very early years, are too peculiarly individualized for the complete reciprocity of understanding, to which always so much divination and productive phantasy are essential. It appears that, for this reason, the modern type of feeling inclines more to differentiated friendships; that is, to those which have their territory only upon one side of the personality at a time, and in which the rest of the personality plays no part (Simmel 1906, 458).

In this “rest of the personality,” secrets remain, concealed even to the best of these “modern” friends.

Simmel regarded the question of whether it is appropriate for a spouse to keep secrets not revealed to the other spouse as “among the universal problems of the highest importance for the sociology of intimate associations” (Simmel 1906, 459). He notes that modern bourgeois marriage is different from the ancient one, as it emphasizes the romantic element, thus making

very natural... the temptation to open oneself to the other at the outset without limit; to abandon the last reserve of the soul equally with those of the body, and thus to lose oneself completely in another. This, however, usually threatens the future of the relationship (Simmel 1906, 459).

Simmel concludes that perhaps there are some exceptional couples that can live without secrets. Most couples cannot. Simmel, here, does not distinguish between secrecy and privacy, a distinction perhaps in the 21st century we would introduce.

Quite apart from its analysis of secret societies, to which I will return, Simmel regards the situation where secrets in relationships between human beings are common as an evolutive step towards a fully developed society. He even writes that secrecy

is one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity. In contrast with the juvenile condition [of humanity] in which every mental picture is at once revealed, every undertaking is open to everyone’s view, secrecy procures enormous extension of life, because with publicity many sorts of purposes could never arrive at realization (Simmel 1906, 462).

“Secret Societies”

Why, thus, is Simmel always mentioned by those who criticize secrecy, particularly when it is practiced by religious or spiritual movements? The answer has to do with his analysis of “secret societies.” Simmel warns against framing the question in moral terms. “Secrecy, he writes, is a universal sociological form, which as such has nothing to do with the moral valuations of its contents” (Simmel 1906, 463). Some societies are secret because their activities are criminal, but this is not a rule: “secrecy is not in immediate interdependence with

evil, but evil with secrecy” (Simmel 1906, 463). All criminal societies are secret, but not all secret societies are criminal.

Simmel then distinguishes secret societies into “absolutely secret” and “*relatively* secret” (Simmel 1906, 471, emphasis in original). “Absolutely secret” societies, he believed, i.e., those whose very existence is unknown to the non-members until they are discovered or exposed, are very rare. One disgruntled ex-member who reveal their existence is enough to destroy them. Most secret societies are “relatively secret” and follow the model of Freemasonry, a subject of great interest to Simmel. That Freemasonry exists, and what it is, is generally known. What is kept secret, with more or less success since ex-members have always published exposes, is a part of the teachings and the rituals.

Except from criminal or terrorist organizations, secret societies are born, Simmel argues, either from external circumstances or from the nature of their teachings. Some societies become secret simply because they are persecuted. The Waldenses (also called Waldensians) were Christian dissidents, precursors of the Reformation, who, Simmel writes, “were in nature not a secret society” but became one “in consequence of the external pressure, which made it necessary to keep themselves from view” (Simmel 1906, 493).

I had a personal experience of how this happens when I interviewed refugees from a Christian new religious movement, The Church of Almighty God, who escaped from China where they are severely persecuted. One of the accusations the Chinese authorities, including Chinese embassies in the countries where they seek asylum, raise against them is that they operate in the secret. However, they are a clandestine group in China because, if detected, they would be arrested. In countries such as South Korea, the United States, Italy, or Spain they still adopt some precautions because the long arm of the Chinese government follows them even abroad, but they have visible places of worship open to visitors, publications everybody can buy, and websites (Šorytė 2018; Introvigne, Richardson, and Šorytė 2021).

Bloody persecution certainly justifies secrecy, and is an extreme case. However, Simmel notes that more generally

the secret society is the appropriate social form for contents which are at an immature stage of development and thus in a condition peculiarly liable to injury from opposing interests. Youthful knowledge, religion, morality, party, is often weak and in need of defense (Simmel 1906, 471).

Interestingly, the German sociologist adds that this is “perhaps most obvious in the case of religious movements” (Simmel 1906, 472).

The second case is the society that is secret because it imparts a secret knowledge. These are, Simmel tells us, the “peculiar types of secret society whose substance is an esoteric doctrine, a theoretical, mystical, religious gnosis” (Simmel 1906, 477). Here, however, Simmel saw problems, and formulated the criticism that is used by most subsequent critics of secrecy as the only part of his article they quote.

Simmel believed that in many content-oriented secret societies, the secret goes around in circles. It is not valuable because of its content. It is only valuable because it is secret. Simmel denounces “the logically fallacious, but typical, error, that everything secret is something essential and significant” (Simmel 1906, 465). In many cases, he argues, it is not. It is true that he distinguishes between genuine Freemasonry and “degenerate Freemasonry” (Simmel 1906, 479), and mostly criticizes the second. However, Simmel writes that in many esoteric societies the secret’s aim is only to create a status. Just as “among children a pride and self-glory often bases itself on the fact that the one can say to the others: ‘I know something that you don’t know,’” among the grown-up members of (most) esoteric movements the knowledge of secrets is merely an “adorning possession” (Simmel 1950, 337: “schmückender Besitz,” Simmel 1908, 365).

In the German edition of 1908, Simmel added an excursus on the notion of adornment (“Exkurs über den Schmuck”: Simmel 1908, 365–72), which is not present in the 1906 article published in English. Simmel’s “adornment” is what Max Weber (1864–1920) called “status symbol” (see Weber 1968, 698–99), a notion we are all familiar with. Simmel argued that jewels and other “adornments” do have a value that corresponds to the fact that the metals and stones they are made of are scarce, yet the real reason we want them is that they are exclusive and not available to those of a social status lower than ours. Other “adornments,” or “status symbols,” such as certain medals or items of clothing do not even have a special quality or aesthetic value, but are appreciated just because not everybody can have them.

Often, Simmel argues, the secret works in the same way. It is not very significant nor valuable, but it is “aristocratic” (Simmel 1906, 487) because only a few people are admitted to know it. Since who is admitted to the knowledge of the secret is decided by a few masters or chiefs, those initiated to the secret

reciprocate by promising “unlimited and blind obedience to the leaders” (Simmel 1906, 492). Submission to the leaders may become a core part of the initiate’s life, Simmel writes, the more so because there are “few individuals belonging to more than one secret society” (Simmel 1906, 491). The latter comment shows that Simmel was not very familiar with the real-life secret societies of his time, including in Germany, where many were at the same time Freemasons, Rosicrucians, neo-Templars, and so on, meaning they did indeed belong to more than one secret society, each with its own chiefs.

Although there were historical cases of secret societies promoting democracy, their aristocratic ethos, Simmel argues, make these groups intrinsically non-democratic. Since “democracies are bound to regard publicity as the condition desirable in itself” (Simmel 1906, 469), Simmel predicted in 1906 that as more countries will adopt a democratic regime, secret societies would eventually decline or disappear. He was wrong, as content-oriented esoteric societies continued to flourish in democratic countries. There are surely today more esoteric groups in the United States or the countries of European Union than in non-democratic states such as China, where they may be repressed and persecuted.

“Secretophobia” and New Religious and Esoteric Movements

Before commenting on whether Simmel’s criticism of (most) secret societies was right, I would like to discuss how his ideas have been applied to religious and esoteric movements, sometimes generating a “secretophobic” approach.

Of course, many who criticize “cults” or esoteric masters and movements do not even know who Simmel was. However, they unconsciously participate in the tradition he inaugurated, by believing that secrecy in a spiritual movement is intrinsically non-democratic, and necessarily leads to “blind obedience to the leaders” (Simmel 1906, 492).

There are, however, also those who quote Simmel explicitly. On the issues of secret I have read with interest some texts by American scholar Hugh Urban. I became interested in his approach because I have written some papers about Scientology (e.g. Šorytė 2020, 2021), and he deals with the secret in Scientology.

The first article by Urban was published in 2001 and applied Simmel’s criticism of secret societies to Freemasonry (Urban 2001). Urban focused on the American Masonic leader Albert Pike (1809–1891). There is no doubt that Pike was an important Masonic ritualist. However, referring to him allows for an easy criticism of Freemasonry as a secret society whose aim was to perpetuate the power of an elite of American Anglo-Saxon whites. Pike was a Confederate general, and he was even accused of atrocities during the Civil War, for which he was arrested and punished by the Confederate States themselves. He was also, as Urban notes, a racist (Duncan 1961; Brown 1997). His statue in Washington DC was defaced, torn down, and set afire as part of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 (Cioffi 2020).

Pike became the stereotypical “bad” Freemason, and in the 19th century many Catholic publications reprinted documents where he allegedly confessed to be in league with Satan himself to destroy Christianity, which were later proved to be hoaxes (see Introvigne 2016, 191–200). While discredited in the West, these false Pike documents are still used today in Russia to prove that there is a Masonic–American conspiracy aimed at dominating the world and destroying the Russian Orthodox Church (see e.g. Braev-Raznevsky 2019).

In other words, if somebody wants to attack Freemasonry as a right-wing and racist organization, Pike makes for an easy target. By selecting famous Freemasons of different political persuasions, such as Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–1882), who was Grand Master of Italian Freemasonry, American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945), or British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874–1965), different conclusion might have been reached.

To his credit, Urban does not claim that all Freemasons are racist or right-wing radicals. He also admits that secrecy can be used by both progressive and reactionary organizations. However, he uses the example of Pike to claim that Freemasonry was an “elitist” organization, primarily including “white males” (Urban 2001, 3). As such, Freemasonry is an example of the “aristocratic” type of secret society discussed by Simmel. This allows Urban to find in Freemasonry a confirmation of Simmel’s theory that “secrecy is best understood as a social form, a strategy aimed at the effect of ‘adornment’” (Urban 2001, 3).

To Urban,

it would seem that the secret symbols of Masonry are, in themselves, really not particularly shocking or remarkable; in fact, most of them would seem rather mundane... So why is it that they need to be surrounded with such an enormous amount of secrecy, occultism, and mystery? As I would argue, it is precisely all this secrecy and ritual ornament—this “adornment of silence”—which functions to *transform the otherwise fairly mundane and unremarkable body of Masonic teachings into a rare, scarce and highly valued commodity* (Urban 2001, 16, emphasis in original).

In itself, the Masonic secrets would be “unremarkable” and worthless. They become valuable to Freemasons only because they are secret, and Freemasons come to believe that they are part of an aristocracy that shares something non-Freemasons do not know.

It would seem that, except when the secret is used to disguise racism and white supremacism, as in the case of Pike, the secrecy of esoteric movements is not particularly dangerous. Members of these movements only invest resources to acquire “fairly mundane and unremarkable” knowledge, and are gullible enough to believe that they have joined a non-existing elite.

However, the situation changes when Urban analyses the secret within a group different from Freemasonry, the Church of Scientology. Urban is not exactly an admirer of Scientology, and often relies on anti-cult sources (see e.g. Urban 2011). In 2017, he published a chapter of the *Handbook of Scientology*, edited by James R. Lewis, on the question of secrecy in Scientology (Urban 2017). Here, the context was the possibility that “secretive religious groups (...) might be engaged in subversive, dangerous and/or illegal activities” (Urban 2017, 295), something more sinister than the simple alleged naivete of the Freemasons.

Scientology according to Urban is “secretive” both about details of the biography of his founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), and about certain of its teachings and practices. Its more advanced stages of teachings, called OT (Operating Thetan) levels, are kept secret to those who are not admitted to take the corresponding courses. Urban states that, in a phase of its history, Scientology struggled to protect its secrets against the American and other governments. Today, he argues, we are in a second phase, where the threat to make public teachings that Scientology tries to keep secret more often comes from ex-members who post them on the web and from hackers such as Anonymous.

As I mentioned, unlike other academic scholars of new religious movements, Urban takes anti-cultists seriously. He quotes approvingly even Gerry Armstrong, one of the most rabid anti-Scientologists, to the effect that Scientology will eventually disappear because all its secrets will appear on the Internet. Urban writes that “the Internet may well prove to be ‘Scientology’s Waterloo’—that is, a battle of information that it cannot realistically win” (Urban 2017, 294).

With all due respect, it seems to me that this is a typical example of technological fallacy, i.e., the naïve persuasion that new technologies have the power to destroy deeply held human beliefs. Technological fallacies are not about Scientology only. Some have claimed that Christianity will be destroyed by the free discussion of its dogmas on the Internet. But the same was claimed for radio, television, and even before for the printing press, in which some atheists had put their hopes. Christianity, of course, is still there. In the case of groups with secrets, there are two aspects Urban seems to overlook. The first is that these groups are dynamic. While some of their confidential materials are being hacked and posted on the Internet, they would have already released to their members new materials that, at least for a certain period of time, will resist hacking, and so on ad infinitum.

The second problem is that those who read materials of groups such as Scientology illegally posted on the Internet by critics and hackers run the risk of encountering apocryphal texts. Sensational secrets allegedly from the OT levels of Scientology and from unpublished texts of Hubbard have been posted on the web, but there is no way of telling whether they are genuine or false. Indeed, Urban himself has been criticized for relying for his criticism of Scientology on texts posted by anti-cultists whose authenticity he cannot prove (Introvigne 2021).

I wonder how conclusions can be drawn from texts that may not be genuine. In his chapter on the secret in Scientology, Urban for example mentions that Scientology insists that materials allegedly part of the OT levels that appeared on the web “are a forgery.” Urban’s own opinion is that, “At present the authenticity of the OT documents [published by anti-cultists] remains unclear.” However, he starts the next sentence with the words “Regardless of their authenticity,” then proceeds to present hypotheses about Hubbard based on these documents (Urban 2017, 291). But, if the documents are false, any conclusion one may draw from them is irrelevant.

In general, Urban remains true to his interpretation of Simmel, which focuses on the secret as adornment. He writes that

the increasingly esoteric levels of Hubbard’s OT or “advanced tech” clearly served as a kind of “adorning possession,” in Simmel’s sense—that is, a source of status, prestige and power that enhances one’s character precisely by virtue of what it conceals (Urban 2017, 295).

From this point of view, the secret is a resource for Scientology, because Scientologists are ready to invest to get their “adorning possessions,” even if in the critics’ and Urban’s opinion they are of no great value. But at the same time, Urban argues, the secret is a liability, because in a modern democratic society secrets are looked at with suspicion and unleash against Scientology powerful and even “dominant” social forces including the media, the Internet hackers, and some governments (Urban 2017, 295).

But Are Secrets as Bad as They Seem?

When Urban deals with Scientology (and with Freemasonry as well), he focuses on one of the functions of the secret Simmel mentioned, that of an “adornment” or status symbol. He does not consider the possibility that both in Freemasonry and in Scientology secrecy might also function as a protection against external hostile forces. As mentioned earlier, Simmel believed this function was at work both in movements that experience varying degrees of persecution, and in “young” movements, particularly religious, which are exposed to hostility more than old, consolidated religions. That this may be the case for Scientology is a possibility Urban does not consider.

However, the dichotomy “protection against hostility versus adornment” only exhausts the possible functions of the secret if one believes Simmel was right. What if Simmel was wrong? Simmel found content-oriented secrecy in movements offering “an esoteric doctrine, a theoretical, mystical, religious gnosis” (Simmel 1906, 477). This can apply to Scientology as well, which many have described as a modern form of gnosis (Melton 2000; Terrin 2017). Although Simmel did not totally rule out that some esoteric secrets might have a respectable content, he focused on the secret as an adornment whose role as a status symbol did not correspond to any real intrinsic value.

But why, exactly, should esoteric or gnostic secrets be worthless? After all, millions continue to seek forms of esoteric knowledge in an immense variety of spiritual schools. Some may be disappointed, but many remain there because they find their experiences positive and fulfilling. As both Wouter Hanegraaff and Jeffrey Kripal have demonstrated, there is no evidence that these practitioners of secret ways are simply deluded, unless one assumes as a starting point that gnostic and esoteric knowledge is worthless by definition—which is in itself a value judgement that should not belong to “objective” academic science (Hanegraaff 2012; Kripal 2017).

I would add that I do not base this criticism of “secretophobia” on theory only. I also rely on personal, practical experience. I have been interested in spirituality for many years. I have practiced different spiritual ways myself, and I have observed many who follow spiritual paths that involve certain secret teachings. Very few among those I have met have concluded that teachings they had obtained with great efforts were worthless, although some may have found that the path they had started to walk was not for them.

Why are certain teachings secret? I find the arguments of the “adornment” or status symbol strange, although I cannot exclude that it may apply to some spiritual organizations, which members may mostly attend to persuade themselves that they are very special. However, most spiritual groups I have observed are not like this. Arrogant individuals exist everywhere, including among those who disparage spirituality. However, most followers of spiritual schools and masters do not go around showing their “adornments” and telling everybody how special they are. If they have acquired some knowledge, they regard it as a gift to be humbly received and shared with others. Indeed, most spiritual teachings warn against the ego and the hybris of the mind.

Some teachings are not kept secret to allow those who learn them to become full of themselves and to believe they have finally joined some exclusive or “aristocratic” club. They are kept secret *because of their very nature*. A teacher of mathematics would not disclose to those who have just started studying it the most complicated equations. These equations are “secret”—they are published in books everybody can buy, but those without an appropriate preparation would read the books without understanding a word of them. Teachers do not keep the equations “secret” to protect their power or to nurture the arrogance of the students who would master them. Simply, they know that in order to grasp these

equations students need to be prepared. Putting the equations in front of the students before they are mature enough to understand them would only create confusion.

To use an even more simple example, parents normally do not teach 3-year-old children how to light a fire. Parents are not protecting their power. They just know that, if they would try to light a fire, small children will probably burn themselves—and perhaps the family home as well.

Confronted with deep teachings about the universe—and it does not matter whether we are ready to believe them or not—we are all children. Teachings are fire too, and we may easily be burned. A wise teacher would not disclose the fire to us and explain how to light it until we are ready.

In this sense, maintaining a secret is a way not so much of hiding a teaching but of not revealing it until a person is ready to understand. For those who adopt an esoteric point of view, there are different levels of understanding and the higher levels are not reached immediately. We read in three different Gospels (Mark 6:45–52; Matthew 14:22–33; John 6:16–21) that Jesus walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee. Everybody can understand the literal meaning of “walking on the water;” however, understanding the symbolic dimension of the story requires a training and a preparation. Jesus himself quoted the prophet Isaiah in Matthew 13 to explain that many “though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” But to those who “understand with their hearts,” Jesus says: “Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.” Here, again, Jesus is not referring to the physical eyes and the physical ears, but to a spiritual way of “seeing” and “hearing” “with the heart,” which goes beyond the mind and comes when the disciple is ready.

Just as there are abusive parents, who misuse their position to humiliate their children, there are also abusive spiritual teachers, who may misuse their knowledge to exert an abusive power or to foster the arrogance of a small clique of preferred pupils. But as the ancient Romans said, *abusus non tollit usum*, “abuse does not cancel use,” i.e., the misuse of something is no argument against its proper use. That some parents abuse their children does not prove that all parents are abusive.

The abuse of secret does not cancel its proper use. Secrecy is a necessary part of some, if not most, spiritual paths. And in this sense we may all agree with

Simmel that “secret is one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity” (Simmel 1906, 462).

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The Secret of the Confession: A Thing of the Past?

Massimo Introvigne

Center for Studies on New Religions, Torino, Italy

maxintrovigne@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The article, an extended review of the book edited by Mark Hill and A. Keith Thompson *Religious Confession and Evidential Privilege in the 21st Century*, discusses the laws and draft laws in the United States, Ireland, Australia, and other countries that have introduced, or would introduce, exceptions to the legal protection of the secret of the Catholic confession and similar practices in other religions, compelling priests and ministers to report to the authorities cases of child sexual abuse learned in a confessional context. I argue that statutes protecting the confessional privilege based on the special treatment of “national” churches will probably not survive the attacks based on the pedophile priests crisis, perhaps with the exception of Italy, where the Concordat with the state has not been signed by the Italian Catholic Church but is an international treaty with a sovereign foreign state, the Vatican. However, a broader protection of the confessional privilege, based on general principles of religious liberty and extended to all religions, including new religions such as Scientology, will probably continue to be affirmed by courts in most democratic countries.

KEYWORDS: Religious Confession, Confessional Privilege, Secret of the Confession, Religious Confession and Sexual Abuse, A. Keith Thompson, Mark Hill.

Confession Under Attack

Religious Confession and Evidential Privilege in the 21st Century (Hill and Thompson 2021: references without indication of the source in this article are to the Hill and Thompson book), edited by Mark Hill, a distinguished British barrister, and A. Keith Thompson, professor and associate dean at the University of Notre Dame Australia School of Law, with a foreword by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, may well be one of the most important books on religion of 2022 (the year when it has been in fact released, although it bears a copyright date 2021). This paper is both an extended review of the book and a

discussion of its subject matter, i.e., the secret of confession and the confessional privilege.

The book originated from the claim, which followed horrific cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by Catholic priests and ministers of other religions, that laws protecting the confidentiality of Christian confession and similar practices in other religions should be eliminated or restricted in their scope. What Rowan Williams calls a “troubling legal attack” against a long-enshrined legal principle (9) is based on the idea that religions have protected sexual abusers by hiding behind the seal of confession. Religionists have countered, as Williams writes, that

the “seal” of confession is not—as some critics would argue—a form of malign secrecy but an assurance that all kinds of destructive and damaging behaviour can be spoken out, named and acknowledged for what they are (8).

If courts of law would not recognize that confessions made to a religious minister are confidential, in the end they would not be made at all.

The book examines the situation, and the controversies, in six different countries: Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, Norway, and Sweden. It could have been expanded with other countries such as France, where similar problems have been discussed (see Introvigne 2021, 2022) after a 2021 report commissioned by the Catholic Church on sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by Catholic priests (CIASE 2021) suggested that the number of cases might have been much higher than it was previously believed. Collective books, however, have limits, and this is already a 300-page volume. I will also limit my discussion here to the countries mentioned in the Hill-Thompson study.

Australia

Australia is one of the countries where the problem was first raised, with the unsuccessful 2003 attempt by controversial Senator Nick Xenophon, who crusaded against both the Catholic Church and the “cults,” to compel religious ministers in South Australia to disclose the content of confessions in cases involving child sexual abuse.

The 2017 report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse recommended that Australian state and territorial governments

eliminate the confessional privilege in cases of child sexual abuse (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017). Most Australian states and territories followed the recommendation, creating a conflict with the Catholic Church, which immediately answered that priests would go to jail rather than violate the sacred obligation connected with the confession. Those who would obey the Australian laws would be excommunicated, the Australian bishops said.

As Robert Netanek and Patrick Parkinson explain in their chapter, in 2020 some Australian Catholic Bishops, following a suggestion by the Royal Commission itself, tried to find a solution where the religious confession privilege would be maintained but priests would be instructed to withhold absolution until penitents who had confessed sins of child abuse had reported themselves to the authorities. However, the Bishops wrote to the Vatican, whose Apostolic Penitentiary, competent on the matter of confession, answered that “absolution cannot be made conditional on future actions in the external forum” (89).

In his chapter, A. Keith Thompson notes that the present situation of the religious confession privilege in Australia is not totally clear, as the new statutes that followed the Royal Commission’s report contrast with other norms that have not been abrogated. Thompson reports that statutes protecting the privilege were introduced in Australia and New Zealand since the 19th century, following controversial cases where the public opinion largely sided with the priests, while the Royal Commission’s position was “an under-theorised reaction to a moral panic” (58). His criticism of the Commission and of the new statutes is based on four arguments.

First, as Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the English philosopher who was no friend of religion nor of the Catholic Church, famously argued in the early 19th century, “the moment the constabulary were known to have harvested their very first confessional secret, the well of such secrets would dry up” (45). Criminals would not confess their sins to priests and ministers if they knew that what they confess would be reported to the police.

Second, in practice very few perpetrators and victims confess sexual abuse incidents to priests and pastors, and when they do it they try to be vague on details, so that a hypothetical report by the minister would be of little use to the authorities.

Third, mandatory report of information ministers have learned *outside* confession, which the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations do not oppose, is the real key to improve the protection of children, as the experience of several Australian states demonstrate.

Fourth, the Commission's argument that abrogating the religious confession privilege would not violate Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on freedom of religion or belief, because that provision allows for "restriction" justified by "public order" and "public morals," is faulty and based on a "misinterpretation" of the article (60). In fact, not all restrictions are justified, the sphere of conscience (in this case, of the priests and ministers) should remain inviolable, and the Commission did not prove that the same results cannot be achieved without gravely violating religious liberty.

The Royal Commission, argue Netanek and Parkinson, also made factual mistakes—as it did, as Holly Folk demonstrated, about the Jehovah's Witnesses (Folk 2021). It did not believe the Catholic bishops' argument that confessions almost never include material that would be useful to the police to prevent further child abuse and identify the perpetrators.

The Commission relied on two main sources. The first was the claim by Australian defrocked priest Michael Joseph McArdle, which the Commission quoted from the book of British anti-Catholic journalist John Cornwell, *The Dark Box* (Cornwell 2014), that he had told other priests of his abuses some 1,500 times in confession. However, the Commission failed to consider that the judges of his case regarded McArdle as a pathological liar, and he tried to use the story of the alleged confessions to divert blame from himself to the Catholic Church.

The second source was a qualitative analysis of nine priests guilty of sexual abuse who accepted to talk to her by Irish psychologist Marie Keenan. The Commission relied on Keenan's finding that eight of the nine priests disclosed their abuse in confession. However, Keenan also reported that they did so without disclosing details that might have led to identifying themselves or the victims (Keenan 2012, 163–64). Perhaps some members of the Commission were not aware that in Ireland and other countries, including Australia, in many Catholic churches penitents may go to confession hiding behind a grille. Those who do not want to be identified can also seek confession far away from where they live, a common practice among Catholics.

In 2019 a report of the Justice and Community Safety Directorate of the Australian Capital Territory had advised against eliminating the confession privilege by arguing that, if they knew that they may be reported to the police by the priest, perpetrators “will probably avoid confession altogether; or alternatively, they may exploit the potential under the rite of confession prevalent in Australia to confess anonymously and non-specifically” (104).

Netanek’s and Parkinson’s conclusion is that the new laws against the confession privilege would not save a single child from abuse, although they do create a dangerous precedent that threatens religious liberty in general.

Italy

The Hill-Thompson book also examines several countries of Europe. Marco Ferrante discusses the very special situation of Italy, where not only the secrecy of confession is protected but the case law maintains that breaching the confidentiality of the Catholic confession is in itself a crime under Article 622 of the Criminal Code, which protects the “professional secret” in general.

Very wisely, the Italian Catholic Church never became part of the Concordat of 1929, revised and re-signed in 1984, which as a consequence is an international treaty between two sovereign states, Italy and the Vatican, as such largely subtracted from the jurisdiction of the Italian courts.

The Concordat has a broad protection of the confidentiality of Catholic confession, but similar provisions are included in agreements with the Jewish Communities and the small Italian Lutheran Church. Courts have ruled that the privilege extends indeed to ministers of all denominations.

In view of the special status of the Concordat with the Catholic Church, and of constitutional principles mandating that the same privileges should be granted to all religions, it may be unlikely that cases of sexual abuse by priests and ministers, which have also been reported in Italy, would determine a change in the existing protection of the confessional secret.

England and Wales

In England and Wales the Canon Law of the established Church of England is part of civil law. The Church of England allows for the possibility of private confession, although it is not frequent. Since 1603, its secrecy has been protected, with the exception of crimes so serious, including high treason, that not disclosing them might lead to the death penalty. Since there is no death penalty in England any longer, this exception is now of no effect.

Recently, Mark Hill and Christopher Grout write in the book, because of the controversy on child sexual abuse, the Church of England has adopted the solution the Catholic Church refused in Australia, instructing ministers to withhold absolution unless perpetrators promise to report themselves to the authorities. It has also explained that a common conversation between a minister and a parishioner is not a confession, and is not protected by the confessional privilege.

The two authors report a disagreement between themselves on whether the protection granted to Church of England pastors extends to ministers of other religions. The authors agree that in the British system it is still true that “a priest of the Church of England is in a very different position from a priest of the Roman Catholic Church” (162) or a minister of any other religion.

In a famous case of 1860, a Catholic priest was convicted for contempt of court after he had invoked the privilege of confession not to disclose from whom he had received a stolen watch. Today, Hill believes that as a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights, Britain should extend the confessional privilege to all religions, although Grout disagrees.

Norway and Sweden

In Norway and Sweden the national Lutheran churches both retain auricular confession as a possibility, as did Martin Luther (1483–1546) himself, although it is not mandatory and, as in the Church of England, is not frequent. In Norway, but not in Sweden, Lutheran laypersons may also hear confessions, rather than pastors only.

When confession occurs, ecclesiastical law mandates that what the penitent told should not be disclosed to anybody, including secular authorities. In Norway, this was also a provision of the Criminal Code until 2021, although according to the chapter in the Hill-Thompson book written by Andreas Heriksen Aarflot it was unclear whether the same rules applied also to laypersons who heard confessions or to pastors only.

There were, however, exceptions as the protection of confession did not apply in cases of very serious crimes, such as homicide, rape, or high treason, and the Norwegian Church itself in 2019 stated that in cases of sexual abuse the duty of confidentiality relating to confession is not unconditional and pastors should respect “current [state] regulations.”

In Sweden, breaching the seal of the Lutheran confessional was a capital offence until 1889. The Church of Sweden was disestablished in 2000, with the consequence that pastors who breach the duty of confidentiality with respect to confessions are now punished by the church but not by the state.

Even after the child abuse scandals, the Church of Sweden maintains that priests should not report to the authorities the content of confession, although they should report information obtained outside of the confessional context. Since confession is rare, courts of law in Sweden, as in Norway, did not have the opportunity so far to test how the internal rules of the Church interact with the mandatory report provisions of the state.

Ireland

Ireland is one of the countries where child abuse scandals involving the Catholic clergy have deeply transformed the religious landscape. Even before independence, some local judges had recognized the inviolability of Catholic confession. After independence, the matter became political, as stating emphatically that the Catholic confession was protected meant for some judges expressing their repudiation of the British past and their persuasion that Ireland was now a Catholic country.

As Stephen Farrell explains in his chapter of the Hill-Thompson book, Irish judges were less keen to extend the protection to other religions. One example is the 2001 *Johnson* case, where a judge ruled that auditing in the Church of

Scientology was not protected, based on the quite Catholic argument that there was no evidence that Scientology taught that breaching the confidentiality of auditing would “lead to some kind of eternal punishment” (207).

All this changed with the pedophile priests crisis. In 2015, the Children First Act became “the first instance of the Irish legislature directly legislating in a way that precludes a priest from relying in any way on the seal of the confession,” although it was limited to instances of child sexual abuse (215–16). The Catholic Church reacted by informing the government that priests would not comply with the provision, regardless of the consequences.

Farrell speculates on possible defenses priests may have based on other laws, and consequences for other religions, although at the time of his writing there were not yet cases decided by Irish courts on the basis of the 2015 law. What was clear was that “the ongoing reception of the seal of the confession by Irish civil law is now more precarious than at any point since independence” (217).

United States

The idea that the laws protecting the secret of confession and other similar religious practices should be abrogated or restricted in scope gained momentum in the United States as well after the scandals of pedophile clergy in the Catholic Church.

Gregory Zubacz, who is both an academic and a Catholic priest with an experience in the child protection committees that were instituted in response to the pedophilia scandals, discusses the American situation in the Thompson-Hill book. Zubacz notes that the protection of confessional privilege was introduced in the United States through civil law, starting from the famous New York *People v Phillips* 1813 case, where a Court of General Sessions allowed a priest who had returned stolen items on behalf of a penitent not to disclose the name of the person who had given him the goods during confession. Interestingly, already in 1813, the court relied on the constitutional principle of freedom of religion rather than on British precedents.

However, the *Phillips* decision was also based on the peculiarities of Catholic confession. In 1817, also in New York, in *People v. Smith* it was decided that a Protestant minister was not equally protected. This led the New York legislature

to pass in 1828 the first American law protecting the priest-penitent privilege for all religions. Between 1828 and 1991, all American states passed similar statutes, and none has been so far repealed. The Supreme Court, starting from the 1876 decision *Totten v. United States*, also upheld the principle that “the confidences of the confessional” are generally protected.

Several American decisions have mentioned the four criteria formulated in 1904 by the well-known American legal scholar John Henry Wigmore (1863–1943) that justify protection of the confessional secret. The parishioner should have made the communication to the minister with the understanding that it would be kept secret; the parties should have regarded confidentiality as essential; the community should regard the relationship “important enough to be ‘sedulously fostered;’” and “the injury caused by disclosing the communications would outweigh its evidentiary value in litigation” (235). However, the third criterium assumes the popularity of religion among the general public, which perhaps cannot be taken for granted today.

Zubacz then examines four cases decided between 2011 and 2018 on the basis of state law and involving child sexual abuse. In Louisiana and Florida, courts maintained that Catholic priests could refuse to disclose details about sexual abuse of children learned in the confessional. Courts in Tennessee and New Hampshire came to the opposite conclusion in two cases involving Baptist pastors. Starting from 2019, legislation making it mandatory for a minister to report to the authorities information about child sexual abuse obtained as part of a clergy-penitent relationship was introduced in both the House and Senate, where it failed almost immediately, and in several states. At the time of Zubacz’s writing, two states had passed laws abrogating or limiting the confessional privilege while in others similar legislation was hotly debated.

Zubacz expresses his concern for “a general erosion of American religious freedom” (221). He is well aware of the crimes perpetrated by pedophile priests, but believes that the child sexual abuse issue may be used as a picklock to destroy the confessional privilege and severely restrict religious liberty in other fields as well.

As a priest, he also complains that the legislation passed in some states and proposed in others would make him a police informant and “the instrument by which the state may work around the penitent’s constitutional right to silence” (240). It would also persuade many potential penitents not to go to confession at

all, “taking away their last and faint hope of the possibility of amending their lives... those who are denied confession will only become worse, sicker, and more diseased” (241).

Zubacz recalls the examples of those the Catholic Church has honored and sometimes canonized as saints for their willingness to suffer persecution and even death rather than revealing the secrets of the confession. They include John Nepomucene (1345–1393) in present-day Czech Republic in the 14th century and Mateo Correa Magallanes (1866–1927) during the Cristero rebellion in Mexico, both canonized; Felipe Císcar Puig (1868–1936) and Fernando Olmedo Reguera (1873–1936), martyrs of the confession in the Spanish Civil War; and Jan Kobyłowicz (d. 1873), who preferred to be deported to Siberia from Ukraine, then a part of the Russian Empire, having been sentenced for a murder he never committed, rather than disclosing what he knew about the case from the confessional.

Zubacz believes that the Supreme Court will eventually decide on the constitutionality of the anti-confession statutes. From his point of view as a Catholic priest, “it is a question of when, not if, the Barque of Peter collides with the dreadnought of the policy of the secular state in the darkness of the night. The Supreme Court will ultimately decide which one will sink” (247).

Archpriest Giorgio Morelli (1943–2021) of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, who was also an academic, sadly passed away while the Hill-Thompson book was being published. His contribution is more of a theological and pastoral nature. He describes confession in the Eastern Orthodox churches as part of a theology of healing, which has both a bodily and a spiritual dimension.

The Orthodox confession, he explains, is a form of spiritual healing, premised on the idea that a priest does not hear confessions as a human being but as “Christ’s instrument”: “the ‘eye,’ the ‘ear’ of the priest is dissolved in the sacramental mystery” (266).

For this reason, Morelli explains, the question of reporting to the authorities, or anybody else, what has been said in confession does not even arise in the Orthodox churches. “In the Orthodox Church, because a priest does not hear confessions personally as the penitent confesses to God, there is nothing that is reportable under mandatory reporting laws however they are formulated” (271).

On the other hand, conversations with parishioners outside of confession should be reported when the law mandates it. The Orthodox Church, Morelli writes, has also been hit by the plague of pedophilia, and “will do all it can morally, ethically and legally to stop abuse,” but “short of breaking the seal of confession” (272).

The final chapter of the Hill-Thompson book is also devoted to the United States and is by Eric Lieberman, a distinguished New York attorney. It is of special importance as the only chapter going beyond the case of Christian confessions—although most other authors also comment that the problem in a contemporary scenario of religious pluralism necessarily involves all religions.

Lieberman starts from the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which both prohibits the establishment of a religion by the government, thus also prohibiting that confession as practiced by one church be more protected than similar practices in other religions, and protects the free exercise of religion from governmental interference. He comments that cases from other countries would have a limited impact in the United States, since “the Free Exercise Clause was an original American concept and invention unlike anything previously known” (282).

The First Amendment is also, Lieberman believes, one of the reasons new religions have been allowed to be born and flourish in the United States more than elsewhere. One such new religion is the Church of Scientology, the subject matter of Lieberman’s chapter. He notes that Scientology is not a mere footnote in the book, since it offers “a unique example of a modern expanding religion whose central practices rely upon highly confidential communications between parishioners and clergy. The structure of the confidential communications in Scientology carries out the principles and beliefs of the religion and its community. Indeed, the Scientology Church’s ability to practice its beliefs relies on the confidentiality of the communications between its parishioners and ministers” (282–83).

The core problem, which Scientology has of course in common with other religions, is that its confidential practices “do not fit traditional Christian patterns” (283), which admittedly the judges who created the American case law on the confessional privilege had in mind. The central practice of Scientology is “auditing,” where a trained minister (auditor) offers spiritual counseling to parishioners, aimed at helping them to overcome their problems and increase

their abilities. The parishioners are supposed to tell the auditor about their “withholds,” i.e., acts against themselves or others likely to damage their spiritual progress. This is a confessional practice that has hundreds of different specialized versions—for example, Scientology Marriage Counseling for marital problems—, and can only function if parishioners are “secure in their understanding that their communications will remain absolutely secure and will not be disclosed” (286). In fact, a parishioner may “disclose information of a highly personal and confidential nature. In other words, a parishioner may tell his [sic] minister secrets known to no other. Such information could reveal immoral or unethical acts, or fall within the full gambit of unwanted emotions, events, considerations and histories” (288). Hence, confidentiality is essential.

In this respect, the practice has analogies with Christian confession. However, unlike the latter, Scientology auditing requires that the auditor takes notes, which are kept in a special folder called “Precogn Folder” (indicating that the parishioner had to move to the more advanced spiritual state of “clear”) and maintained under lock and key under high security conditions. Since Scientology believes in reincarnation, when parishioners die their folders are stored for their “return in the next lifetime” (290). Also, auditors are supervised by Case Supervisors, who have no contacts with the audited parishioners but have access to their Preclear Folders where they place their written instructions intended for the auditors. Part of the ministerial team is also an Ethics Officer, who guides the parishioner to resolve ethical issues when needed.

Do these differences invalidate the application to Scientology auditing of the principles American courts have recognized as protecting Christian confession? To answer this question, according to Lieberman, two premises are needed. First, while most cases about the confessional privilege have been decided according to common law, the landmark 1959 decision *Mullen* by the District of Columbia Circuit “and its consequences inevitably mandate recognition of the privilege as constitutionally based” (294). To reason otherwise would imply that the privilege applies “only to certain denominations or practices and not to others” (295).

Second, Lieberman argues that the elements making Scientology’s confessional practices different from Catholic confession are not unique. It is not true, in particular, that only in Scientology “confession” is not a one-on-one practice but involves more than two persons. As early as 1917, in *Reutkemeier v.*

Nolte, the Supreme Court of Iowa extended the confessional privilege to a “confession of sin” made by a Presbyterian woman to her pastor and three congregational elders. In 1994, the Supreme Court of Utah concluded that communications made to obtain ecclesiastical guidance to a Latter-day Saint bishop did not lose their privileged status because the bishop later transmitted them for review to a Stake (the equivalent of a diocese) High Council Court. Other decisions reached the same conclusion, with a federal appeals court stating in 1990 that excluding from privilege confidential communications that reached more than one minister of the same religious body would risk “restricting the privilege to Roman Catholic penitential communications” only, which would be constitutionally impermissible (301).

It is also the case, Lieberman notes, that a solid Supreme Court case law mandates that the state cannot interfere in how religious bodies decide to self-organize themselves. The conclusion is that it is “inconceivable under these cases for a United States court to order a minister to disclose a privileged communication contrary to the rules and governance of his [sic] church, even in the unlikely event that the parishioner attempts to waive the privilege” (305).

The case of a penitent, a murder suspect, who consented to the use in court of a confession made to a Catholic priest in jail and recorded without the priest’s knowledge, was decided by the U.S. Court of Appeal for the Ninth Circuit in 1997 in *Mockaitis v. Hardleroad*. The court concluded that, the penitent’s consent notwithstanding, the confession cannot be used as evidence, and any such use would violate the religious liberty of the priest and the Catholic Church. It is true that the case was decided under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which was later declared unconstitutional as applied to the states, but Lieberman believes that the general principles affirmed by *Mockaitis* derive from the Constitution rather than from the RFRA, and their interpretation remains valid.

If confessional communications to ministers are protected without regard to the religion that received them, nor to how many ministers accessed them, or to whether they were written down and preserved or not, and on these matters religions are free to self-organize themselves as they deem fit, then the conclusion about Scientology is inescapable, Lieberman argues. “Scientology’s central practice of auditing meets all the necessary requirements for full protection in every state and in the federal courts under the constitutional standards” (307).

Auditing “ultimately employs more than one minister,” but “that characteristic is necessitated by the beliefs and structure of the religion, as in numerous denominations other than Scientology.” Just like a Catholic priest, “a Scientology auditor is prohibited as a matter of faith and doctrine from revealing what is said or written in an auditing session even if a congregant attempts to ‘waive’ his [sic] privilege contrary to his religious covenant never to do so.” Auditors should be protected just as Catholic priests are. “At the end of the day, all religions and faiths must be treated equally with recognition of the various forms and practices with which Americans practice their faith” (307).

Some Conclusions

The book edited by Hill and Thompson is the most comprehensive treatment to date of a crucial issue: whether the legal statutes protecting ministers of all religions from disclosing what they have learned from parishioners within the context of a clergy-penitent relationship will, and should, survive the present assault by those who want to abrogate them in the wake of the pedophile Catholic priests scandals.

I agree with Lieberman’s conclusion in the last chapter, that the central religious practice of Scientology (and presumably similar practices in other religions and movements too), will likely be granted by American courts the same protection they have offered to the Christian confession.

However, Lieberman does not address the issue of the introduction of exceptions to the confessional privilege in cases of child sexual abuse that are now parts of the laws of Ireland and several Australian and American states and are being promoted elsewhere. While the protest against religious authorities who covered up cases of sexual abuse is understandable, I also agree with those who argue that these statutes open a breach in the wall protecting the confessional privilege, which may lead to other breaches until the wall will collapse altogether.

These issues, in fact, go beyond confession. As a sociologist, I am reminded of the famous 1906 article by Georg Simmel (1858–1918) (Simmel 1906), which included many useful observations but ultimately, perhaps because it was often misread, fueled a culture of mistrust and suspicion against all religious (and non-religious) organizations maintaining secrets.

As Wouter Hanegraaff demonstrated in his *Esotericism and the Academy*, the suspicion against secrets is as old as Protestantism. Secrets, the early Protestants believed, were a feature of pagan religions, used to hide immorality, and they had passed into Roman Catholicism. Later, Enlightenment philosophers and Marxist ideologists saw the secret as something usually hiding anti-liberal or right-wing conspiracies against progress or socialism (Hanegraaff 2012).

American historian David Brion Davis (1927–2019), in a landmark article that he published in 1960, argued that this century-old distrust of the secret led American Protestant to a militant and sometimes violent opposition in the 19th century against three secrets they regarded as immoral and sinister. They were the secrets of the Masonic lodges, of the Catholic confession, and of the Mormon temple rituals (Davis 1960).

Later, more civility prevailed, and society seemed to accept from scholars that secret is intrinsic to spirituality, and religion cannot perform its role without the confidentiality of certain practices, which the laws should protect and guarantee as part of religious liberty. In the late 20th and 21st centuries, however, terrorist attacks perpetrated using or misusing the name of Islam, the pedophile priests crisis in the Catholic Church, and campaigns against “cults” revamped old theories that religious secrets are something sinister and hide illegal activities.

The Internet also created an illusion of total democratization and openness. Jesus said in *Matthew* 10:27 “What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs,” which was mistakenly interpreted to claim that in Christianity there should be no secrets. It seems that today the Internet is telling us “What was whispered in your ear, post on your blog or on Facebook immediately.”

Perhaps students should be taught courses using both the book by Hill and Thompson and David Ventimiglia’s 2019 textbook *Copyrighting God* (Ventimiglia 2019). The fashionable but false claim examined by Ventimiglia, that nothing published by a religion should be protected by copyright because religion should be free to be used and even misused by everybody, is based on the same rationale as the claim that nothing in a religion should be secret or confidential. Not coincidentally, Ventimiglia’s book also discusses anti-copyright claims used against the Church of Scientology, although I am not sure I agree with his conclusions.

My personal opinion about the confession controversy is that laws affording a special protection to the Catholic Church's sacrament of confession or its equivalents in certain Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches will probably not survive the pedophile clergy crisis, nor a Western world where, in one country after the other, active members of the traditional Christian churches are becoming part of a minority.

Italy may be a special case because, as mentioned earlier, the protection of confession is part of a Concordat it signed not with the Italian Catholic Church, but with the Vatican as a foreign state, making it an international treaty. Other limited geographical exceptions may also survive. In general, however, special laws protecting the confessional practice of a church because it used to include the majority of a country's population may become a thing of the past sooner than some religionists believe.

At the same time, both constitutional principles and international conventions about religious liberty will probably continue to be applied to recognize that religious practices for which an absolute confidentiality is essential, such as the Catholic or Eastern Orthodox confession or Scientology's auditing, should remain protected and survive what the co-editor of the book calls the "moral panic" about child sexual abuse (58).

The expression "moral panic" should be qualified, as both Thompson and the undersigned agree that child sexual abuse by members of the clergy is a horrific reality. The moral panic operates when legitimate concerns are misused to demolish one of the foundations of religious liberty, the confessional privilege.

Churches, on the other hand, can and should contribute to defusing the moral panic by addressing the sexual abuse issues with more honesty and transparency than some of them exhibited in the past. I believe they should also accept that old statutes singling out "national" denominations for special protection will disappear (almost) everywhere, and focus on advocating for religious liberty and a confessional privilege for all religions.

However, absolute transparency is a myth. As the Hill-Thompson book demonstrates, the confessional privilege does not protect only, and perhaps not even mostly, the religions and the ministers. It protects the sinners, i.e., all of us, who should not be deprived of the comforting certainty that there is a place in the world where we can talk freely and acknowledge our shortcomings and

wrongdoings, with confidence that what we say will not be reported to the police officer, the tax collector, or the prosecutor.

Without these safe havens, be they operated by the Catholic Church or the Armenian Orthodox Church or the Church of Scientology, not only will criminals lose what may well be their last opportunity to reform, but we will all lose one of the few opportunities remaining in this world to look safely and honestly at ourselves, our past mistakes, and our fears for the future.

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Research Notes

Emic Perspectives on the Tai Ji Men Case

Annie Cheng

FOWPAL (Federation of World Peace and Love), London, UK
yawen4049@gmail.com

Liu Yin-Chun

FOWPAL (Federation of World Peace and Love), The Hague, Netherlands
weiss07@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: On May 5–6, 2002, the Institute for the Study of Freedom of Religion or Belief (ISFORB) of the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven, Belgium, organized a conference on the theme “Freedom for Us or for All? (Non-)Religious Communities and FORB Rights.” In the first session of the conference, two *dizi* (disciples) of Tai Ji Men presented an emic perspective on the conflict that since 1996 has opposed their movement to certain Taiwanese authorities. Although both college-educated, they work in the corporate world, one in a bank and the other in a biotechnological industry. They analyzed the Tai Ji Men case not as scholars, but from a personal point of view derived from their experience in the movement and in its cultural and peace education activities.

KEYWORDS: Tai Ji Men, Hong Tao-Tze, Tai Ji Men Case, New Religious Movements in Taiwan, Religious Freedom in Taiwan.

1. *The Tai Ji Men Case in Taiwan*, by Annie Cheng

The Tai Ji Men case in Taiwan has now been studied by a considerable number of scholars in different countries (see e.g. Jacobsen 2020; Chen, Huang, and Wu 2021; Tsai 2021, 2022; Chen 2022; Introvigne 2022). Rather than summarizing their findings, I would like to offer an insider’s perspective. I live in the United Kingdom, have worked for twenty years in the banking industry, and have been a *dizi*, i.e., a disciple, of Tai Ji Men for twenty-six years.

In addition to practicing Tai Ji Men Qigong on a daily basis, I have been involved in some of the many cultural activities and peace missions led by Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, the leader (*shifu*) of Tai Ji Men in several countries, including at the United Nations in Vienna.

My topic, within the context of a discussion on freedom of religion or belief (FORB), is the FORB problems Tai Ji Men has encountered in Taiwan. As we all know, FORB is protected and promoted by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Declaration and the Covenants have been adopted by most of the countries around the world.

Usually, when we look for FORB violations, we look at non-democratic countries. The common impression is that democratic states have legislation and policies in place to protect human rights and FORB. While this is true, how the government agencies enforce the laws vary. Indeed, the effective protection of FORB is a good indicator telling us how democratic a country is.

In a letter dated July 19, 1789, to a French priest called Arnold, Thomas Jefferson (1743–1796), who later became the 3rd President of the United States, famously said that “the execution of the laws is more important than the making [of] them” (Jefferson 1853, 82). The problem Jefferson indicated when he was living in France during the French Revolution is universal, and also applies to Taiwan.

In Taiwan, freedom of religion was stipulated in the Constitution. The government incorporated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights into domestic law in 2009. A National Human Rights Commission was established in 2020. In Jefferson’s terms, the “making of the laws” seems appropriate, and even fascinating. But what about “the execution of the laws”?

Tai Ji Men is an ancient *menpai* (similar to a school) of qigong, martial arts, and self-cultivation. Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy was established in 1966 by Dr. Hong, and developed both in Taiwan and internationally. In parallel, Dr. Hong’s peace activities reached more than one hundred countries around the world, and involved presidents, prime ministers, academics, and religious leaders from all continents.

Unfair Investigation

In 1996, Tai Ji Men was caught in the crossfire of a politically motivated crackdown on religious and spiritual movements accused, rightly or wrongly, not to have supported the candidate of the ruling party (who eventually won) in the presidential elections. In December 1996, a Prosecutor called Hou Kuan-Jen led a team of hundreds of armed police and officers of the Prosecutor's Office to raid both Tai Ji Men academies and the private homes of several *dizi*. Of course, the raids only confirmed that Tai Ji Men is a law-abiding organization, and does not possess illegal drug or weapons. The use of armed agents to raid a peaceful spiritual organization was clearly disproportionate (for details of the case see Tan, Ding, and Huang 2016; Chao et al. 2021).

In addition, Prosecutor Hou also brought with him several reporters and camera operators from the main Taiwanese media. The raids became a show staged by Hou, who was shouting around to show his authority, for the benefit of the media. This was totally opposite to what is expected from the judicial system in a democratic country. Those who work for the state should strictly follow the principle of non-disclosure of information obtained in the course of investigations. This is to protect the reputation, privacy, and safety of the defendants, suspects, victims, and other litigants, and to ensure the defendants' right to a fair trial in line with the principle of presumption of innocence, ensure a smooth investigation procedure, and make it easier to discover the truth.

On the contrary, Prosecutor Hou converted the raids into media shows, and continued to spread untrue messages to the media in an attempt to manipulate the public opinion and influence the trials.

Abuse and Violence During Detention

Prosecutor Hou arrested Dr. Hong, his wife, and two *dizi*. They were brought into the District Prosecutor's Office for interrogation. When the *dizi* refused to cooperate with Prosecutor Hou by accusing Dr. Hong, they were immediately locked up and not allowed to see anybody. During a long period of detention, Prosecutor Hou only interrogated these disciples (*dizi*) a few times. On one occasion, he brought in a detainee's family member as a leverage to threaten the detainee to cooperate and tell what Hou wanted to hear.

All such maneuvers violated the principles of due process and fair prosecution. In fact, as the judges later ascertained, Prosecutor Hou, when the defendants refused to tell him what he expected, even fabricated false transcripts of their testimonies.

Among the accusations Hou raised against Dr. Hong there was the one of “raising goblins.” The accusation was as bizarre as it was false. It was also against proper procedure and rules of evidence. Even more bizarre was that somebody might be prosecuted for “raising goblins” a few years before the beginning of the 21st century. It was something unique in the annals of contemporary law.

Tax Discrimination

As mentioned earlier, Tai Ji Men is a qigong, martial art, and self-cultivation group. As such, the Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy is a member of various martial arts and other associations, including the Taipei Martial Arts Association, the Chinese Martial Arts Association, the Chinese Qigong Association, the Chinese Taoism Association, and the Taipei Taoism Association. There has never been a case in Taiwan where masters of martial arts schools have been taxed for accepting their disciples’ appreciation tokens or gifts. In addition, among the tens of thousands of religious communities in Taiwan, not a single master or leader has been taxed for accepting contributions or donations from followers.

Since the inception of Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy in 1966, the nature of the academy has never changed, and there has been no tax issue before Prosecutor Hou intervened. Only for six years, from 1991 to 1996, Tai Ji Men has had to face taxation issues, and this is entirely due to Prosecutor Hou’s ill-founded charges (on the tax case, in addition to Tan, Ding, and Huang 2016, Jacobsen 2020, and Chao et al. 2021, see also *Bitter Winter* 2021).

Prosecutor Hou wanted to add tax evasion to his list of charges against Dr. Hong and Tai Ji Men. Unable to find any evidence, he summoned a tax officer from the National Taxation Bureau (NTB) to give a false statement. As Hou had requested, the NTB officer stated that Tai Ji Men is a cram school (i.e., a short-term educational institution), that the gifts received by Dr. Hong from his disciples were in fact tuition fees, taxable as such, and that by not having paid taxes on them Dr. Hong and Tai Ji Men were guilty of tax evasion.

Prosecutor Hou then offered the statement as evidence for his allegation of tax evasion. The NTB simply copied the amount indicated by Prosecutor Hou in the indictment and issued tax bills, without fulfilling its statutory duty of investigation to clarify the underlying taxation base. The competent authority for cram schools, the Ministry of Education, clarified that Tai Ji Men is not a cram school twice, in official letters of 1997 and 1999, and repeated the same statement again at a public hearing in the Legislative Yuan in 2000. Zhang Sheng-He, the then Director of the NTB Taipei, and Yang Chon-Hua, the then Director of the NTB Central Area were both present at that public hearing. In fact, the NTB itself agreed that Tai Ji Men is not a cram school during a court trial in 2004, and said this again in 2012 and 2013. However, the NTB still insisted on issuing tax bills, and never admitted its mistakes, profiting of a system characterized by a lack of accountability and the absence of a proper rectification mechanism.

Speaking at a press conference on December 29, 2021, Huang Kun-Guang, a retired tax auditor, pointed out that the Tai Ji Men tax case should not have been started in the first place because the Prosecutor did not find any evidence of illegal activity or cash flow. The NTB conjured tax bills from thin air without fulfilling its statutory duty of auditing or examination. Such taxation is illegal and also a form of state violence, as it demonstrates that the NTB is allowed to impose taxes on its discretion without evidence or examination (Amicarelli 2022).

The Administrative Appeal Committee of the Ministry of Finance ruled in favor of Tai Ji Men five times, and requested the NTB to conduct an appropriate investigation. In 2002, the NTB finally agreed to carry out a survey to clarify the nature of the monetary gifts to Dr. Hong. The NTB selected a sample and sent out 206 questionnaires. All 206 responses confirmed the nature of the monetary donations as gifts.

However, Zheng Sheng-He, the then Director of NTB Taipei and Hsu Yu-Zhe, the then Director of NTB Central Area, concealed the evidence and prevented the interested parties from accessing the survey results. Both Directors even forged responses. In 2009, Ling Zhon-Yuan, the then Director of NTB Taipei, in her response to the Control Yuan, forged response files and claimed that none of the 206 responses indicated that the monetary donations were gifts, which was the contrary of the truth.

It was not the only irregularity. In 2003, Zhang Sen-Her, the then Director of NTB Taipei, backdated an official letter to cover the Bureau's misconduct in

seizing and selling properties of Dr. Hong's wife. An Administrative Court confirmed the NTB's misbehavior in 2005. The NTB Taipei then refunded the money it had obtained from the selling of the illegally appropriated assets, but called this a "tax refund," which was unjustified and not reflecting the nature of the payment. Also, the NTB refused to pay the incurred interests. This incident demonstrates that, when the NTB claimed that Tai Ji Men owed taxes to the government, it was in fact the government that owed money to Dr. Hong and his wife.

In 2007, after more than ten years of litigation, and three levels of trials, the Supreme Court acquitted the Tai Ji Men defendants and stated that there had been no fraud, no tax owed, and no violation of the Taxation Code. However, the story did not end there. The NTB refused to follow the ruling and to revoke all the illegal tax bills, maintaining the bill for the year 1992 based on a technicality. In 2020, the NTB colluded with the Administrative Enforcement Agency to auction off property of the Tai Ji Men's master, which after two auctions were unsuccessful was subsequently confiscated by the state.

Police Force Was Deployed to Silence Dissident Voices

On September 19, 2020, a group of police officers arrested one of the demonstrators who protested in Zubei for the Tai Ji Men case, Ms. Huang A. (Fautré 2020). She was simply standing on a roadside and holding a poster. She had packed her bag and was ready to leave when the police officers approached her. The police officers did not know what was on her poster, but they arrested her at any rate because they had received instructions from their boss. The police claimed that Lee Gui-Fen, the Executive Officer of the Administrative Enforcement Agency, had accused Huang of intimidation, defamation, and intrusion of privacy. Actually, Huang is a harmless, short 60-year-old lady. She was detained and interrogated before being sent to the Prosecutor's office in late night.

This incident happened when the Enforcement Agency was about to distribute bonuses to the bureaucrats involved in the auction. The timing brought forth the suspicion that the government was trying to suppress dissent and a growing support for Tai Ji Men.

Eventually, Huang was acquitted as the prosecutor confirmed that her behavior was within the scope of freedom of speech and expression, but her mental and physical health were severely impacted. She was a victim of the power the Administrative Enforcement Agency exerts in Taiwan.

No One Was Held Accountable

We have seen that both Prosecutor Hou and the NTB committed several breaches of the laws. Did they suffer any consequence?

The Control Yuan, the inspective arm of Taiwan's government, indicated in its 2002 report eight major violations of law by Prosecutor Hou, including failure to guarantee confidentiality during an investigation, illegal searches, unlawful freezing of assets, overstepping his authority, violation of the Code of Criminal Procedure, and so on. The Control Yuan referred the report to the Ministry of Justice for disciplinary action.

In 2009, the Control Yuan carried out another investigation on the NTB in relation to their misconducts for handling the Tai Ji Men case. The report listed seven instances of serious misconduct.

Unfortunately, despite the Control Yuan's thorough reports, the NTB did not take any action. On the opposite, under various pretexts, they continued to protect their officers and to persecute Tai Ji Men.

All this confirms that, while on the surface the Tai Ji Men case is depicted as a tax dispute, the underlying truth is that the government deploys various administrative tools to oppress Tai Ji Men's FORB, and cover the misconducts of its bureaucrats.

One can ask why, after more than twenty-five years, we continue to protest. The answer is in two words: love and conscience. Our fight for justice is not for us but for the people of Taiwan. Personally, I love Taiwan, and I want to help it match its title of democracy beacon in Asia. Only when the government will be willing to admit the mistakes and rectify the injustices, will this title of democracy beacon in Asia be fully deserved. The Tai Ji Men case is now well-known outside Taiwan's borders, and widely perceived as a test for Taiwan's democracy (see *Bitter Winter* 2021).

As for us, we will continue our fight until justice prevails, because we believe injustice to one is injustice to all.

2. *The Interaction Between Tax Justice and FORB in the Tai Ji Men Case*, by Liu Yin-Chun

Like my colleague Annie Cheng, I will also offer an insider's perspective on the Tai Ji Men case. I am the managing director of a biotechnology company in the Netherlands, and a Tai Ji Men *dizi* (disciple). Actually, I started learning kung fu from the Tai Ji Men leader, Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, when I was nine. I have learned in Tai Ji Men that, if we want to help ourselves and our physical and psychological health, we should also help others and the world in general. I also reconnected with traditional Chinese culture, and studied topics such as Tai Ji and the balance between yin and yang. I then went to Leiden University, and applied the yin-yang balance model rooted in Taoism to literary analysis. Before the Netherlands, I have also lived in Russia and Israel, and have tried to apply there the Tai Ji Men philosophy to problems arising from difficult situations of political turmoil.

As is typical of many *dizi*, I have also devoted time to volunteer work to promote what we call a culture of love, peace, and conscience through international cultural exchanges. Dr. Hong has visited more than one hundred countries promoting these activities, and *dizi* who have accompanied him, including myself, have had some exciting opportunities not only to visit faraway places, but also to learn the art of dialogue with people of different cultures and religions.

In 2017, together with Dr. Hong and other *dizi*, I visited the Kingdom of Bahrain and met with leaders from different religions to discuss religious diversity and coexistence. We met with leaders representing Islam, Hinduism, the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and other religions.

In his opening speech at the Bahrain event, Dr. Hong stated:

Looking up to the sky, one learns from the broad, selfless sky and learns to care for all creatures; looking at the earth, one learns from the earth's unlimited tolerance and earns to accept all matters. The ability for humans to accept and agree with the different ways of expressing love establishes peace within the self and marks the beginning of peace with others as well (Hong 2017).

Here was, I thought, a lesson on acceptance and tolerance of our differences.

The government of the Kingdom of Bahrain has been interested for many years in Dr. Hong's ideas about conscience education. In his visit of 2017, Dr. Hong reiterated that forming and educating the conscience, as the moral compass of every citizen, is the way to solve the problems of Bahrain's society, as it is the way to solve the problems of humanity in general.

Tai Ji Men's efforts for conscience education and its contribution to spread traditional Chinese culture internationally have been acknowledged in Taiwan as well. Four different elected Taiwanese Presidents have praised Tai Ji Men. Yet, at the same time, the same Taiwanese governments that praise Tai Ji Men for its benevolent activities have kept harassing it through ill-funded tax bills. This is the paradox of the Tai Ji Men case, and the contrast is really pathetic.

When the Tai Ji Men case started, I was 12 and lived in Taiwan with my parents. I have very vivid recollections of what happened, and my parents were among those investigated. I am thus in a position to offer a personal testimony, as well as some elements of analysis of the case based on my experience at the university and later as a manager.

As Annie Cheng has explained, in 1996 Tai Ji Men was among the targets of a politically motivated purge against spiritual movements accused of not supporting Taiwan's ruling party (Introvigne 2022, 87). Dr. Hong, his wife, and two *dizi* were arrested. Many other *dizi* were investigated, and they were at risk of being arrested, too.

My parents had a friend who worked in the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau, and he told my parents that they were on the investigation list. At the age of 12, for the first time in my life, I learned about persecution of spiritual minorities and state violence. It was a traumatic experience. First of all, the media were full of fabricated news I knew were not true. Second, we did not know whether Dr. Hong, his wife and the detained *dizi* were safe and sound. My parents and I just could not believe such a thing could happen in a democratic society like Taiwan. I was reading the media even if I was very young, and I realized the government was being criticized for criminal cases it was not able to solve. The crackdown on spiritual minorities became a way to shift the attention of the public opinion.

My parents and I also became very familiar with the name of the Prosecutor,

Hou Kuan-Jen. We discussed often how he was violating the principle that a pending investigation should be kept secret. He manipulated the media and the public opinion, and tried to create an image of Tai Ji Men as a mysterious, evil “cult.” The famous, or infamous, accusation that Dr. Hong was “raising goblins” was of course ridiculous, but was part of this campaign.

I have painful memories of that period. Back then, the Internet was not as developed as it is today. Television and the print media were the major information sources for most Taiwanese. For this reason, when Tai Ji Men was demonized by the Prosecutor and the media, tens of thousands of Tai Ji Men *dizi* were also vilified and discriminated. I can still remember how at that time when I was dressed in my Tai Ji Men uniform and walked through the streets, there were always people looking at me and commenting negatively.

In 2007, the Taiwanese Supreme Court found all the defendants in the Tai Ji Men case not guilty of fraud and tax evasion. In 2009, all the defendants received national compensation for unlawful imprisonment. We thought the Tai Ji Men case had finally been put to rest, but the National Taxation Bureau completely ignored the court’s ruling and kept issuing ill-founded tax bills, before finally transferring the case for compulsory enforcement. This led to the auctioning-off Tai Ji Men’s property in 2020 (for the context and the legal background of the case, see Tan, Ding, and Huang 2016; Chao et al. 2021; for a history of the tax case, see Jacobsen 2020).

All Tai Ji Men *dizi* know this story by heart. Several international scholars who have studied the Tai Ji Men case also know it. However, there is a question I would like both to ask and to tentatively answer. Why did the National Taxation Bureau go on with its tax case after it was repeatedly told by courts of law that Dr. Hong and Tai Ji Men were not guilty of tax evasion? Why did a national agency ignore the law and confiscate property illegally?

The answer, I believe, is in a system that has existed throughout Taiwan’s history, the tax bonus system. During the Martial Law period, sedition and espionage laws created a system of awards and bonuses. The government used hefty bonuses to motivate people to report espionage. This system may be explained by the international tensions but led to numerous wrongful charges.

The bonus system then went beyond espionage, and rewarded government’s bureaucrats as well. Today, the Ministry of Finance still budgets for reward

bonuses to motivate tax officials to achieve their performance goals. Not surprisingly, this results in many unfounded or malicious tax investigations. Making the system even more dangerous is that it is very difficult to prosecute tax officers and have them sanctioned even when it becomes clear that they made serious mistakes.

The Tai Ji Men case is a clear example of the dangers of the tax bonus system (Fautré 2021a, 2021b). It is also a case whether this system interfered with freedom of religion or belief (FORB). An interesting feature of the case is that Tai Ji Men consistently refused proposals to settle with the National Taxation Bureau. Even when tax bills are patently ill-founded, many Taiwanese taxpayers accept to settle, because settling is less expensive than continuing to fight.

Tai Ji Men refused this logic, as it believes that the system should be changed. Tai Ji Men *dizi* have invested considerable energy and resources in denouncing Taiwan's unjust tax system and supporting other victims. Tai Ji Men has not only demanded that its case be solved. It has asked that tax laws be reformed, and taxpayers' human rights be respected. It has demanded reform not for Tai Ji Men only, but for all citizens of Taiwan.

Tai Ji Men perceive it as battle for FORB, human rights, and democracy. Taiwan has a rather positive democratic image internationally. Taiwanese are glad and thankful for this, but at the same time they are aware of the risk that issues of human rights abuses, which do exist in Taiwan as they do in other democratic countries, may be easily neglected.

One of the main teachings of Tai Ji Men I have learned since I was a child is that we all make mistakes. As a person of conscience, if I make a mistake I need to admit it, apologize, and rectify it. As a young girl, I expected, perhaps naively, that civil servants would do the same. The Tai Ji Men case taught me that unfortunately there are governmental officers, such as Prosecutor Hou and some bureaucrats of the National Taxation Bureau, who would never admit their mistakes, let alone rectify them, even when they are evidenced by courts of justice and by Taiwan's national control authority, the Control Yuan. This is a problem not only for them or for Tai Ji Men. I wonder how much damage they have done to Taiwan's democracy. The daily human rights abuses caused by politics and taxation will one day be judged by the international society and harm Taiwan's image.

As someone who is both Taiwanese and Dutch, I often wonder what the Tai Ji Men case would have been like if it had happened in the Netherlands. I do not idealize the Netherlands, and I know every country has its own challenges in its legal and social systems. Yet, it seems to me that the Netherlands is more protective of FORB. It is part of the Dutch tradition, and I never felt unsafe in the Netherlands because of my spirituality or belief.

Second, I compared the Dutch Taxation Bureau to Taiwan's National Taxation Bureau, and the comparison is not favorable for the Taiwanese agency. The Dutch Tax and Customs Service is based on the principle of service. After all, its official name is Belastingdienst, and "dienst" means service. The taxation officials are meant to serve the public. Of course, practice does not always follow principle but my experience tells me that taxpayers' rights are taken more seriously in the Netherlands than in Taiwan.

It is also the case that in the Netherlands governments are less protective of their bureaucrats and more ready to admit that they make mistakes. A good subject of study in this respect is the so-called "Dutch childcare benefit scandal." For those not familiar with it, the name may be misleading, because it may indicate frauds perpetrated by parents who obtained childcare benefits they were not entitled to. Actually, it was the other way round. It was the Tax and Customs Administration that, based on what was proved to be an incorrect interpretation of the law (ten Seldam and Brenninkmeijer 2021), accused some 26,000 parents of having made fraudulent childcare benefit claims, and asked them to pay back the money they had received. Thousand of families were severely hit by these requests.

The case shows a similarity with the actions of the National Taxation Bureau in Taiwan. However, the consequences were very much different. When it became clear that tax bureaucrats had misinterpreted the law and violated the rights of the parents, the Dutch Parliament promptly created an investigating committee. In a few months, this committee produced a report that concluded that the parents had not committed any fraud and the tax bureaucrats had been wrong. Since he was responsible for the behavior of the bureaucrats, by then the Minister of Finances had already resigned. After the publication of the report, the government itself collectively resigned. The Dutch voters appreciated this behavior, and the 2021 elections gave the majority to the same coalition and a government was formed in 2022 with the same Prime Minister. The parents who

had been affected were indemnified and compensated (Mackor 2022).

We can say that serious wrongdoings committed by bureaucrats of the Tax and Customs Office were investigated and rectified within a reasonable period of time (Zijlstra 2021). The government assumed responsibility for the behavior of the bureaucrats and resigned. The parents who had been unjustly accused and sanctioned were indemnified.

In contrast, in the Tai Ji Men case the Taiwanese system consistently protected the bureaucrats who had breached the law. They were never punished, they continued enjoying their ill-acquired tax bonuses, and property illegally seized was not returned to Tai Ji Men. Nobody assumed responsibility for their wrongdoings. They never admitted their mistakes, and the case is still not solved after more than twenty-five years. The contrast with the Dutch case is obvious. In both cases, injustices were perpetrated, but the Dutch system showed the capacity of rectifying its own mistakes, and the Taiwanese system did not.

The Tai Ji Men case is just the tip of an iceberg. There are many similar cases in Taiwan. Definitely, tax justice and FORB need to be better affirmed and protected if Taiwan wants to be perceived as a full-fledged democracy.

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