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## **Evolution of the Cult Phenomenon in Belgium and Legislation Against the Abuse of the Weak**

The approach of the Belgian authorities to cults has long been very reserved. Indeed, one needed to take a position in an area touching upon two fundamental concepts: on the one hand the freedom of expression and association, and on the other hand the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which are guaranteed by the Belgian Constitution.

It is the drama in Vercors in 1995 involving the ‘Ordre du Temple Solaire’, which caused a reaction from the Belgian public authorities.

Why focus on harmful cultic organisations?

Because one can only feel challenged by the development of many organisations which endanger the physical and/or psychological integrity of citizens. It must be demonstrated that individuals are in danger, physically, mentally and financially. In Belgium, an independent centre has been set up for this; it is attached to the Department of Justice.

Cults adjust very easily to the evolution of society since the loss of influence of the so-called traditional religions encourages them to blossom. Vulnerable individuals in our present-day society are easily swallowed up into this new form of pseudo-spirituality.

There is also the problem of knowing the number of cults and the number of their followers. Cults act on several levels: they claim to cure diseases, both physical and mental, but also provide so-called vocational training. All means are good: they take advantage of attacks and natural disasters to get noticed. An important axis is also the youth sector since one of their areas of predilection is the family and children in particular (who are more malleable).

What means does Belgium have to fight against cults?

A penal arsenal exists but, to combat cults effectively, we should add to the penal code, as in France, the concept of “abuse of weakness”. There are several ways of fighting effectively: dissolution of associations, confiscation of the property of cults or of responsible persons, protection of former followers who testify.

But all this must be well mapped-out so that one does not infringe the fundamental principles of freedom of expression, of belief and of association.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In June 2011 the proposed law was definitively adopted by the Parliament Chamber with the approval of all democratic political parties, except the Flemish nationalists and the far right stayed abstainers.