

Presentation by Anne-Marie Courage, counsellor to MIVILUDES (Mission Interministérielle de Vigilance et de Lutte contre les Dérives Sectaires

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the President of FECRIS, André FREDERIC, for his invitation. I would also like to apologise on behalf of the Prefect, Christian GRAVEL, who has been held up by other commitments, and the Head of MIVILUDES, Donatien LE VAILLANT, who took up his post at the beginning of February.

We are particularly grateful for this invitation, as it allows us to share a number of our concerns on the subject of preventing and combating sectarian aberrations¹.

As we have regularly recalled, and according to MIVILUDES' activity report, the cult phenomenon rapidly gained momentum with the COVID crisis and the amplifying effect of social networks. We still have a long way to go, as preventing and combating sectarian aberrations is a long-term mission. Today it is a public policy backed at the highest level of government by the Secretary of State for Citizenship, Sonia BACKES.

As a preamble, I'd like to remind you of a few key principles that guide our day-to-day action, principles that are sometimes misunderstood.

In France, we have French-style gardens, French-style secularism, and a French-style policy to combat sectarian aberrations.

As we constantly explain, MIVILUDES is a unique structure in the world. In contrast with the narrative repeated by our critics, MIVILUDES is not an authority for regulating freedom of belief, or as others put it, a thought police. Its actions fall within the strict framework of the rule of law and the spirit and letter of the 1905 law on the separation of Church and State.

¹ French Government interpretation of "undue influence"

In France, everyone is free to believe or not believe, to commit or not commit. And it's this notion of disengagement that's important: everyone is free to join a group in the morning, change group at lunchtime and then change their mind again and join a third group in the evening. In other words, everyone has the right to belong to a community or not. This is why any situation of control or subjection is in itself a serious attack on this founding principle.

In this respect, the State is the guarantor of three principles:

The State must maintain a position of impartiality when it comes to the beliefs held by each individual

The State guarantees the conditions for effective freedom of conscience for everyone.

The State fights those who abuse freedom of expression, those who cloak themselves in the attributes of religion and human values and who undermine the very basis of these freedoms.

On the other hand, when a citizen believes that he or she has been the victim of mental abuse, it is our duty to listen and to bring the matter to the attention of Justice. Only the magistrate is empowered to classify offences.

In a cultish group, human beings are conditioned to obey the leader's orders, with the promise of a better world, an utopia and personal and spiritual fulfilment.

This human conditioning, presented as a source of emancipation and autonomy, is in reality nothing more than a delusion. Blinded followers think they are working for an ideal. In reality, they are working for a dystopia.

As I said in my introduction, we are fortunate that this public policy is supported at the highest level of government by Minister Sonia BACKES. And we are fortunate

to have a legal framework that punishes mental abuse: the About Picard law, referring to the names of its rapporteurs, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last year. This law, which punishes the perpetrator of abuse of weakness with 5 years' imprisonment, was revisited at the beginning of this year and now punishes organised fraud more severely.

Let's be clear: the aim is not to target an entire movement or doctrine, in other words to stigmatise a belief or make a value judgement on a belief, which is contrary to fundamental rights, but to condemn any criminally reprehensible act committed by the perpetrators. Any situation of mental control that deprives the individual of his or her free will.

Take the example of sexual acts, which are presented to victims as a necessary step towards therapy or divine ascension, a rite of belonging to a group. There are many examples in the field of health and care where sexual predators who want to satisfy their urges develop a healing approach. Sex therapists, mediums, magnetists, bonesetters, psychotherapists, life coaches, relaxation specialists or unregulated therapists... and even photographers, osteopaths and energy therapists, the qualifications of these pseudo-therapists are not always easy to come by.

Abuse of weakness is a serious infringement of fundamental freedoms and was the subject of two days' work as part of a national gathering on the question.

The fight against sectarian aberrations is a public policy embodied by Secretary of State Sonia BACKES, the Minister attached to the Minister of the Interior, responsible for Citizenship.

The Minister wished to give new impetus to the combat against sectarian aberrations by organising the national conference on the combat against sectarian aberrations at Place Beauvau on 9 and 10 March, with the aim of revitalising and

reinforcing the effectiveness of this public policy.

The conference brought together government departments, MIVILUDES, associations, public figures and members of parliament on the theme of ***"What public policy to combat sectarian aberrations in the next decade"***, with the aim of drawing up the outlines of a joint project to combat sectarian aberrations, adapting our means of action and making it a long-term project.

The first day provided an opportunity to draw up a precise diagnosis of the evolution of the phenomenon, with three round tables: one on how to care for the victims, the second concerned the merchants of happiness, health and care and the third on the points of contact between conspiracy and sectarian aberrations.

On the basis of this snapshot, the second day, organised into 7 working committees, was devoted to drawing up the outlines of an interministerial ***roadmap at least until the end of the five-year term***; it should be noted that the work of the committees is intended to continue beyond the Assises.

It emerged from the work that it would be difficult, as the Minister pointed out, to: "to do so without strengthening our legislative arsenal".

The Ministries of Health and Justice are working together to create an offence of ***"incitement to stop treatment for a serious illness"***.

As a reminder, in October 2021 the naturopath Miguel Barthéléry was given a 2-year suspended prison sentence for the deaths of two of his followers who had stopped their cancer treatment on his advice.

Strengthening the legislative arsenal also involves three other fundamental elements:

"Strengthening the possibilities for prosecuting offenders,
"shortening the time taken to investigate cases",
"improving compensation for victims".

Another important area, which the Minister has also emphasised on several occasions, is prevention:

We need to "put all our energy into prevention, raising awareness and informing people about the risks", and "the decisive battle is being fought on social networks".

A partnership with digital platforms was sealed on this occasion.

Information education at school level to encourage vigilance.

Victim support associations have an important role to play in the fight against DS, to provide victims with more support and better care.

In conclusion, the history of the combat against sectarian aberrations has been marked by major criminal tragedies: collective suicides under the orders of Jim Jones, pseudo-pastor of the Temple of the People, David Koresh leader of the "Davidians" group, Joseph Di Mambro medium and Luc Jouret Belgian homeopathic doctor leaders of the Order of the Solar Temple, or, a little later, the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo underground by Aum Shinrikyō acupuncturist and visually impaired yoga teacher.

These criminal acts revealed the totalitarian power of a sectarian movement to the general public.

As I said in my introduction, our mission is to strike the right balance between preserving individual freedoms and protecting citizens.

To conclude, I would like to say 3 things:

MIVILUDES is not an authority for regulating freedom of belief.

MIVILUDES is not a thought police.

MIVILUDES is a single inter-ministerial body whose mission is to prevent and ensure the protection of victims by coordinating the preventive and repressive

action of public authorities.

The prevention and combat against sectarian aberrations is a long-term process, requiring close cooperation between all the institutional and associative players. We need the associative fabric to successfully implement the policy of prevention and combat against sectarian aberrations throughout the country. We need to work together as a network, and the FECRIS conference gives us the opportunity to do so today. Thank you for your attention.