

**Speech by Jean-Loup Adénor and Timothée de Rauglaudre**

“Covid-19, revealing the mutations of the phenomenon of cults”

*Authors of the book “Le nouveau péril sectaire” (the new peril of cults), to be published by Robert Laffont on October 14*

**Introduction: Covid-19, an opportunity for gurus**

When we set out to investigate cults’ undue influence in late 2019-early 2020, we obviously did not know that we would be experiencing a global pandemic. For a year, we tried to understand how the landscape of cults would look today and wondered if the State still had the political will and the means to control this phenomenon. We have collected the words of dozens of victims of the influence of cults, in about fifteen different movements. In the course of our work, the impact of Covid-19 on the phenomenon of cults became obvious. This work has enabled us to understand why the changes in the phenomenon of cults are particularly well suited to the characteristics of the pandemic, particularly in three areas: the uberisation of the phenomenon, its refocusing on health and well-being issues and the existential anguish of the end of the world. In our opinion, Covid-19 has not radically transformed the phenomenon of cults but has, rather, revealed pre-existing mutations and exacerbated them.

**1/ Internet and the networking of the phenomenon of cults**

The Covid-19 crisis has reinforced the role of the Internet as a privileged access point for new cultism/sectarianism. Some gurus, especially those in the health sector like Thierry Casasnovas, were very quick to capitalise on the fear of the virus. Jehovah's Witnesses have also been seen to be building up their online proselytising. The Universal Welcome Centre or Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, of Brazilian origin and installed in some thirty French cities, was watched closely.

We have to take into account the effect of surprise that occurred during the first lockdown. People hate the unknown: We were afraid because we didn't know about the disease yet, we were confined to our homes in front of the computer. On the other side of the screen, these charlatans had a very reassuring discourse and a solution to everything.

Some 3.0 gurus even became closer to each other, like the Tal Schaller-Casasnovas-Crèvecoeur fringe, and organised common events, pooling their communities. From the beginning of the crisis, the discourse was anti-medicine, anti-system, anti-Big Pharma, but an unexpected and disturbing convergence took place. Prior to the health crisis, conspiracy and alternative health theories were two relatively separate worlds. Today, there is a clear convergence between alternative health discourses and all the major conspiracy theories. So, it is no longer just a criticism of Big Pharma - a term used to refer to the pharmaceutical industry as a whole - but, rather, purely conspiracy, even esoteric rhetoric. These gurus may be hippie-like, but that doesn't stop them from evoking a pedo-satanist plot (QAnon).

And too bad if their respective speeches are not really coherent. Their convergence is rooted in a distrust of the system as a whole. Criticism of traditional medicine, denunciation of a conspiracy by the elites: Today, they have no problem switching from one to the other.

Other conspiracy figures have appeared on the Internet and are causing fears of their community being taken over. In October 2020, Louis Fouché, an anaesthesiologist at the AP-HM, created Réinfo Covid, a platform to flood the networks with a “different and necessary light” on the health crisis. The most anxiety-provoking theories are disseminated: electronic chips in the vaccine, “toxic” masks, lockdown compared to “camps”. We know today that this same Louis Fouché was a member of the Colibris (linked to Pierre Rabhi and anthroposophy), from which he drew inspiration for the structuring of his Platform. We also know from listening to his speeches on the web that spiritual, even mystical, discourse is never far away.

Outside of this conspiracy sphere, there are also “financial education communities” that claim to train young people in online trading, but which in reality hide pyramid selling systems, where young people find themselves losing thousands of euros and are pushed to recruit their personal and professional contacts. In June 2020, the Autorité des marchés financiers (AMF - financial markets authority) was concerned that it had received around one hundred reports of such practices in the space of three months. Indeed, the health and social crisis, isolation and idleness of young people has made them particularly vulnerable to these aggressive recruitment practices that mainly take place through social networks, from Instagram to Facebook through TikTok.

## **2/ Cult/Sect movements against medicine and vaccines**

The phenomenon of cults has therefore changed in format, but also in terms of content. In the 1990s, when the public authorities began to become aware of the phenomenon, they targeted large and transnational groups, structured around an authoritarian guru, what Serge Blisko calls “para-religions” or “peri-religions”, like the order of the Solar Temple of course, as well as the Children of God, Hare Krishna and the Unification Church of the Reverend “Moon”. Today, the undue influence of cults appears much less in religious situations and much more in questions of health or well-being, which concern 38% of reports to Miviludes. Covid-19 is therefore necessarily a golden opportunity for the new Age gurus and pseudo-therapists. For example, for the past year and a half, we have only been talking about “disease”. However, for a long time, the New Age has been developing a discourse according to which “disease does not exist”, and according to which one can reinforce one's immunity by means of natural medicines, fasting or a 100% raw food diet. It is at the centre of Thierry Casasnovas' discourse, for example, who takes advantage of it to sell his vegetable juice recipes, his juice extractors and his naturopathy courses. This is also the case of a woman we met in Eourres, an ecovillage in the Hautes-Alpes under the influence of New Age and anthroposophy, who explained to us that she had never taken medication, that she healed herself with energy therapists but also by singing: “The more you raise your frequencies, the less possible illnesses you have, because illness is very low frequencies, so they resonate with the “bad that is said”, with the low densities. You never get sick if you are happy.” This alternative health discourse, which brings

together people who are suspicious of the pharmaceutical industry, logically leads to a rejection of conventional medicine, as well as, of course, of the vaccine.

On this point, it can be said that Covid-19 has produced a transformation of the phenomenon of cults, by bringing together the two main divisions of the anti-vaccine movement. On the one hand, the extreme right and fundamentalist Catholics. The faithful of the Society of Saint Pius X, which is at odds with the Vatican, are taught from an early age that the vaccine is a poison, an external body that violates the physical integrity of the believers, as two former followers, Solène and Victoire, told us, who have suffered the patriarchal violence of the Fraternity. They are told that, if they are obliged to be vaccinated, green clay would neutralise the effect of the vaccine. “We are taught that it’s an introduction of a foreign body and therefore it makes us sick, because vaccines are made from human cells,” testifies Victoire. Even today, geographically distant from the fundamentalist community, this thirty-year-old struggles to get rid of these beliefs in which she has been immersed since childhood: “We’re getting hyper-scared with this. Even now, I don’t trust vaccines at all, in spite of everything, because to me it’s a poison. My children are not vaccinated. I know I’m an outlaw. But I’ve been told that since I was a little girl.”

Civitas, the political arm of Catholic nationalism, linked to the Society of Saint Pius X, has particularly mobilised against the vaccination against Covid-19, demonstrating in front of vaccinodromes, denouncing a “plan-demic of satanic origin”. The other main division of the historical anti-vaccine movement is the New Age ecology, which shares a rejection of modernity, science and the use of natural medicines with the first division. The leader of this spiritual ecology is evidently anthroposophy. Since the beginning of the pandemic, predictions about the vaccine (lectures given in Dornach, Switzerland, in 1917), an “ahrimanian” and therefore “materialistic” force, have been widely circulated in anthroposophical networks and even beyond: “The spirits of darkness will breathe into their hosts [...] to discover a vaccine that can, from early youth, through the body, extirpate the tendency to spirituality.” Many parents of Steiner-Waldorf schools mobilised in the demonstrations against health restrictions and then against vaccination, and they were the ones who invented the protests with white masks and suits.

### **3/ Covid-19, an existential crisis**

The pandemic has been a real boon for millenarian movements, such as Jehovah's Witnesses. A source inside the movement describes the discourse of the Elders and the organisation: “Today they can say 'we were right, trust us'. The community maintains this feeling because the more people are afraid, the less they reason”. A member of Jehovah's Witnesses for thirty years, he is more concerned than in the past about the influence of the movement on his family. “It feels like the end [of the world],’ members tell me. They are so conditioned by the official discourse among Witnesses that they cannot see this pandemic any other way,” he laments.

In the cult of Jehovah, the Apocalypse announced by the Bible would inaugurate the arrival of paradise on Earth and the destruction of all those who are not Witnesses. “We believe the

pandemic is one of the signs of the last days, along with wars and other diseases. The prophecies of the Bible announce the end of a system, that of men, to be replaced by a system governed by God. The pandemic is a sign that allows us to talk about the end of this system,” confirmed the national headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses.

To deal with this event, the community is omnipresent and indispensable. At the beginning of the lockdown, “it sent a list of basic necessities to be purchased and invited people to stock up for a month,” continues our source.

Other groups take advantage of the complexity of scientific discourse and the confusion of political discourse to establish a declinist vision of society. This is notably the case of the Society of Saint Pius X. A letter sent by the superior general of the community reads: “A single microbe is capable of bringing humanity to its knees. In the age of great technological and scientific achievements, it is above all human pride that it brings to its knees. The modern man, so proud of his achievements, who installs fibre optic cables in the bottom of the ocean, builds aircraft carriers, nuclear power plants, skyscrapers and computers, who after having set foot on the Moon, continues his conquest to Mars, is powerless before an invisible microbe. »

The police intervened twice on the occasion of Mass illegally organised by the Society of Saint Pius X despite the lockdown. On the evening of 11 April, in the parish of Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet in Paris, about thirty clergymen and altar boys gathered for a Latin mass. None of them wore masks or respected the preventative gestures. “We know how this fraternity works. Any outside authority is not recognised, reports Unadfi. There is only the hierarchy of God and the clergy. Then, in the family, there is only the father. It is a closed community. The children go to schools run by members of the fraternity. They don't know the outside world and the only talk they hear about this pandemic is their own.” Not really in line with science, in this case.

Alongside these fundamentalist Christian movements, which have taken advantage of the health crisis to strengthen their hold on their followers, we find a millenarianism without God in New Age ecology. In October 2020, the renowned anthroposophist Michel Joseph explained that he saw the pandemic as “the announcement of the fourth wave of births of star children”. An anthroposophical version of the “indigo children”, these extraordinary young beings would arrive every twenty years at the time of the “Jupiter-Saturn conjunction” and would have the mission of healing humanity from its “materialistic and egotistical culture”.

We could also talk about the multiplication of survivalist camps, which are preparing for the catastrophe and are often linked to the extreme right, or collapsologists or supporters of deep ecology and the return of the myth of Gaia, the mother earth which would take revenge for the selfishness of man...

#### **4/ The health crisis, revealing the retreat of the State**

One of the reasons that prompted us to investigate the new peril of cults was the announcement in late 2019 that Miviludes would be attached to the Ministry of the Interior. We want to show

here that, far from being an insignificant administrative choice, this reform is a symptom of the weakening of public authorities in the face of cults with undue influence over the last 10 years. The health crisis and the approach of the presidential election have certainly pushed the government to announce a “reinforcement” of the Miviludes, in order to extinguish the polemic that had emerged. In reality, today's Miviludes is not what it was in the beginning. Its budget and staffing levels have been declining steadily: from a about 15 advisers in 2019, to eight advisers now, according to the latest information we have received. Moreover, Miviludes, which was under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister, is now under the authority of a prefect, who is himself attached to the Ministry of the Interior, which filters media requests. Former president Georges Fenech expressed his concern to us about a loss of political autonomy for the institution, and Marlène Schiappa's advisers assume that Miviludes is no longer as free to express itself as it once was. Although the minister has promised to increase grants to associations by a factor of ten, after plummeting for the last ten years, but it is not clear whether this will be enough. In short, at a time when the phenomenon of cults is exploding and fragmenting, public authorities are not equipped to deal with it, which promises an uncertain future for the victims of influence from cults.