



Acts of the European Conference

Women in cults, gurus and victims

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¹ L'histoire secrète des Témoins de Jéhovah

² Uskontojen Uhrien Tuki Ry – Support group for the victims of religions,
<http://www.uskontojenuhrientuki.fi>

³ Seven years under the influence of the cult – testimony

Welcome by the President, Danièle Muller-Tulli (CH)

The title for our reflection during this “Women in Cults, Gurus and Victims” conference was not chosen by chance, on the contrary.

As you all know, FECRIS benefits of participatory status in the Council of Europe, has Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and finally is a participant in the Fundamental Rights Platform of the European Union. These institutions, anxious to defend the fundamental rights of the citizens of the democracies of which they are part, have all placed a special emphasis in their programmes on the defense of women and children's rights. Therefore, it seemed essential to devote one day of study to the question of women in cults, because their role is vast, important, and often forgotten.

The added value of FECRIS is without a doubt the variety of the presentations as well as the geographic diversity of the speakers, who came from North America and Eastern and Western Europe to support their colleagues from Bulgaria, where the CRNRM “Research Centre for New Religious Movements”, located in Sofia, is a member of our Federation and coorganiser of this conference.

All our thanks go to Professor Ivan ZHELEV Dimitrov, President of CRNRM (Centre of Research on New Religious Movements) and to Prof. Stoyan Denchev, Dean of the SULSIT State University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, who could unfortunately not be here with us to open this conference due to another important event in Bulgaria. He has, nonetheless sent a warm welcoming letter to the participants which will be read out. I wish you all an excellent conference.

Professor Stoyan Denchev, Rector of the State University for Library Studies and Information Technologies (SULSIT)

Dear Conference participants,

Dear guests,

On behalf of the academic society of the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies I warmly welcome you. We are honored to host this International conference of the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects (FECRIS) – an organization with extensive international experience and prestige, an advisory body to the EU and the UN.

The FECRIS Conference in Bulgaria is an important event as it will put the local experts and the Bulgarian public in the current issues of religious rights and religious security and will discuss the place of government regulation in them.

We participate in the FECRIS Conference, because it highlights prevention activities and care of human values. Although they are foundation of modern democratic regimes and dynamic factor in international relations, they could be affected by the impact of religious and non-religious cults.

With the support of the current Conference the SULSIT gives its contribution to the efforts to inform the public about various destructive manifestations of religious and highlight opportunities for prevention them from all institutions involved in the issue of the spiritual health of the nation - state and local authorities, educational and health institutions, NGOs and others.

Being a host, the SULSIT identifies itself as an academic institution where religious diversity is studied from a different perspective, but not neglecting its relationship with national and social security.

Hoping that the forthcoming Conference will become a center of fruitful discussions and exchange of views, will boost the new and thorough research, and will contribute to strengthening the rights and dignity of citizens, I would like to wish you a successful work.

STOYAN DENCHEV, Prof. D.Sc.
Rector

Message from Dr. Markus Kremer, Interdepartmental Working Group on the so-called sects and psychogroups, Baden-Wurttemberg

Dear participants of the FECRIS International Conference in Sofia!

Warm greetings from Stuttgart both from me and my esteemed predecessor, Hans-Werner Carlhoff.

Since 1993, in Baden-Württemberg, there is an inter-ministerial working group with the mission of informing and warning about the existence and risks of so called sects and psychogroups. As the chairman of this working group, I feel linked with a similar objective to FECRIS and its partner organisations. Unfortunately, due to official duties, this year it was not possible for me to participate in today's event. I therefore take this opportunity to address a few words of encouragement and support for your important work.

Our common theme has by no means lost its importance. On the contrary: The "market" of the (supposed) offers for salvation is constantly evolving, especially in terms of structures. While 25 years ago, there were clearly defined, closed groups, called "sects/cults" which were fought because of their questionable beliefs, extremist religiosity or malpractices, it has now shifted to an almost endless variety of offers that are addressed in various ways to all levels of

society. The Social networks and the loss of an overall consensus on values promote the spread of dangerous teachings and lifestyles.

This year's conference focuses on the role of women in sects/cults. In this context women appear under various forms: as "victims", as supporters of a group, as concerned persons or relatives, as "mediums", or simply as a caring mothers and wives.

Why are women increasingly affected by the cult problem?

Firstly, one might consider the thesis of sociologists that religion is primarily a female phenomenon. Women are appear more sensitive to existential and transcendental questions or answers. Everyone may think whether this is the case or not. It is true that outside the major religions "the Offers of meaning" focus on issues where women have a certain "natural" competence: motherhood, nature, health & healing, holism, security, harmony, etc. At the same time traditional religions more than ever reflect an anachronistic Patriarchal bias that keeps women away from office and influence and prevents female participation. In contrast, sects emphasize a certain "equality of the select", be they men or women. They thus overcome social role models and offer women in particular a welcome package of self-realisation. They disguise their true interests: trying to exercise power over people and bring them into dependency and "bondage". Unfortunately, the concerned persons often notice these dangers too late and can no longer effectively distance themselves from the "cult/sect system".

All the more reason for enlightenment and support by church, state and civil society organisations of which you are the representatives here today in Sofia. Here FECRIS has the significant and praiseworthy task of combining the interests of many individual national initiatives and to make their voices heard at European level on behalf of present and future "victims".

In this sense I wish the conference a good and promising course and all of you all the best!

Catherine Picard, President of UNADFI⁴

Sexual Aggression as the Violation of the Dignity of Women.

"The worst tyrants are those who know how to be loved".

Spinoza

1 Foreword

In preparing this presentation, I asked myself a question. Does a victim of sexual aggression in a cult have a gender? Does a guru predator limit his harmful acts to women? If we refer to the cases we have examined concerning sexual practices within certain movements, we note that the humiliation suffered also affects men, who suffer just as much. Unfortunately, we cannot forget to examine minors, and they will be cited in several cases.

In the same vein, we have to recognise that a guru that subjects their followers to sexual abuse is not always a man. Women have also played a strong role in the development of degrading practices for individuals. And if we continue our observations, we must recognise the guru's companion, who often goes unnoticed by the public. Yet victim testimonies relating their experiences place them at the same level as their mentor in terms of responsibility, whether they were the initiator or actor in the forced sexual practices or not.

This latter group rarely faces justice, slipping through the net, the evil genius who accompanies the defendant, supporting and leading the circle of the latest followers convinced of their innocence. The most perverse, feeling that they may end up charged, try to pass themselves off as victims. They cause confusion in the "perpetrator and victim" debate, where the person often serves as the "assistant perpetrator" who escapes punishment.

⁴ National Union of Defence Associations for Families and Individuals Victims of Sects

I should clarify so that there is no confusion about my statement I just made, that I am describing the attitude of a guru's companion and not that of their closet followers who were persuaded at the start of the construction of the group or movement. We must accept seeing them as victims of their manipulation and the subsequent consequences.

Finally, we can't leave out the case of predators who, within these cultic movements involving sexual domination, a nest that satisfies their depravity. Certain had already been sentenced for sexual abuse. Thus, during the Masset case, at the Albertville court, we heard witnesses defend the guru, comfortable with the idea that all the women that were delivered were perfectly consenting. We are no longer dealing with followers. Rather, they are consumers, clients of a pimp.

2 Sexual Abuse

In the 1990s, many texts highlighted the problem of sexual abuse in sects. I would cite one by Marie Genève (Bulletin de liaison du CCMM, 1995), which argued that the subject is an object of manipulation: attraction by seduction for the guru or a theory; control of sexuality via abstinence or unbridled sexuality; diversion of sexuality in the interest of the master of thought control.

The legal definition of sexual aggression highlights all the constitutive elements of manipulation:

"Sexual assault is a act of a sexual character, with or without physical contact, committed by an individual without the consent of the targeted person, or, in certain cases, especially with regards to children, by affective manipulation or blackmail. It is an act that aims at subjecting another person to their own desires through an abuse of power, by the use of force or constraint, explicitly or implicitly implied. Sexual assault violates fundamental rights, specifically physical and psychological integrity and the security of person.

This definition applies irrespective of age, sex, culture, origins, civil status, religion and sexual orientation of the victim or sexual aggressor; the type of sexual act; the location or living environment in which it takes place; the links that exist between the victim and sexual aggressor."

The control of sexuality is subject to subservience, a state of subjection, restricting followers with interdictions, bullying, bodily punishment, controlling their behaviour in a closed location that is cultic society.

3 Case Study

I will illustrate my discussion with several cases that have occurred over the past two years. Many share similarities in how future victims are approached and the construction of theories based on yoga or meditation, magnetism sessions, offers of alternative medicine, psychotherapy or prayer;

- the self-proclaimed Swiss Solera yoga instructor who selected women between 25-45 from his group, all in a fragile state, emotionally unstable, to better convince them of the usefulness of certain practices that would increase their self-confidence. The "master" would give his "sacred sperm" to the chosen ones.

- former mechanic from Bourg dans l'Ain, who became a magnetizer to make ends meet, sentenced for sexual fondling as a pretext for curing their feminine pain of his visitors. It was noted during the hearing that certain of them had already been raped, information removed by the guru.

- the pseudo-therapist from Niort, found guilty of rape, who targeted women who wanted to lose weight or stop smoking.

- the one from Lannion (Bretagne) who offered liberating therapies "to avoid the end of the world", making these women "bait for swingers" suffering torture. The smutty guru having raped his 14 year old step daughter, he would serve her to his friends.

- the guru from Savoie, a former parking attendant, who would use the technique of inducing false memories to convince his men and women patients, abuse them one after another, forcing some women to become prostitutes, forbidding any form of protection and threatening the risk of uterine cancer in case of disobedience.

- the guru from Gironde, healer-philosopher, who organised orgies and sadomasochistic practices within a community bringing together socially isolated persons, who believed they were helping to save the planet. One of his victims, stricken by cancer, stopped their treatments. The master was helped by his wife, who demeaned the future sexual and domestic slaves.

- finally, the guru from La Réunion welcoming as roommates single women with children, with the help of his wife, for the purposes of a prayer community, who would commit fraud, rape and abuse two children in the group.

This list highlights the surge in sexual aggression as a motor for cultic abuses, in the service of a guru, with the help of their companion, for the use of their family members, friends or clients.

“Divine woman”, “chosen from the chosen”, “celestial meetings”, “impulse meetings”; “hug therapy”, manipulative propositions with nice attractive names, yet only a trivial way of saying orgy, sadomasochism, incest and rape.

3 The Question of Consent

There is no doubt that these crimes that we just described were committed and recognised. All the gurus named were sentenced for fraudulent abuse of a state of weakness and/or for sexual aggression or rape. This indicates progress and a better understanding of this plague by our judges. Yet questions still remain concerning the role of the victims, specifically their consent and their responsibility.

The notion of consent is difficult to pinpoint. The debate divides jurists that grant priority to individual freedom and to autonomy of individuals, and philosophers, such as Michela Marzano, for who “consent to acts that call into question human dignity can never serve as a justifying principle.” According to J.S. Mill: “The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.”

When we speak of enlightened consent, one must ensure that the person has all the necessary elements to make their choice. What about consent obtained via threats, manipulation or blackmail? What is their consent worth if there are in a state of weakness or being manipulated?

According to the principle outlined in article 1109 of the Civil Code, “There is no valid consent if the consent was given in error, or if it was extracted by violence or ensnared.” Here we are talking about a defect of consent. As such, we consider that the victim did not decide their outcome and that, while they agreed with the arguments of the manipulator, she did not choose the consequences.

Sexual aggression is defined by a default or defect of consent, as violence, constraint, threat or surprise, limiting freedom and hindering the exercise of will, of consent. However, it is not easy to prove a defect of consent and the different courts do not always agree on its recognition:

What is a consenting victim? It is a person who is dominated or someone using a survival strategy?

When we speak about free consent, it is not only the freedom that precedes all external pressure, but also that which corresponds to the control of one's self and their emotions. We are conditioned in our choices, even the most difficult, by our history, influenced by our emotions and elements associated with the situation itself. Everything that comes from our personal history, the fact that our unconscious self sometimes leads us to choices that are contrary to our conscious interest, also count.

When we judge an act or decision, many of the details about the surrounding context remain unknown. As such, a judge doesn't make a decision based on the significance that act's consent can have, but simply on its lawful or unlawful character.

5 The Question of Violation of Dignity

The notion of freedom sometimes runs up against the **dignity of person**. In 1963, H. L. Hart wrote: "Harming someone is something we have to continue to prevent using criminal law, even when the victims consent to or participate in acts that are harmful for themselves." Marzano reaffirmed this by stating that "a just society is always the one that protects the weakest, where the State intervenes to limit the strength of oppressors."

The protection of human dignity is a principle reinforced by all international treaties and conventions; the UN, UNESCO and the ILO.

It has become a central principle of the European constitutional order, source of all fundamental rights, basis for democracy. These texts have, for fifty years, tried to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

This notion has become part of French doctrine and positive law. No less than fifty current legislative texts refer to the dignity, domestic law relying on diversified foundations, often in association with discrimination. Equality between men and women is, in particular, seen as an expression of human dignity. There can be no discussion of domination of one over the other without impacting the dignity of both.

However, across the globe women suffer violations of their rights, because they are women. This violence is found everywhere, within the family and in the smallest community. The cult constitutes a micro-society that does not accept any faith or law that is not its own. Like any totalitarian structure, by controlling the body and sexuality of followers, women and sometimes their children, the cult enslaves by destroying the most intimate parts of the person, their will, their desire to live and the ability to love.

Humiliated, diminished to the role of sexual object, devalued, they must face their return to society, yet find their identity and dignity scorned. This is when we must welcome them, work with them and defend them. In conclusion, I would like to cite someone who never gave up, N. Mandela.

"Any man or institution that will try to rob me of my dignity will lose"

Professor Ivan Zhelev Dimitrov, President of CRNRM (BG)

The Role of Women in Cults in Bulgaria

I am happy to welcome FECRIS which defends human and democratic values here today. This Conference is extremely important for Bulgaria because there are many new sects and cults in our country, in which it is necessary to provide information and prevention because people are not informed about the danger of sects.

Women are the first victims at many levels and above all mentally. They have a very wide age profile and are used as a "call product". They are somehow mandated for recruitment

Internet and Face Book are widely used media for recruitment, and the lack of information of Bulgarian women causes them to be caught up in groups that promise training, either in personal development, in New Age groups, mixing esotericism and astronomy or so that they themselves become gurus. These trainings are very expensive up to 300 € for a day.

There have been very serious cases, such as the death of a baby at birth, the death of a woman who has been forced to fast for several days. There are also suicides of young people who frequented the new religious movements.

The fact is that the lack of information and education are the real problem. Many movements exist as diverse as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Falun Gong, groups of Christian Orthodox origin, occultists, purely Bulgarian gurus, clairvoyants, etc.

Roman Silantiev, Professor of Islamic Studies at Moscow State Linguistic University(RU)

Women in the Islamic destructive cults – the example of Russia

Currently, the largest set of sects in Russia are the Islamists, who are represented both by small groups (up to a few dozen people), as well as by large groups (numbering over 100 thousand members each). Among them the most numerous and active are the sects of the Wahhabi type – “Islamic State”, “Caucasus Emirate”, a variety of Jamaats (religious, social and often military communities) in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia and other regions. In addition to the “classical” Wahhabi-Salafi formations, there are other destructive organizations, which can be identified, such as “Hizb ut-Tahrir”, “Muslim Brotherhood”, “Tablighi Jamaat”, as well as the pan-Turkic cults Nursi (the branch Mustafa Sungur) and Gülen. The total number of Islamists in Russia now exceeds 700 thousand people, with at least 200 thousand of them sympathizing with “Islamic state”. At the same time the membership of the once largest Russian cult – the Jehovah Witnesses – hardly exceeds 170 thousand people.

A few years ago Rosfinmonitoring (Russia's Federal Financial Monitoring Service) started publishing a “List of organizations and individuals, in respect of which there is evidence of their involvement in extremist activities or terrorism”. As of May 6, 2016 it had 5737 entries, which, of course, is very far from listing all of the existing terrorists and extremists. However, this document is quite valuable for researchers, as for some time now the majority of individuals who committed crimes of terrorist or extremist character, have been included in the “List”. It also contains the names of people who have committed any offense that is legally equated to terrorism – for example, the creation of a particularly aggressive gangs, taking hostages and some other. The “List” gives the names of offenders, as well as their date and place of birth, however, it does not disclose the specific offences for which they have been sentenced or are wanted. The vast majority of those included in the “List” consists of Islamist males, but it is rather difficult to distinguish them from ordinary criminals without information on the corresponding articles of the Criminal Code.

The situation is much simpler when it comes the women included in the “List”. Though there are a few supporters of the fascist ideology among the female extremist, absolutely all of the 144 female terrorists and their accomplices are related to Islamist sects. It is noteworthy that 24 of them (i.e. 17% of the total number) are newly converted Muslims of various nationalities. These are Russian, Ukrainian, and even Jewish women, or women born in mixed marriages.

Research carried out by the author showed that the highest number of women terrorists or women who are terrorists' accomplices belonged to the Wahhabi sects, among whom the proportion of supporters of the “Islamic State” is increasing rapidly. It is known without a doubt that 12 of the 24 listed female new converts are “Islamic State” supporters. Second to them come the supporters of the Wahhabi terrorist organizations of the North Caucasus, and third – the adepts of the terrorist party “Hizb ut-Tahrir”.

The reasons for the involvement of women in terrorist organizations differ significantly in the two main groups – the group of the so-called “ethnic” Muslim women and the group of the newly converted females. In the first case, the vast majority of women have joined the ranks

of terrorists under the influence of family members (first and foremost – the husband). In the second case, the reasons are as follows:

1. Influence of friends – **28%**
2. Marriage – **25%**
3. Spiritual search – **13%**
4. Situations of stress – **12%**
Which include:
 - Falling in love – **6%**
 - Disease – **3%**
 - Divorce – **1%**
 - Suicidal thoughts – **1%**
 - Death of a close one – **1%**
5. Being charmed by the Muslim culture – **10%**
6. Influence of relatives – **6%**
7. Internet propaganda – **4%**
8. Rebellious moods – **2%**

Women who have become members of terrorist organizations are involved in different kinds of illegal activities. The most dangerous among these activities is when women become suicide bombers, and are therefore used as a living weapon. Many of the suicide bombers are widows of Islamist fighters, which is the reason they are often called “black widows” or “Shahida” (fem. for “Shahid” – martyr). Female suicide bombers were involved in many terrorist attacks in Russia, killing hundreds of people. The most famous among them are Hawa Barayeva, Zarema Muzhak-hoyeva, Maria Khorosheva Alla Saprykina, Mariam Sharipova and Naida Asiyalova, while their total number reaches several dozens.

The most common activity among aggressive female Islamists is helping their terrorist husbands – harboring, fundraising or functioning as contact persons and messengers. Often they are also involved in the promotion and spread of their destructive ideology. This activity is most in demand – after all, a competent recruiter is much more valuable than the average fighter. Among the female terrorists specializing in the propaganda several stand out as especially effective: Maria Pogorelova from St. Petersburg, Christina Presnyakova from Voronezh and Daria Itsenkova from Astrakhan.

A special group of women terrorists consists of those who have moved to the territory of the “Islamic state”. The most attractive among them are used for the needs of the so-called “Sexual jihad” pleasuring local insurgents, the most intelligent are utilized in the propaganda, and the rest, which are a large majority, simply serve as laborers, and give birth to the future fighters of this terrorist organization.

Thus, out of all of the women involved in sects in modern Russia, the biggest threat constitute aggressive female Islamists. Experience, particularly the example of student Varvara Karaulova from the Moscow State University, shows that it is exceptionally hard to bring them back to normal life – perhaps harder than with the adepts of any other totalitarian sect.

This phenomenon has to be closely and diligently studied, especially in view of the fact that the proportion of newly converted Muslims among the terrorists has been steadily increasing.

Jean Pierre Joula, UNADFI

Presentation of a study prepared by the Scientific Committee (Francophone branch)

Do there exist specific features concerning the type of cultic manipulation by and against women?

(“By women” meaning as “guru perpetrators” and “victim perpetrators” and “against women” meaning as victims).

The FECRIS scientific committee, francophone branch, is made up of 10 professionals trained in the framework of teaching by the faculty of medicine Paris-Descartes (doctor, psychologist, lawyer, judge, specialised educator, police), relied on direct interviews with the 35 victims.

The initial project, which focused on an analysis of written testimonies of victims, was abandoned to focus on direct interviews with victims.

Each of the interviews lasted for a minimum of two hours.

The interview was non-directive and voluntary, without the use of listeners throughout the discussion.

These victims, ex-followers, accepted to provide their testimony to allow professionals to better understand the process that led them to drawn in to and then leave this cultic influence.

Only some of these victims (40%) were able to, after leaving the cult, start separation psychotherapy.

The anonymity of the former followers was kept.

Cultic groups were managed by male gurus (28), or female gurus (7). Two cults were managed by a guru couple.

Victims

The committee listened to 35 former female cult followers, among which were 5 minors. Among these 35 victims were two victim perpetrators, meaning that they committed criminal acts when under their influence.

The professions of these victims cover the whole social spectrum: doctor, engineer, social worker, dentist, artist, lawyer, psychologist, company manager, unemployed. The age of these women (not including the 5 children) varied from 19 to 75 at the time of being under cultic influence.

The time spent in cultic groups varied from 2 to 42 years.

The data from the interviews is sorted based on the following categories:

Type of cultic grouping:

Esoteric and syncretic (Cordées, A.R.E., Nao, Gimel; F.B.U., “Children of God”, Order of the Solar Temple; Scientology; Galacteus);

Orientalist (Krishna);

Christian (IJ, Welcome Centre, Bliss);

Therapeutic (“TVI”, “Total biology of human beings”);

Psycho-therapeutic (“le petit groupe”; “Les jardins de la vie”);

Artistic (“Jogging rose”, “Sylvain Lefèvre group”)

Humanitarian and fair trade (“W. and E.”, “Amma”);

Attraction of group

Of the 35 women who entered a cult:

- 13 were attracted by esotericism and spirituality
- 8 by psychotherapy
- 5 by humanitarianism
- 5 by alternative care
- 2 by artistic research
- 1 by yoga
- 1 by fair trade

Type of cultic trauma experienced

With all the victims, we always find situations of:

- Subservience
- Submission
- Affront to dignity of person
- Humiliation
- Breaking with old benchmarks and environments
- De-socialisation
- Disindividualisation
- Cultic alienation implemented against the victim

For some women victims we can add specific situations:

- 3 situations of rape
- 4 orders for forced sexual practices with other followers
- 3 orders for sexual slavery
- 2 orders for prostitution
- 2 practices of pedophilia
- 1 forced pregnancy
- 3 obligations for total chastity
- 4 situations of forced confinement
- 4 situations of physical mistreatment
- 3 situations of denial of physical care
- 1 situation of homelessness

Elements leading to exiting the cultic group

- 4 triggered by the death of the guru
- 1 by the death of a follower
- 5 during legal proceedings (trial, arrest of guru, dismantling of the group)
- 5 confronted with unreasonable financial requests
- 3 love encounters
- 4 revolted by the guru's behaviour towards another follower who they defended by opposing the guru
- 1 helped by the external intervention of a family member
- 2 wanted to protect their child
- 2 who took refuge in another cult

Period after their exit from the cult

- 15 former followers took psychotherapy
- 4 created a victim's association
- 4 published a book of testimonials
- 6 testified in the media (TV, radio, etc.)
- 4 formed a sustainable couple

- 1 was welcomed by their family (after being separated for 45 years)
- 3 founded a family
- 1 created an artistic group

Difference between female and male victims

The female follower is frequently placed in a subservient position for affective reasons; She can be treated as inferior to male followers in certain cults, a situation that can be amplified by male followers in the group. The impurity dimension plays an important role in certain cults on this issue.

Female followers are more frequently abused and humiliated sexually. The difference in treatment between female and male followers depends on the guru and their fantasies.

To this regard, it seems that a female guru's pathology differs little from a male guru's.

The victim perpetrator of a crime

Two former followers who spoke participated, under the influence or following orders from their guru, in criminal offences

Both received an acquittal, in consideration of the cultic influence to which they were victim (for one of them, an appeal of the acquittal decision pronounced by the criminal jurisdiction was filed by the prosecutor)

Other data concerning the specifics of the victimisation of female followers could have been used, but the brief nature of this presentation meant we had to leave it out.

As several members of the scientific community have worked in penitentiary establishments with extremists under the influence of Islamic groups, their contribution could have in large part confirmed the cultic nature of the influence process at work within these groups, but for clear reasons we preferred not to deal with this in this presentation.

In conclusion of this overly short study, it is possible to consider that the treatment reserved for female followers within cultic influenced groups translates into an archaic method of exercising power which is structured around submission.

This regression in relations with the other indicates of a loss of the values that the democratic form of managing human relations took centuries to develop.

**Francine Caumel-Dauphin,
General Secretary of the Centre Against Mental Manipulation (CCMM)**

Special Features of Female Gurus: Are there any??

Overall, I had doubts about what this question could raise – in her role as a guru, she does not have any special features in comparison to her male “colleagues”, BUT, SHE IS A WOMAN and it changes things a little.

To introduce this subject, I will refer to a bright author from France in the 18th and 19th centuries: Abbot GREGOIRE. Jean-Baptiste GREGOIRE (1750-1831) wrote a History of Religious Cults founded by women. GREGOIRE noted common points that some of them share – they were founded on a vision, ecstasy and “used practices that the exaltation of ideas and the

illumination of the senses frequently gave them a trend more or less characterised by debauchery.”

He already noted that the devotion of women “holds closer to the heart, men to the mind”. Men are driven by “conviction, daughter of reason”, while women “are governed by persuasion, daughter of feeling.”

He refers to medical literature from the period, which noted that woman’s nervous system was weaker, more subject to exaltation, more inclined to mysticism, ecstasy, to prophetic visions, thus fanaticism. Women are naturally more devoted, but their conduct is characterised by “earthly affections”.

GREGOIRE developed these ideas: “With women, almost everything is reduced to love for pleasure and power; but their most energetic passion is commonly that of exercising real authority or opinion over others (...) this miserable propensity already troubled MARY, MOSES’ sister when she spread rumours about her brother, which caused her to be covered by leprosy and sent “out of the camp” for seven days.

The murky centuries of the Middle Ages saw Marguerite PORRETE and a hundred other women associating devotion to lubricity, with crowds of followers tagging along after them. Naturally inclined to dominate, women often manifested this propensity by meddling in the ecclesiastic ministry. Not being able to reach it, they try to damage it by influencing the conduct of the members. Certain even crossed the high barrier between them and sanctuary, such as Guillemette LA MILANESE, who, in the 13th century preached, used sacerdotal clothing and gave tonsure to women of the cult. But, certain movements gave women an equal place to that of men:

- The Brownists, near the end of the 16th century, granted women equality. In this cult, each member was free to serve the general good of society, without be accountable for their actions before a superior.
- The Quakers or Religious Society of Friends, in the 17th century had a clear sense of spiritual equality, in particular the equality of sexes. Men and women had the same right to speak during services.

In the 18th Century, GREGOIRE highlighted the importance of lettered women who formed groups spreading revolutionary ideas, a forerunner of the feminist movement. The Order of Victims, founded around 1755 by Jacqueline-Aimée BROHON, was organised as follows:

- The Apostolic College was made up of half men and half women;
- Women had the honour of starting the new mission:
 - Because of the effect of the love of Jesus Christ for the Holy Mother;
 - To compensate their loyalty to Jesus Christ during this mortal life and the Passion;
 - To humiliate the masculine sex which had abused its superiority.

We can also find female prophets where their exaltation was fed by the events of the Revolution: Catherine THEOT, called “the Mother of God”. She was a former maid at the Miramaines Convent, and became a soothsayer. She said she was invested with a spiritual mission and brought many disciples to her, waiting for the arrival of a messiah.

GREGOIRE, while not totally approving of their actions, saw these women as a sort of revelation of the modern values of religion. He was very receptive to the aspirations of democratic modernity that they promoted:

- The liberty of conscience and expression;
- The evangelical moral;
- Criticisms of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

In the 19th century, these female prophets joined illuminated and philanthropic movements, such as the Baroness Barbara Juliane VON KRÜDENER, who was sent to Russia, from brigade to brigade, because she had prayed with the people, because she had predicted the day of the last judgement and because she had fed the starving. Suzette LABROUSSE would predict the fall of the temporal power of the Pope (she said she was the Wife of the Apocalypse).

So, after this historical overview, let’s look at the current situation. We find women who are somewhat driven in their acts by mystical rather than scientific delirium: Françoise DERCLE,

for example, said she was evolving in a 3rd dimension and believed in the power of the mind. Maud PINSON who declared she was the reincarnation of the Virgin of the Apocalypse. Eliane DESCHAMPS who received messages from Christ's Virgin. They often have brilliant minds. One was an English teacher, they hold degrees from universities (of course some were totally fake). They created structures (Maud PINSON founded the Psychoanalytic Research Institute). They have a keen sense of seduction and communication. They are very skilled psychologists (they often present themselves as such) and great speakers, admirably using their charisma. These last elements are common in both women and men, as well as the megalomaniac tendencies which pushes them to create groups to dominate, impose a doctrine, control knowledge.

As with men, female gurus are pathological personalities which stems from their narcissistic perversity. But, if 25% of identified narcissistic perverts in the general population are women, this proportion is much higher in the cult domain.

There is frequently attention paid to the importance of the body. They are grand seductresses who know how get attention in society through their beauty, their charm and/or their magnetism. They often have eating disorders, either being bulimic or anorexic. This category of women has a deep hatred for men, though well hidden beneath their charming and seductive aspects. They often play the role of the "ideal mother", passing almost as saints. We can find them in narcissistically gratifying professions which provides power over others: health professions, teaching, upper management, etc.

These people surprise because we don't expect that type of pathology on the part of a woman.

The time they take to approach their target is longer. They take more time to study their target to discover elements that will allow them to solidify their manipulation.

They use sex as a means of control. Men more often use pleasure to make the other dependant.

Overall, they can go farther and be more dangerous than narcissistic perverts who are men, but their influence and manipulation are just as Machiavellic.

This pathology, that we also find in every day life, adds to the myth of persecution and they are often very paranoid. Maud PISON, Yvonne TRUBERT who was the guru for the IVI (Initiation to Life) Cult. They show an almost permanent aggression and subsequently become serious tormenters. Françoise DERCLE, for example, controlled all correspondence, forced hard work, promoted telling on others in writing, sexually humiliated her followers. They have an unlimited imagination. For example, Eliane DESCHAMPS, known as the "Petite Servante" and founder of the "Amour et Miséricorde" cult, described the appearance of the Virgin every year during the night of August 15-16. A certain number of them do not hesitate to practice exorcism, such as MELINE J., called "Mother", an important Voodoo Priestess in the Paris region. She would spray her followers with blood from sacrificed animals, would whip them and humiliate them. The case is currently before the courts.

If male gurus are often the reincarnation of a spiritual leader, women can too, but they frequently work in the field of prayers and direct groups such as the IVI which I noted above, or "Mary, door to heaven", which was led by a couple in Reunion, Cécile and Augustin VALENCOURT (former policeman). The movement Charismatic Renewal is, currently still, led by Anne MERLO, who promotes the unity of Christians and an activist for a New Eve using widely distributed DVDs. Grete HAÜSLER created the Circle of Friends of Bruno GRÖNING (CABG) in order to perpetuate the influence of the Master over minds. Spirituality is a field mainly occupied by women with modern supports. Mélanie DEMIR, for example, runs a cybergroup with the name "I am the path, the truth and life".

The field of wellbeing is also a perfect area for exploitation. Gabrielle FRECHETTE created the Centre Reine de la Paix. She believes that a spirit occupied her body and speaks through her. She calls herself Séréna and declares her self a Shaman. In the centre, the sudation experience is practiced, called "consciously dying" and in 2007 a follower experienced it for real. The case is still before the courts.

It is important to highlight that cults led by women do not end their existence through violence of arms, in contrast to some led by men. There are no collective suicides.

CONCLUSION

Do women gurus have special traits?

My answer is yes, even if many of the traits are shared with male gurus.

Some are in the incarnation of the Virgin or a saint (Saint-Theresa for example), but most are in contact with the beyond, with parallel worlds, or directly with God, Jesus Christ or the Virgin. They principally personify mysticism while men personify more strength and power. But they are also about power, but it is power masked by mystery that can only be decrypted by them. Because they are women, we trust them more, and it allows them to take more time to evaluate their prey, to get to know them and as such “hold” them more deeply and sustainably.

I wouldn't hesitate to consider them as more dangerous than their male counterparts!

Thank you for your time!

Serge BLISKO, President of Miviludes

Undue influence: what Specific Approach for Women?

The MIVILUDES (Mission Interministérielle de Vigilance et de Lutte contre les Dérives Sectaires), advising the Prime Minister of the French Republic, meets many women during its observation, prevention or repression missions.

We lack data to support that women are more often victims of cultic aberrations than men, and the analysis of some 2,500 reports received annually by the Mission is not conclusive.

1) We find women victims within deviant groups.

Cases recently concluded in France show that sexual predation (sexual aggression or rape) against women are often the result of cultic influence. This is illustrated by the horrible testimony of Amoreena Winckler, who escaped from “The Family/The Children of God” group (you can read her biography in two books – Purulence, 2009, and Fille de Chair, 2014).

- I think about a case concluded in May 2014 by the Paris Court of Appeal dealing with forced sexual relations during psychotherapy. The therapist and his wife were sentenced respectively to a suspended 1 year and 6 months sentence for abuse of weakness and 50,000 and 25,000 euros in fines.
- I would also cite the case of the “French Society of Jungian Analysts and Practitioners” led by Jacques Masset (sentenced to 4 years in prison for abuse of weakness, and banned from practising any profession in relation to the infringement, and one of his establishments was closed in 2016).
- So that you don't assume that deviant psychotherapy is the only danger, I would refer to the “Zeus” guru (Claude Alonso currently charged with rape) who promoted “group orgasms” to save humanity, located in South-West France.

Among the victims, I would cite the subornation of young women by Daech recruiters. Their organisation sends them on missions to create future fighters or to provide care, but for certain it is about ensuring rest and reward for warriors, which has been known in many armies.

2) We find female gurus at the other extreme end of the spectrum.

There are also women in positions of leadership within deviant groups.

They present themselves frequently as the self-proclaimed link between a divine being or a “higher being” and the rest of humanity.

Two French examples illustrate this position of female guru (the term is still surprising, proof that public opinion still thinks it is a position for men).

- The female guru from the Lisieux Welcome Centre, Françoise Dercle, in January 2013 was sentenced to 5 years of prison for abuse of weakness and 444,000 euros in compensation for about twenty civil party victims. Notably, she forced her followers to sleep with different sexual partners, sometimes within the same family.
- The female guru of the “Amour et Miséricorde” prayer group, Eliane Deschamps, who claimed she saw the Virgin, was charged with abuse of weakness in 2014.

These women led their groups with an iron fist, attracting both men and women, but requiring total submission from their followers.

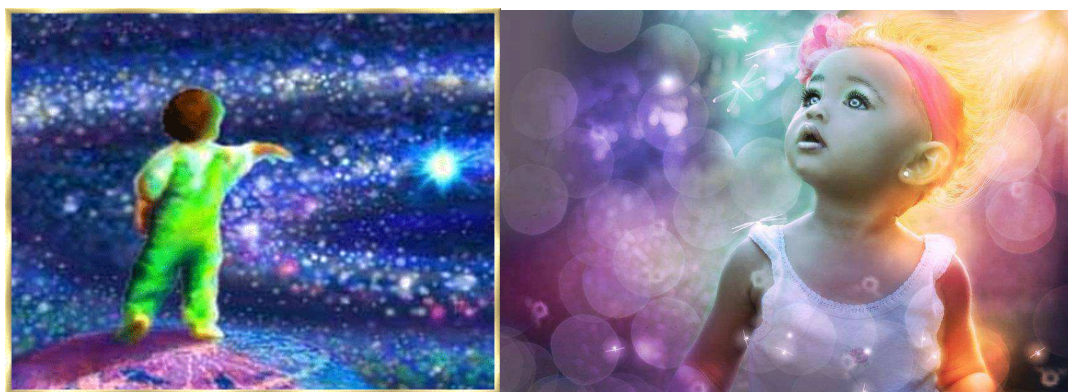
3) Between the position of women both as victims and co-authors of abuse of their co-followers.

- Here I am referring to women who are close to a guru, appearing to fully support their actions, and as such are led to participating in forced sexual relations within the group, in particular to climb the “ladder” in the hierarchy. For example, Brigitte Boisselier, French chemist who was the herald of the first human cloning in 2000 and 2002 by the Raelian movement.



Source: <http://fr.rael.org/seminars/?c=6&s=241> et <http://raelcanada.org/fr/gotoplex-day-2014-pour-liberer-les-femmes-devieux-tabous/> (Consulted May 12, 2016).

- I am also referring to mothers who are persuaded that their child is “special”, with specific talent of an “indigo child”. The “intervention” takes place when the parent is concerned by their child’s “abnormal” behaviour (attention deficit, hyperactivity, dyslexia, autism, high potential...) and is looking for solutions. The child is called “indigo” because its “aura” is supposed to be this colour, as such revealing their “little god” or superhuman characteristics, possessing superhuman powers.



Source: <http://angelsplace.perso.sfr.fr/EnfantsIndigos.htm> , consulted May 12, 2016

- Finally, I can refer to the case where a mother accepted “giving” her daughter to the guru because she was “chosen”. It is the common scheme of the “divine woman” chosen by the guru. As such, Hervé Granier, guru in Eastern France, raped a minor with the consent of her mother who was under pressure (sentenced to 15 years of criminal detention, sent to appeal in October 2013).

I would like to draw your attention to the development of two worrying phenomena. One is the emergence of movements that only focus on women and the other is the complacency of women’s magazines.

4) Women talking to women

The emergence of groups led by women addressing women exclusively is on the rise. Here are a couple of the many examples from around the world: “tentes rouges”, “Bénédiction de l’Utérus”, “Femmes-lumière”, “International school of the sacred feminine”, “Women within”.

These groups rely on women who have developed “personal fulfillment” methods focusing exclusively on femininity and energy brought on by her gender that every woman gives off when she accepts to cultivate it. Followers are “feminine”, of all ages, from puberty to maturity; they find themselves victims of a “belief” created by other women, and often promote the popular image of the strong-woman-in spite-of-her-cruel-destiny-that-she-was-victim-of or is-victim-of...

We can cite the “Bénédiction de l’Utérus”, practised and “taught” by Miranda Gray. It is a meditation aiming at bringing out the divine in the woman, accompanied with “care” and healing energy “channelings” which start from the uterus. Miranda Gray is author of *Red Moon – Understanding and Using the Creative, Sexual and Spiritual Energy of the Menstrual Cycle*, published in France in 2011.

5) The complacency of women’s magazines towards methods of alternative care is worrying.

Many women’s magazines promote personal development or alternative care methods, or publish interviews with fortune-tellers.

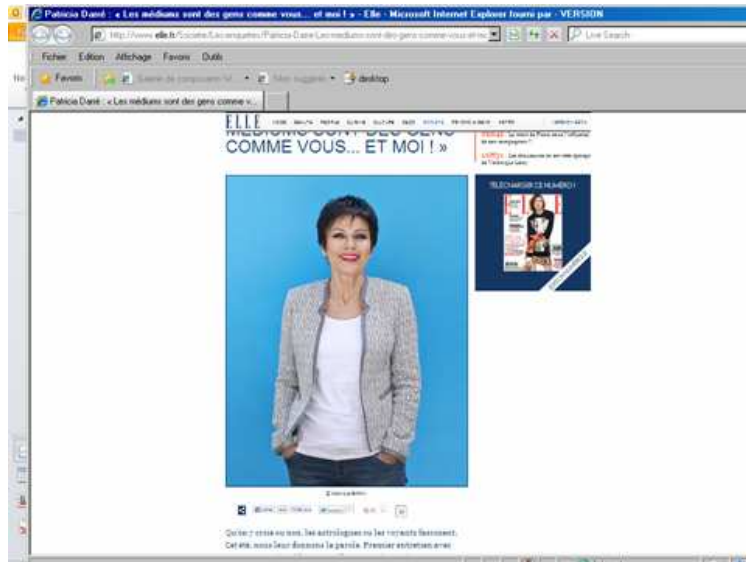
This is an increasing trend, and compares to the alerts received by Miviludes concerning websites or training programmes focusing on powers of feminine energy and femininity. Women’s issues forums are also a target to communicate around these themes, and many are strongly influenced by the “New Age” ideology.

MIVILUDES maintains good relations with the media in general and in particular with the daily press, which is a good relay for the actions by our Mission. On the other hand, we note aberrations in other media, which is an obstacle in educating the French population against pseudo-therapists in the field of health, specifically by promoting the merits of “soft” medicine.

To illustrate my statements relating to women's magazines and magazine media in general, I have chosen a few significant examples:

- During the month of June and July in 2013, the magazine ELLE published four portraits of astrologists.

The first, Patricia Darre, author of the book "Les lumières de l'invisible", published by Michel Lafon, declared: "Like others, I am able to communicate with a parallel dimension (...). I communicate with the deceased in a way that I cannot scientifically explain. I receive their messages from the beyond and I communicate them in a natural and spontaneous way, without making a fuss about it".



<http://www.elle.fr/Societe/Les-enquetes/Patricia-Darre-Les-mediums-sont-des-gens-comme-vous-et-moi-2465568>

- In June of 2013, the monthly magazine Marie France published an article called "I tested photographic therapy". To enlighten us (if I dare say) about this new method, Alexia Perchant, photographic therapist, explained her method. To the question "what tools do you use during your sessions" the photographer answered "tools that I have used during my personal work sophrology and relaxation to help me let go, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) to "anchor" positive emotions in ones' own image. I also use aromatherapy, head massages, music to help promote positive emotions. But, be careful, all of this is highly supervised; my protocol was validated by specialists from different professional fields (psychologist, sophrologist, art therapist and coach) to ensure the strictest and most serious work environment possible".



<http://www.mariefrance.fr/psycho/coaching/retrouver-confiance-avec-la-photographie-therapie-12690.html>

- Certain websites offer forums and as such interaction. Internet users who wish to exchange and dialogue look for this. Hundred or even thousands of websites and forums exist. You can find the address for a therapist, a miracle remedy or a health centre that uses only unconventional practices. You can find anything!

For example, on the Doctissimo forum, a discussion about “the law of attraction”:

Posted 01/29/2012 at 22:19:51

Good evening, I just read “the secret” and I now have the power of focused intent can someone tell me about how to become a practitioner please? I am passionate about the subject, the results seem to be positive but I feel lost and do not know where to start to put it into practice thanks in advance

http://forum.doctissimo.fr/psychologie/developpement-personnel/sujet_152407_1.htm

Whether to detect, expose, train or inform,

Miviludes will work with you to fight against cultic aberrations

Janja Lalich and Luigi Corvaglia

Introduction to Presentation

“Goodbye Mother: Children of Cults Leaving in Their Own and Starting Over”

Given the longevity of some of the cults that emerged between the 1950s and 1980s, we have learned more and more about second- and even third-generation “members” of those groups – that is, the offspring of those followers who joined the groups as adults. This presentation will highlight some of the issues related to being raised in a “self-sealing” (or cultic) group that typically (1) requires unquestioned adulation of a charismatic leader; (2) demands a high degree of conformity; (3) imposes behavioral, emotional, and sometimes physical constraints; and (4) is ruled by a closed (and most often, extremist) belief system or ideology. Not only did the children *not choose* to be in the group, but also they were raised to believe that there was no alternative worldview as well as having been taught to fear (and in some cases, hate) the “outside world.”

In line with the theme of this year’s conference “Women in Cults, Gurus and Victims,” my colleague on FECRIS’s Scientific Research Committee (English-Speaking Branch), Luigi Corvaglia, will begin with an overview of the relationship between mother and child – a core social relationship and one that is regarded, in most societies at least, as fundamental to child development. He will note how that relationship can be affected when the mother is in a cult. This will be followed by a summary of my research findings. Data presented here are drawn from semi-structured interviews with 63 individuals who were born and/or raised from an early age in one of 39 different groups, ranging from Christian fundamentalist to New Age eclectic to Eastern meditation and others. I should like to note that this material will be expanded upon in a forthcoming book under the tentative title, “Escaping Utopia: Growing Up in a Cult, Getting Out, and Starting Over,” to be published in 2017 by Routledge, and will be written with my colleague and co-author Karla McLaren, M.A.

Janja Lalich, Ph.D. ,Professor Emerita of Sociology California State University, Chico
Author of *Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships* (Bay Tree, 2006) and *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults* (University of California Press, 2004)

Preliminary Findings on Research on Children of Cults

Please note that these are VERY EARLY preliminary results of my research project, entitled *On Our Own: How Children of Cults Manage to Survive in the "Outside World."* I have just begun to analyze these data. Participant interviews were approximately 2 hours long, and all participants completed a basic demographic questionnaire, the results of which were entered into SPSS (social science analytical software program).

1. This is the first in-depth research of its kind, based on meetings and interviews with individuals who were born and/or raised in a cult. These individuals are sometimes referred to as "second-generation" cult members (SGA), although some of the participants in this research were "third generation." Most don't like the SGA moniker, as they feel they did not choose to be members. They could perhaps be called "adult children of cults," which is what I prefer to use.

2. This research includes data from 65 individuals who lived in 39 different groups and who left the cult on their own either in adolescence or early adulthood. "On their own" means they left without their parents or other family members, and in most cases without any outside assistance.

Interviewees consisted of 50 females, 13 males, 1 transgendered male, and

1 F-T-M transsexual.

The number of years spent in the group ranged from 7 to 41 years.

Their ages at the time of the interview ranged from 21 to 68.

The 39 different groups represented range from Christian fundamentalist to New Age eclectic to political to Eastern meditation to hippie communal.

3. In 34 cases, the mother is still in the cult; in 23 cases, the father is still in the cult. In 2 cases, the mother is now in a different cult; in 3 cases, the father is now in a different cult. More than half of the participants still have siblings in the cult.

Because of the large number of family members still in the cult, one of the most significant findings was that in most cases, for many years these individuals had little or no contact with their parents or siblings, and in about half still have no contact. In most cases, this is because contact is forbidden by the group. This enforced shunning of relatives is clearly detrimental to healthy human and family relationships.

4. While in the group as children, half were either home-schooled, attended group-run schools, or had no schooling whatsoever. The rest attended public or non-group-run private school, but typically they were not allowed to socialize with other children not in the group. For this and other reasons (such as strange dress, obvious devotion to some type of leader, odd language, distant behavior), these cult children were ridiculed (even by teachers at times) and often ostracized by other children.

No matter which type of schooling they had, once out of the cult, these individuals were at a disadvantage in terms of not having educational records, only one or two had education beyond high school, and many had barely an elementary education. Upon leaving the cult, they had no understanding of the American educational system or know how to go about "catching up." For example, they did not know about the high-school equivalency exam (GED), how to get into college or trade schools, how to apply for financial aid, and so on. In one instance, a young woman spent precious thousands of dollars and three years on a program she later learned was not accredited and was basically worthless.

5. Less than half (27) consider themselves religious or spiritual at this point, which is far less than the national average. Only 26 stated they believe in God or a universal presence. Meanwhile 22 are agnostic or atheist, 15 say they don't know, and 1 doesn't think about it.

Interestingly, 62 (or 95%) say they are politically aware and/or politically active. This is far higher than the average population. This may indicate that this type of experience makes a person far more leery of organized religion or any kind of religion, and far more concerned about political issues and current events (perhaps as a result of having lived such an isolated life at one time).

6. Almost 80% have no current relationship with the group and do not want any. These relationships are described as either hostile, has been declared an enemy by the group, or don't want anything to do with the group. Only 5 individuals said they have a good relationship with the group, and 9 said the relationship is neutral. This is particularly relevant given point #3 above regarding the number of family members still in the group. This intensifies the difficulties of any kind of reconciliation.

7. As for relationships with parents, 37% said they have good relations with their mother and 26% describe that relationship as neutral. The rest have either hostile relations with their mother, don't want anything to do with her, or she doesn't want anything to do with the offspring. (Note: the mother is deceased in 6% of cases.)

As for fathers, 38% have good relations with father and about 28% neutral. The rest are either hostile, don't want anything to do with him, or he doesn't want anything to do with the offspring. (Note: the father is deceased in almost 14% of cases.)

An interesting note is that more women (all of whom are now adults) have a better relationship with their father, whereas more men have a better relationship with their mother.

8. The majority of these individuals were sexually abused as a child/teen while in the cult, and many were physically abused. However, sexual abuse seemed more rampant and not surprisingly more psychologically and emotionally harmful. In some cases, the perpetrator was a parent, sibling, or other family member (e.g., an uncle). In most cases, the sexual abuse was kept hidden and was controlled by guilt and fear. In a few cases, it was integral to the philosophy of the group. Physical abuse was more open and often part of the group's teachings.

Some of these individuals do not yet have a healthy understanding of the abuse they were subjected to — either because they cannot face it, do not see it as “big deal” because it was happening to all the children or because it was part of the belief system, because they cannot figure out who to hold responsible, or because still feel guilty and ashamed. Inappropriate affect was common during these parts of the interview.

9. Upon leaving the group, almost to a person, these individuals experienced extreme confusion, depression, a sense of loss, anxiety, and fear, stemming from having defied the cult and from the years of indoctrination that the cult way was the only way. They also experienced extreme culture shock for most of them had been living a very confined and isolated existence. Nevertheless, a striking note was that many remarked that what surprised them most when they left the cult was how nice everyone was in the “outside world.” This is not what they were expecting, having been ingrained with the idea that everything outside the cult was evil, corrupt, and life-threatening. These brave individuals who struck out on their own found the opposite to be true.

Another important observation is that no matter how bad things got or how much these individuals suffered while trying to build a new life for themselves, every single person (except one) said they would never go back to the cult, and never thought about going back even in their darkest moments. For them, the most painful moments in the outside world were better than life in the cult.

11. Adult children of cults comprise a growing and uniquely vulnerable population. With thousands of cults active in America today and possibly several million people actively involved in a cult at any one time, this is a pressing social issue. The fact that many cults have been in existence now for decades means that second- and third-generation members — those born and/or raised in the group — are also growing in numbers. And as we are learning, these children of cults are leaving in droves. Many groups are battling ferociously to improve the retention rate of the children of their members once the children become teens and young adults. As a society, we need to be more cognizant of this group and their issues, and work toward providing recovery and rehabilitation resources for them.

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On Our Own: How Children of Cults Manage to Survive in the "Outside World"

- First in-depth research of its kind
- 65 individuals from 39 groups who left the cult on their own as an adolescent or young adult
- They left without family members & without any outside assistance
- All participants completed a basic demographic questionnaire
- The following are my preliminary findings
- To be published next year by Routledge

Socio-Demographics

- Gender Breakdown
 - 50 females
 - 13 males
 - 1 transgendered male
 - 1 F-T-M transsexual
- Number of years in group: 7-41
- Ages at time of interview: 21-68
- Types of group ranged from fundamentalist Christian to New Age eclectic to Eastern meditation to hippie communal

Family Situation

- In 34 cases, the mother was still in the group
- In 23 cases, the father was still in the group
- More than ½ of the 65 participants still had siblings in the group

Because of the large number of family members still in the group, one of the most significant findings is that, in most cases, participants had little or no contact with their parents or siblings. In most cases, this is because contact was forbidden by the group.

Thus, enforced shunning of relatives is clearly detrimental to healthy human and family relationships.

Education

- Half were either home-schooled, attended group-run schools, or had no schooling
- Half attended public school or a private school not run by the group ... *but typically they were not allowed to socialize with children not in the group*

For this and other reasons (such as strange dress, obvious devotion to some type of leader, odd language, & distant behavior), these cult children were ridiculed and often ostracized by other children.

Thus, these study participants were disadvantaged as children, and were ridiculed & ostracized by others as a result of growing up in a cult.

Education: Long-term Effects

- No matter what type of schooling they had, participants were disadvantaged as adults
 - No educational records
 - Only one or two educated beyond high school
 - Many had barely an elementary school education
- They had no understanding of the U.S. educational system or how to "catch up"
 - Never heard of the high school equivalency exam (GED)
 - No understanding of how to get into university, community college, or trade school
 - No knowledge of financial aid or how to evaluate different programs, e.g., accreditation

Politics & Religion

- Less than half consider themselves religious or spiritual at this point
 - Far less than the national average
 - 26 stated they believe in God or a universal presence
 - 22 are agnostic or atheist
 - 15 don't know
 - 1 doesn't think about it
- 62 participants say they are politically aware and/or politically active
 - Far higher than the national average
- *This may indicate that a cult experience makes people leery of organized religion & more concerned about political issues and current*

Relationship with the Group

- 80% have no relationship with the group
 - These relationships are described as
 - Hostile
 - Have been declared an enemy by the group
 - Do not want anything to do with the group
- 20% describe the relationship as neutral or good
 - 5 said they have a good relationship with the group
 - 9 said the relationship is neutral

This finding is particularly relevant since most participants have family members still in the group

Relationship with Parents

- 37% report good relations with mother
- 38% report good relations with father
- 26% & 28% describe relations as neutral
- Parents are deceased in 6% & 14% of cases

31% of women & 20% of men describe their relationships with parents as
hostile
don't want anything to do with them, or
s/he doesn't want anything to do with me

An interesting note is that women reported a better relationship with their father more frequently, while a greater number of male participants described the relationship with their mother in positive terms.

Sexual Abuse

- The majority reported that sexual abuse occurred while they were children or teenagers
 - Many were also physically abused
 - Not surprisingly, the sexual abuse appeared to be more psychologically and emotionally harmful
- The abuse was kept hidden, and in most cases, was controlled by guilt & fear
 - In a few cases, abuse was integral to the group philosophy

Interesting note: Individuals struggle to deal with the abuse, apparently because they cannot face it, see it as "not a big deal," do not know whom to blame, or continue to feel guilty and ashamed

Upon Leaving the Group

- Extreme confusion, depression, a sense of loss, anxiety & fear
 - Experienced by almost every participant
 - Explained as arising from having defied the cult & years of indoctrination that the cult way was "the only way"
- Culture shock
 - Most participants had been living a very confined & isolated existence
 - Many reported that what surprised them most was how nice everyone was on the outside
 - Every participant except one reported that no matter how bad things got "outside," they would never go back

Challenges in New Life

- Sense of alienation
 - "I felt like I had just landed on Mars"
 - No resources for practical matters
 - No help to understand their experience
- Repercussions
 - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), often undiagnosed for years
 - Floundering, odd jobs, frequent relocations
 - Re-victimization
 - Taking up drugs, prostitution, and/or life on the streets

Sources of Help

- What Can Be Done?
 - This is a uniquely vulnerable—and growing—population
 - Cultic group demographics suggest that large numbers of 2nd- & 3rd-generation members are leaving the cult

Thus, as a society, we need to work toward providing recovery & rehabilitation services for this population

- The Internet
 - Most common source of assistance was ex-member websites, either about their own or other groups
 - Contact online led to other resources and put them on the road to recovery

An insecure base: mothers in cults

" Mothers in cults are like matryoshkas (Russian dolls)"

(A cult is a Truman Show)

Luigi Corvaglia

Lauren/Sylvia: *Look at what you've done to him!*

Christof: *I have given Truman the chance to lead a normal life. The world, the place you live in, is the sick place.*

This could happen to you

Christof: *He could leave at any time. If his was more than just a vague ambition, if he was absolutely determined to discover the truth, there's no way we could prevent him. I think what distresses you really, caller, is that ultimately Truman prefers his cell, as you call it.*

The phrase; "This could happen to you", which stands out on a poster depicting a jetliner hit by lightning, is not exactly the kind of warning we expect to see in a travel agency. In the movie; *The Truman Show*, this is what the protagonist can see when he goes in to buy a ticket to leave the quiet town where he lives, always controlled, monitored and broadcast 24 hours a day.

The intent of Christof, the director and the demiurge of the show, is to prevent Truman from abandoning the stage-set which he believes to be a town inhabited by sincere and joyful people. To do this Christof is committed to creating within the unwitting protagonist, a fear of the outside world, by describing it as full of dangers.

Security is inside the group; danger outside; a manichean vision that recalls life in a cult. Even there, one or more demiurges; charismatic builders of new worlds; instill in the followers a fear of that which is located beyond the confines of the group. What is outside, if not dangerous is irrelevant. In one scene we can see the little Truman at school expressing the desire to become an explorer, and the teacher who responds promptly, "Oh, you're too late! There's nothing left to explore ... " There is no world outside the cult.

To prevent Truman from discovering his fake reality, the director has delicately invented ways to dissuade exploration and broadcasts fake channels with news reports on the dangers of traveling and television shows on how good it is to stay at home. So it might seem that the director, as the cult leader, if not guaranteeing positive freedom; that is the ability to choose, at least allows a kind of negative freedom; ie, the lack of impediments to the choice, but this is not actually true, because fear is an impediment. This is what Steven Hassan refers to when he writes:

When cult leaders tell the public, "Members are free to leave any time they want; the door is open," they give the impression that members have free will and are simply choosing to stay. Actually, members may not have a real choice, because they have been indoctrinated to have a phobia of the outside world. Induced phobias eliminate the psychological possibility of a person choosing to leave the group merely because he is unhappy or wants to do something else⁵.

⁵ Hassan, S., *Combating Mind Control*, Park Street Press, Rochester, 1990, p. 65

But there is another impediment that eliminates that possibility of a “free” choice and demonstrates that the lack of overt violence and explicit threats are not a guarantee of freedom. George Orwell points out the issue well when he writes:

*(...) public opinion, because of the tremendous urge to conformity in gregarious animals, is less tolerant than any system of law. When human beings are governed by “thou shalt not,” the individual can practice a certain amount of eccentricity: when supposedly governed by “love” or “reason,” he is under continuous pressure to make him behave exactly the same way as everyone else.*⁶

Truman “feels trapped into a familial and social world to which he tries to conform whilst being unable to entirely identify with it, believing that he has no other choice”, some psychoanalysts noted⁷.

2. Seaheaven. An insecure base.

Christof: *Seahaven is the way the World should be*

Everything we have said so far about the movie *Truman Show*, in addition to being an excellent metaphor for the management of a cult, is also the perfect description of how good parents should not behave with their children. The British psychologist John Bowlby told us clearly:

*All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organised as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures.*⁸

That means that children should develop trust in their attachment figures in order to explore and enjoy the world, safe in the knowledge that they can return to their secure base for help if needed. In other words, a secure base is provided by care-giving figures who are sensitive and responsive and support exploration, because they know that their children are sure of their care and can turn to them as a safe haven when upset or anxious.

Though the tiny town where Truman used to live was called *Seahaven* (ie, Sea Haven), its function is absolutely different from what Bowlby attaches to the safe haven provided by good parents. Seahaven is the only safe place for Truman. A “safe haven”, as Bowlby intended it, is the harbor where we can take refuge when the storm comes and a starting point for new excursions to the open sea. In other words, a secure base. Exactly what a cult is not. A cult, like the director of the *Truman Show*, discourages exploration. So what is lost, is the ability to look at the outside world with confidence. The sea is always stormy.

A manichean system in which every security is placed within the limits of the cult implies general insecurity and a strengthening of the attachment to the only perceived centre of certainty: the cult, its leaders, its teachings and its dogmas. That is what we call *insecure attachment*, whereas the condition of trust in caregivers and confidence about the wider world provides a *secure attachment*. Some studies suggest that insecure attachment is a risk factor for the development of a psychopathology in childhood and in later life. It seems that these first life ex-

⁶ Orwell, G., *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, 1950, pp. 71–72

⁷ Brearley, Michael; Sabbadini, Andrea (2008). "The Truman Show : How's it going to end?". *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 89 (2): 433–40.

⁸ Bowlby, J, *A secure Base*. Basic Books , New York, p. 62

periences of attachment affect self-esteem, self-regulation of emotions and behavior and the quality of relationships throughout life⁹.

3. Mothers in cults are like matryoshkas (Russian dolls)

Christof: *I know you better than you know yourself.*

Truman: *You never had a camera in my head!*

Some of the followers of a cult are mothers. Mothers should be a secure base for their children. Therein lies a problem. They cannot be a source of security and confidence because of their own lack of security and confidence. In fact, the imbalance of power between the cult leader and the follower is analogous to that between parent and child. The leader is supposed to be the caregiver. The follower is infantilized. It is a set, a fake island where the leader is wise, powerful, devoted and trustworthy in the opinion of the disciples and the world outside is dangerous and misleading. The mother is wise, powerful, devoted and trustworthy in the opinion of her child but inept, impotent and incapable without the leader's guidance with respect to her own opinions. So there is a bigger mother, the cult, which contains a smaller one, the disciplined mother. It is like a matryoshka. The child asks his/her mother for guidance and the mother asks the leader. How can an insecure mother give security to her child? What we know is that this insecurity in the mother is further fed, precisely by leveraging on the condition of maternity. In fact cults direct the mother's child rearing to increase the perception of non-control by these women, whose power is not recognized, even in the most natural context of care giving and taking of responsibility.

The ways to do this are:

1. Control of conception and pregnancy
2. Discouraging the mother-child bond
3. Control of time spent with the child
4. Actual or threatened removal of the child from the mother
5. Monitoring and judging the relationship between the mother and the child

The conflict between their own sense of what is right and the cult's control could lead mothers to three different solutions:

- a. The mother may continue to consciously disagree with the cult practices, but will give in externally to resolve the pressure being applied on her. These mothers are often characterized as bad group members.
- b. Some mothers may repress their sense of right, fully embracing the group's ideology, yet maintain an unconscious feeling that something is wrong. These may often be the "good" cult members.

⁹ Lorenzini R., Sassaroli S., "Attaccamento, conoscenza e disturbi di personalità", Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 1995

c. Some mothers may resolve the conflict by a total submission to the group and its deceptions, perhaps in exchange for a degree of power. These are the mothers who get permanently trapped¹⁰.

Mothers of group b., are like Truman who, according to the above mentioned psychoanalysts, lives "in a familial and social world to which he tries to conform while being unable to entirely identify with it". That's why he was able to get a boat and leave Seahaven.

4. Addiction and cults

Truman: Lauren, right? It's on your book.

Lauren: Lauren. Right. Right.

Truman: Well, I'm Truman.

Lauren: Yeah. I know. Look, Truman, I'm not allowed to talk to you. You know.

Truman: Yeah, well, I can understand, I'm a pretty dangerous character.

Intervening in the mother-child relationship means interfering with the deepest bonds provided by nature and disturbing what for many women is the basis of much of their identity. Why is this so important? Because the relational condition plays an important role among the factors that help to maintain a condition of dependence. To understand this, let's try to respond to this question: What causes drug addiction? Probably most of the people will respond "drugs with their chemical hooks". But if you break a leg, for weeks you'll be given an opiate more powerful than heroin but you will not become an addict.

According to a study by Canadian psychologist Bruce Alexander, there is another variable that explains the addiction to drugs¹¹. The experiment is called *Rat Park*. In his experiment Alexander created two environments: the first is the classic 'rat in a cage' to which morphine was administered and a daily amount of the drug left for it in a vial. The second, however, is a "paradise for rats," the Rat Park, complete with games, cans, running wheels, food and other forms of entertainment where rats could entertain social and sexual relationships. Even in Rat Park there was a bottle of morphine, this was also administered to the rats. The result was eloquent: the rat in the single cage stuck to the bottle and in no time it developed an addiction to drugs, losing interest in any other activity. The rats of Rat Park, after an initial enthusiasm, dropped the bottle. Some would return every so often to consume small amounts; others not even that. In a "social environment" that is broader and more interesting, the rat feels no need to "take drugs," the study concludes. We can suppose that, if it remains locked in a cage alone, the drug is an effective way of escape for the rat. It is, in fact, an adaptation to the circumstances.

This probably also occurs in the "cult addiction". In fact, the effectiveness of undue persuasion increases in specific relational conditions. So if we ask, "What causes enslavement to a charismatic leader?" The right response is not, "The leader with his or her psychological hooks". The process is very similar to that which we have just seen. In a cult we replace a

¹⁰ Stein, B., *Mothers in Cults: The Influence of Cults on the Relationship of Mothers to Their Children*, 1997

¹¹ Alexander, B.K., Beyerstein, B.L., Hadaway, P.F. & Coombs, R.B. (1981). The effects of early and later colony housing on oral ingestion of morphine in rats. *Pharmacology, Biochemistry, & Behavior*, 15, 571-576.

substance with new relationships and new theories. In other words, some people might surrender to persuasion because they live like the rat in the cage. What is offered to them is an artificial, good integration in a warm and safe environment. It's a kind of rat park. That could be a good world for a rat, but what about humans? It is an artificial reality. It's like Seahaven in the Truman Show, as we said. Another cage with the initial one inside. The cage of loneliness and dissatisfaction contained within the park rat; a painted cage, with no apparent bars and a blue sky drawn on the background. Larger forms with smaller ones inside. It sounds like matryoshkas again ... So, back to the disciplined mothers. It is clear that this condition poses a risk to the loyalty to the group and its leader. A good mother-child relationship could reveal itself as a viable escape route from absolute cult ownership. The power of love and the importance of the child in her psychic life could distract the mother from the cult.

A religious allegory that one could read into the movie we are using as a metaphor relates to the Garden of Eden, from which Adam (Truman) having eaten from the tree of knowledge, wants to leave. In every "heaven" (heaven) inevitably appears a snake. This is also the case in Truman's ersatz paradise. There is the woman who reveals to him that he is on TV, before she is removed from the set. His dream of finding her is also the dream which; at first he doesn't know he has; of finding the truth of the outside world. Well, the mother-child bond risks to be a tree of knowledge. A child could be the opening that reveals the light of the outside world and awakens the inner one. A fissure that a cult must necessarily seal, as Chrisof does trying to prevent contact between the star of his show and the girl he loves.

Truman Burbank: *In case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening and goodnight.*

A Secure Base

All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organised as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures. (Bowlby 1988)



support of exploration



safe haven when the child is upset

A **secure base** is provided through a relationship with one or more sensitive and responsive attachment figures who meet the child's needs and to whom the child can turn as a safe haven, when upset or anxious.

A secure base is exactly what a cult is not.



A cult discourages exploration



That's what we call
Insecure Attachment

A manichean system in which every security is placed within the limits of the cult implies general insecurity and the strengthening of the attachment to the only perceived center of certainty: the cult, its leaders, its teachings, its dogmas.

For infantilized mothers it becomes impossible to be sources of secure attachment for their children.

Mothers in Cults

HOW THE CULT DIRECTS THE MOTHER'S CHILD-REARING PRACTICES

- 1 Control of conception and pregnancy
- 2 Discouraging the mother-child bond
- 3 Control of time spent with the child
- 4 Actual or threatened removal of the child from the mother
- 5 Monitoring and judging the relationship between the mother and the child

(Alexandra Stein, 1997)

Intervening in the mother-child relationship means interfering with the deepest bonds provided by nature and disturbing what for many women is the basis of much of their identity.

Why is this so important?

Addiction and cults



Because the relational condition plays an important role among the factors that help to maintain a condition of dependence.

The conflict between their own sense of what is right and the cult's control could lead mothers to three different solutions:

- 1 The mother may continue to consciously disagree with the cult practices, but will give in externally to resolve the pressure being applied on her. These mothers are often characterized as bad group members.
- 2 Some mothers may repress their sense of right, fully embracing the group's ideology, yet maintain an unconscious feeling about what is right. These may often be the "good" cult members.
- 3 Some mothers may resolve the conflict by a total submission to the group and its deceptions, perhaps in exchange for a degree of power. These are the mothers who get permanently trapped.

Addiction and cults

An analogy



What causes drug addiction?

Drugs with their chemical hooks!

What causes the enslavement to a charismatic leader?

The leader with his or her psychological hooks!

If you break a leg you'll be given for weeks an opiate more powerful than heroin but you will not become an addict.

Rat Park Experiment

Rat Park was a study into drug addiction conducted in the late 1970s (and published in 1981) by Canadian psychologist Bruce K. Alexander



If you break a leg, you'll be given for weeks an opiate more powerful than heroin but you will not become an addict.



What causes drug addiction?
Drugs with their chemical hooks!
What causes the enslavement to a charismatic leader?
The leader with his or her psychological hooks!

In a cult we replace a substance with new relationships and new theories.

In other words, some women might surrender to persuasion because they live like the mouse in the cage. What is offered to them is an artificial good integration in a warm and safe environment. It's a kind of "rat park", but it is another cage inside the first one (matryoshkas again ...).

A good mother-child relationship could reveal itself as a viable escape route from the absolute belonging to the cult.



Goodbye Mother: Children of Cults Leaving on Their Own & Starting Over

Alexandre Cauchois,
author of "The Unusual and Secret History of Jehovah's Witnesses"

The Status of Women in the Jehovah Witnesses

Born almost 140 years ago, the Jehovah's Witnesses movement at its origins had several women as part of the direction of the organisation. As such, the President and founder's wife wrote and participated in an exclusively female group, which ensured that the organisation's choices were good.

Starting in 1916, early in the life of the movement, things changed. That year, local committees exclusively made up of women were created. Their role was to proselytize to convert new followers. They were sent to the homes of people and brought back those they met to public speeches made exclusively by men. Their mission was to attract, not teach.

The organisation quickly evolved into a totally patriarchal structure. Men played a predominant role while women were just "companions".

Today, while women can participate in activities that help grow the movement's followers, their place within the community is limited. In each congregation, women are all invited to complete hours of preaching, meaning door-to-door work. Given that many of them do not look for paid work, they widely participate in "the work of evangelisation".

I will first examine the structure of the hierarchy within the Jehovah's Witnesses. You will note that many positions are jealously kept by men. Then I will examine the place of women within the family unit and will finish with a recurrent problem within the movement – pedophilia.

Each congregation is made up of several dozen members. It is led by a committee, called elders, men usually over 35. They have authority over the members of the congregation to:

- Judge reprehensible actions by all the other members;
- Give instructions, most of which come from the branch office or Governing Body of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The instructions that they apply to all the other members of the congregation are written and controlled by other male members of the movement, "Overseers" named for regions. They report directly to the branch office.

Within branch offices both men and women work, but men are however more numerous. Most tasks can be completed by both men and women. However, a large percentage of the men are "elders" within the congregation, which once again places the women in a socially inferior position.

Certain positions are reserved for men within branch offices, in particular those dealing with managing the organisation's activities. The major religious questions, which stem from each congregation or followers, are forbidden to women. Only men can answer these questions.

The Governing Body functions in the same way. At the head of each organisation is a committee called the Central Committee, made up of about ten men. They are responsible for giving instructions that must be applied in all countries or in certain sectors.

Here is an example.

In February 1999, the journal *The Watchtower*, the official magazine for the Jehovah's Witnesses, distributed around the world, was published with the same texts in Italy and France. However, the French version published photos of women Jehovah's Witnesses with long skirts, which the Italian version had shortened the skirts by several dozen centimetres. If in France instructions dictate that "sisters" must wear skirts that cover the knees, the Italian instructions are much more liberal.

Dress is controlled by the elders. A woman can be reprimanded from the stands, in public, for dressing in what is judged an indecent way by the committee of elders of her congregation. In this case, she must meet with 3 elders, who will judge her within a "judicial committee". I will come back to this later.

Women are not better treated within the family unit.

Her first responsibility is the children's education. She is also responsible for training them spiritually. But her inferiority to men is total, because, and I cite, she must be "respect her husband". On the Jehovah's Witnesses official website, the definition of the word "woman" includes the following elements:

- a married woman is "possessed by her husband";
- a woman's role is to sexually serve men. The following quote comes directly from the Jehovah's Witnesses website: "He did not oblige the man to go seeking a companion among the animals, but he brought the animals to Adam for naming. Adam was not inclined toward bestiality and was able to determine that there was no suitable companion for him among these." Thus, God made woman...

- however, subsequently qualified as "his equal", the site affirms immediately after that "The woman, being created out of the man, was dependent upon the man for being brought into existence. Being part of the man, "one flesh" with him, and a complement and helper to him, she was subject to him as her head. She was also under the law that God had given Adam about the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. She was responsible to work for the good of the man. Together they were to have children and to exercise dominion over the animals".

So, it is as a tool for labour and as a mother that the woman finds her place within the home. This is supported by the "Description of a Good Wife". It says: "The happy state and activities of the faithful wife are described at Proverbs 31. She is said to be of more value to her husband than corals. He can put trust in her. She is industrious—weaving, making clothing for her family, attending to the buying of household needs, working in the vineyard, managing a household with the servants, aiding others who need help, clothing her family attractively, even bringing in some income by her handiwork, equipping her family against future emergencies, expressing herself in wisdom and loving-kindness, and, through fear of Jehovah and good works, receiving praise from her husband and from her sons, thereby honoring her husband and her family in the land. Truly he who has found a good wife has found a good thing and gets goodwill from Jehovah."

So, I think you can understand that the woman is an accessory that must be nice to her husband and the congregation. Within the home, she is qualified as a "weaker vessel", who must get her spouse's approval for the tasks she needs to do. She must be submissive even during sexual relations, given that she "has no power over her own body".

She cannot get abortions, irrespective of the reason she got pregnant. Jehovah's Witnesses have published texts describing "sisters" who were raped, who kept the child and are very happy, as they remained faithful to Jehovah by not getting an abortion. Of course, the texts never talk about the case of a raped woman who had a very difficult pregnancy...that doesn't happen it seems.

Concerning pregnancy, it must be noted that the refusal of blood also poses a problem when giving birth. Because of their beliefs, in fact Jehovah's Witnesses would rather die than receive a blood transfusion. And according to a clinical study completed in the US in 1998 and 1999, because of their refusal of blood transfusions, the mortality rate among women Jehovah's Witnesses who give birth is 44 times higher than among the general population.

I will continue with the role of the woman in the home. We have seen that she is inferior to her husband, but not only to him.

A campaign has been ongoing for several months, one that incites Jehovah's Witnesses parents to baptise their children as young as possible. Cases of boys and girls being baptised at 5, 6, 7 or 8 are no longer rare. When a boy is baptised, they receive a special status. In effect, his mother can no longer educate them spiritually without "covering her head", as such showing her "respect" to the baptised male. Mothers of families find themselves inferior to their own children within the home. This inferiority is judged to be divine.

The book Reasoning from the Scriptures states: "When should a woman cover her head? When she 'prays or prophesies,' as stated at 1 Corinthians 11:5 (...). However, she should wear such a head covering as an outward sign of her respect for man's headship when she cares for matters pertaining to worship that would ordinarily be cared for by her husband or by another man." Her son is part of that group, given he is a baptised male member.

You can also read: "Those charged with oversight of a congregation are described in the Bible as being males. The 12 apostles of Jesus Christ were all males, and those later appointed to be overseers and ministerial servants in Christian congregations were males. Women are counseled to 'learn in silence with full submissiveness' at congregation meetings, in that they do not raise questions challenging the men in the congregation. The women are 'not to speak' at such meetings if what they might say would demonstrate lack of subjection. Thus, although women make valuable contributions to the activity of the congregation, there is no provision for them to preside, or to take the lead by instructing the congregation, when qualified men are present. In contrast, if no man can teach, women could then teach with their head covered as a sign of submission to the celestial organisation of God."

A young boy who does not have the capacity to teach must receive his teaching from his mother, with the condition that she covers her head. It is the same if she must pray: she covers her head to show her inferiority.

Additionally, on February 15, 2007, the Watchtower discussed changes in society, first talking about feminism. "At the start of the 1960s in the US, women who wanted to liberate themselves from male domination launched a new 'women's liberation' movement. At the start of that period, about 300 men for every one woman abandoned their family, but by the end of the 1960s the gap was reduced to 100 to 1. Today, it seems that women swear, drink, smoke and behave immorally equal to men. Are they happier? No." That is feminism for this movement – it says it all. Vulgar, alcoholic women who smoke and sleep with everyone. It is a bit reductionist, no?

Let's talk about sexuality.

In 1969, rules started being applied concerning authorised or forbidden sexual relations within the couple. Starting from this period, women had to explain in detail their sexual practices to committees of elders. The elders would state whether her intimate relations were in accordance with divine will or not. Many couples were placed in difficult positions. In 1983, the Watchtower wrote about practices other than vaginal copulation as "unnatural conjugal relations", which could lead to "expulsion". This still applies today. It destroys families.

The elders are involved in every aspect of a couple's intimate life.

With regards to the wife of an elder, she does not have the right to know about the files her husband is handling. In fact, the wife, judged as a "gossip", presents the risk that confidential information would be communicated to unauthorised persons.

As such, the wife of an elder must accept that her husband attends meetings reserved for men, continually absent from the home without having to justify his actions, given the “secret” character of his role.

Additionally, this secret is a tool used to hide unsavoury acts, mainly pedophilia.

And Australia is not an exception, given cases have been noted around the world.

It is serious enough that the association Silentlambs, which helps victims of sexual abuse within congregations, qualifies the sect as a “paradise for pedophiles”. A file held by the Governing Body of the Jehovah’s Witnesses lists all the cases around the world. Several years ago, it contained the names of 23,700 Jehovah’s Witnesses pedophiles.

We have seen that a woman can be banished from the congregation if she wears clothing judged inappropriate by elders, or because she decided to divorce her spouse, or because she had an abortion, perhaps following rape. How is pedophilia handled?

The first element that will be analysed by elders is the presence of at least 2 witnesses, people who were present at the scene. If no, the pedophile cannot be found guilty, unless they recognise the facts.

Here is a letter sent from the Governing Body of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to all congregations in 2012: “Elders must keep in mind the following clear biblical directive when they analyse testimonies for the exclusive purposes of religious discipline: “A single witness cannot testify against a man about any fault or sin. It is only on the word of two or three witnesses will the case be heard”. (...) As such, while the elders verify each allegation, they are not authorised by the Scriptures to undertake an action within the context of the congregation unless they have the confession of two reliable witnesses.”

She was fondled and must explain it to 3 men, sitting in front of her, all serious in their suits and ties.

The committee of elders, in most cases, to save the reputation.

If they are found guilty, they are only rejected from the movement if they don’t “repent”. Once again, the members of the congregation will not learn why they were banished from the movement. And they can return if they “sincerely repent”. It is the same elders that will judge the value of their “sincere repent”.

What should one think about the overly numerous cases of elders, themselves pedophiles, who were judged by their peers?

Adult or child, among the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a woman is a tool to create followers, but is very inferior to men. A situation that will not change given one of the Jehovah’s Witnesses gurus, Geoffrey Jackson, indicated in front of the Australian Royal Commission in 2015 that it is out of question that women participate in judgements for acts of pedophilia within congregations. And there will never be a woman with responsibility within this sect that counts more than 8.2 million members around the world.

Joni Valkila, Director of UUT (FI)

How the Laestadians, an extra-conservative cult present in Finland, Scandinavia and North America, violate women's rights

News Articles 17.3.2009 klo 15:40 | päivitetty 17.4.2012 klo 1:12

Archbishop : Laestadians' Birth Control "Lifestyle Choice"

Archbishop Jukka Paarma says his recent appeal for the Conservative Laestadians to relax their restriction on birth control relates to lifestyle choices and not to the doctrines of the Laestadian movement.

The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church says it does not want to comment on Laestadian doctrines. Archbishop Jukka Paarma says different views on various issues do not threaten the unity of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

There are hardly any differences on the core aspects of faith. What comes to watching television, using birth control or going to the theatre are more or less lifestyle matters that different church branches can hold various opinions on", says Paama.

The Finnish League for Human Rights recently drew attention to the Laestadians when it remarked that birth control is linked to human rights.

Conservative Laestadians are considered an exception in Finland's thoroughly secular society. The puritanical lifestyles shared by the movement's members and the religious restrictions. Such as those on the use of birth control, repeatedly make headlines.

"Laestadians Don't Need Bans"

The Conservative Laestadian movement's leadership, however, denies the existence of indoctrinated bans. Laestadian leaders say their members inherently know right from wrong.

Conservative Laestadians believe they are the only true representatives of God's kingdom on earth. Although conservative in their views, Laestadians are not opposed to women in the clergy. This is because Laestadians don't consider male Lutheran ministers righteous clergy members.

"We believe that we are at the core of the Lutheran faith", says Olavi Voittoinen of the Central Association of the Finnish Association of Peace, a conservative Laestadian organisation.

Sins in Conservative Laestadianism

- – Premarital sex is a sin.
- – Contraception is a sin.
- – Homosexuality is a sin.
- – Wearing any makeup is a sin (as well as colouring your nails).
- – Having piercings and/or tattoos is a sin.
- – Dyeing your hair is a sin.
- – Any music from the last century is horrifyingly sinful.
- – Being a professional athlete/actor is a sin.

- – Going to the cinema is a sin.
- – Having a TV is a sin.
- – Alcohol, drugs, gambling and swearing are sins.
- – Being a female priest/preacher is a sin.
- – Movies and kissing are frowned upon.

Child Welfare Researcher Johanna Hurtig from the University of Tampere says the first of the current cases date back to the 1980's. The SRK claims also earlier cases are included.

Proceedings in some 30 cases are currently underway from the last decade. The SRK issued an internal report on the issue on Thursday.

The Chairman of the SRK, Olavi Voittoinen, admitted the committee had dealt incorrectly with the issue over the years.

“Insufficient care has been given to individual victims”, Voittoinen said.

Secrecy has shrouded the cases and in some instances the abuse of confidential-ity has been used to cover up matters.

Testimony from a young Laestadian

Hi everyone.

First off, I want to apologize for my relatively weak English.

I'm a 17-year-old female high school student in Finland. When it comes to religion, I'd say that out of all the young Finnish people most are atheists (me included).

However, I was born to a very strict and raging religion called Conservative Laestadianism. It is a Lutheran revival movement and the most successful Laestadian movement. There are about 155.000 Conservative Laestadians, and most of them live in Finland, Sweden and USA.

I was brought up and brainwashed in a very close-minded community. It seemed to almost intentionally try to keep me separated from the other (normal) kids. I was taught that only Conservative Laestadianism can sell you the ticket to heaven. However, the prize isn't exactly the lowest:

- Premarital sex is a sin.
- Contraception is a sin.
- Homosexuality is a sin.
- Wearing any makeup is a sin (as well as colouring your nails).
- Having piercings and/or tattoos is a sin.
- Dyeing your hair is a sin.
- Any music from the last century is horrifyingly sinful.
- Being a professional athlete/actor is a sin.
- Going to the cinema is a sin.
- Having a TV is a sin.
- Alcohol, drugs, gambling and swearing are sins.
- Being a female priest/preacher is a sin.
- Movies and kissing are frowned upon.

I may have forgotten some unwritten rules, but the list above gives you an idea of the kind of life I'm supposed to live.

As I grew older and went to school, I was very insecure and ashamed of who I was. I tried to

hide my religion from my friends as well as I could. But often I felt like I was missing out on life, since I wasn't allowed to do almost anything.

When the school started to teach about evolution, I was just utterly confused. But since it all made sense, I started to believe in scientific explanations about the universe. However, I had to watch my mouth at home, because I was afraid that my parents might get mad. Later on I learned that they actually believed in evolution, because "God's day can be a lot longer than ours".

As I became a teenager, I started living a secret life. I listened to modern music, danced if I wanted to and went to movies with my friends. I abandoned religion and became an atheist. However, because I hid everything from my parents, I felt like I had no real control over my life. Future seemed scary and uncertain. I started cutting myself and controlling my eating habits to escape from reality. I was screaming in frustration but no one heard me.

However, now I've decided that I don't want to hide anymore. But coming out of the closet isn't easy. There is no way I could gracefully escape from the cage my family's religion has built around me. Because the Laestadian community is so large and powerful, it will certainly raise a huge fuss if one decides to leave it. I'm happy with my social life and I don't want other people to see me differently. I don't want to become the black sheep. I'm also afraid that people would start pointing fingers at my parents, since my brother came out as a non-believer just about a year ago.

I'm also concerned about the problems this religion causes. All the decision-makers in the community are men. Stressed mothers of oversized families are often depressed. Intolerance of certain people (e.g. gays) is encouraged. Young people feel insecure and lost in today's world, which so eagerly feasts on things that are considered sinful.

I wanted to bring this particular religion to daylight and hear your thoughts on it and the dilemmas I'm facing.

Thank you.

Testimonial from a former follower of the Lisieux Welcome Centre

From a Prayer Group to Slavery

I will certainly be less theoretical and technical than the people who have already spoken, but I want to share with you what I experienced...

I had a happy childhood. My mother was a very orderly and authoritarian, when she said something we quickly obeyed. She was very attentive to her children; she took good care of my brothers and me. But when I turned eight, my father started touching me (he didn't rape me). At the same time, he thought I was worthless: when I said I wanted to be a nurse, he said I would only ever be able to be a farmer. Those two ways that he treated me caused internal conflicts, and it is perhaps my childhood that created a fertile ground for what happened later, as I had a strong need for recognition.

I left the house young and got married. We had a son, but my husband was an alcoholic and extremely violent and I had to leave him because I was really scared that he would kill me (I divorced him shortly after). My mother was in contact with the businessmen of the Full Gospel and she suggested I go with her: "You should come. You'll see: it feels good to hear about God." And it helped me, even if my faith wasn't all that strong! Later I started going to an evangelical church; many things took place in my life, meetings, and my faith really grew.

I met D, the father of my children, during an ecumenical gathering and we got married very quickly.

Meeting and Prayer Group

I met Françoise Dercle (FD) in 1996: we were colleagues where I worked as an educational assistant in a hotel school. We had a couple of common friends, who were also Christians. It was what brought us together. English teacher, FD also led a “Jesus Workshop” (a time for searching and discussion) in this school.

What attracted me to her was that this mother was close to her children: she had a way of educating them, spending time with them, doing things with them...I really admired her, she was the kind of mother I dreamed of being, a model! In my eyes, everything she did was good, her children obeyed her, they were good pupils in school, nice to everyone, and above all self assured.

In school FD was liked by all the students, even those who didn't like English, and additionally they progressed very well. Very active, FD organised European trips and exchanges for the students. The dream for me was to become a woman like her. She was very charismatic. We spent more and more time together.

She prayed a lot, she spoke about God in a very lively manner, which appealed to us. Once a month, the members of an English evangelical church came and taught our prayer group about the Bible. Then, FD organised annual meetings with them.

The better my English became, the more I noticed that she didn't translated exactly as I had understood, thus denigrating myself once again, I said to myself: “she is the one who knows”.

Very quickly, she starting to create links with us, to become closer to us, to listen to what we had in our hearts, to get us to speak so we would tell her our daily problems.

First Signs of Her Hold

In 1997, she made D., my husband, quit his job to work as a volunteer managing the home of an Englishman, which served as a welcome centre for English Christians coming to rest in France. That was where our prayer group met.

At the end of 1998, the owner of this house no longer wanted to welcome us, we went to live in Lisieux, in the empty rooms of a school that had moved. Gradually, the Christian meetings with FD attracted more and more people.

It was during this period that the “heart to heart” discussions started. She spoke to us individually, alone, for hours and hours. She searched our past, made us talk, and because finally someone was listening to us, we delivered: she knew a lot about each and everyone one of us, which allowed her to then “pull the strings”, to use everything she heard to make us suffer.

Over time things changed. Before, when we prayed for someone, we put our hand on our shoulder or things like that. Now, there was no time to pray like that. She spoke like that about the bible or God, but without using the bible. Then, we started to cuddle together, but only with her. She placed us in situations that we wouldn't have experienced if we had not met her. She made us jealous because we all wanted to be in her arms. Personally, I was part of the group she rejected, for years and years.

In 2003, she took my husband from me: “he doesn't belong to you anymore”, she said, and she ordered me to return my engagement and wedding rings. At that moment, I thought about leaving...but she had already spun her web, for five years, day after day, she held her hold over us. I feared ending up alone with the children. It was too late, I was “addicted”, I was dependent of her. Even if I had a home and salary, given that our home was in my name and my salary allowed by family to live...I really suffered, she spent a lot of time with D. And I spent my time thinking about what they might be up to.

The meetings were more and more frequent; then started the times when we would cuddle in each others arms, then she placed tatamis on the floor to be more comfortable. The more it happened, the more she grew on us...and the more we helped to develop the guru in her. Gurus can't exist if there are no followers...

Celestial Meetings and Navigations

Then FD found new techniques to chase away demons. According to her, in fact there are two types of personalities in each person: a "God personality", which manifests itself when everything is going well, and a "Demon personality" which is the source of difficulties, illnesses, problems. That was when the "Celestial Meetings" started: we would surround her, and she would spit or vomit (literally) demons, we did so as well; we fought to be against her, we pushed to be beside the queen.

Little by little, we arrived the "Navigations", lying on the tatamis. What is supposed to happen will happen: a man and a woman from the group got undressed and started to make love. It was a sign from God: to chase away the demons you need to make love. Additionally, when you make love, or rather when we "navigate", if we are with God it is not carnal, it is spiritual...And as the "Woman Mistress", with absolute powers, FD organised who went with who, when and where.

She became more and more directive. Women who did not work became her cleaning women, or rather her subjects, her pawns that she moved and she would do what she wanted to do to them. She was very authoritarian, everyone was scared to displease her; so we would do everything possible to make her happy, but anyways it was never good enough, because what is good one day is not the next. She is the only one, the chosen one, the living Holy Spirit, the only one who knows!

Terrorised and Totally Submitted

It is increasingly terrifying; however, we have the feeling that what she is doing what is good for us. We all need recognition and, while she never hesitated to hit us, to treat us as worthless if things didn't go as she wished, we spent our time trying to please her.

Then FD decided to buy a house so that we could all live together in a true community to please God and so that people could see that we were happy. This house was bought with the money from the sale of several follower's homes, including my mother's. Anyways, money is a demon, and FD knew what to do with it, no us. For the glory of God, and to chase away the demons, she would look at our accounts and tell us how much we must give and how to share it out. She knew us so well that she would use us where it would be most effective. She took all our time, tired us out; she was a tyrant...and yet we never complained about her.

In 2005, the infernal life started in the house. For such different people, it is extremely difficult to live together, especially since FD made people jealous by separating couples, by organising who slept with who. She commanded, gave orders, nothing could be done without her authorisation. Everyone denounced, either on paper or by email, those that did bad things. Françoise knew everything, we were her subjects, she called herself "the queen", we lived in a dictatorship.

For each of us, no need to think, everything was organised by FD: "I am not responsible for anything, nothing is my fault, no need to make decisions".

Investigation, Arrest, Trial

In 2006 a follower made a complaint. This act would lead to the start of an investigation, and the police used phone taps. They were analysed by Dr. Parquet, a psychiatrist. The investigation would lead to the arrest of FD and members of the group in June of 2007. I went to prison for six months,

first having been considered FD's right hand, before then being recognised as a victim after psychiatric evaluation.

Françoise Dercle was sentenced after appeal to five years in prison for fraudulent abuse of a state of weakness.

My children were placed in a foster home for three years.

I would like to share with you the education that was given to them from almost their birth till they were 9 and 11: this education did not allow them to grow and develop their identity. Luckily, they did not take part in the adult meetings. But they never had to think, think about their needs nor to reflect, as the adults took care of them, following an established plan, doing it for them.

And nothing could take place without the authorisation of Françoise. They were educated without being unhappy, or dropouts or de-socialised, but outside of the realities of life (no organisation of school work, for example).

When they came home on weekends, I reproduced the same things, I felt guilty that they were in a foster home and I gave them everything they wanted and more! They were never confronted with frustration, so I will leave it to your imagination how difficult their adolescence was, and still is...

Awareness

Being dominated by someone can often lead us to commit harmful acts that are serious and irreversible. Looking back, I realise that if FD asked to "navigate" the children, I probably would have allowed it.

I am fully aware that it is very difficult to judge followers that are victims and who are coauthors of serious acts, but under her hold, FD would have made me give her the moon, make love to who ever, or, why not, go as far as killing...Still today, I often ask myself the question how far she could have made me go, because due to the love I had for her, I was no longer able to judge, but above all it was so that she would love me and that I was important in her eyes. I always had an increasing need for recognition.

I have become very distrusting once I feel that someone is trying to manipulate me, sometimes even for day to day things; my biggest fear still today is to once again be recruited.

Conclusion by Danièle Muller-Tulli, President of FECRIS

The title for our reflection during this "Women in Cults, Gurus and Victims" was not chosen by chance.

Today, all international organisations, the UN, Council of Europe, have placed a special emphasis on "gender". Why?

Because it is not only a way to repair harm done to women over decades, but above all a society cannot be called "democratic" if the question of equality between men and women is not seriously dealt with.

The added value of the FECRIS is without a doubt the diversity of the presentations as well as the geographic diversity of the speakers, who came from North America and Eastern and Western Europe to support their colleagues from Bulgaria, where the CRNRM "Research Centre for New Religious Movements", located in Sofia, is a member of our Federation.

The dean of the SULSIT University, State University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Prof. Stoyan Georgiew Denchev, a remarkable personality in the political, diplomatic and cultural worlds, was unfortunately not able to open the conference as expected.

However, he sent a warm welcoming letter to the participants, reminding them of the importance of the respect of human values in democratic societies, as well as the importance of information and prevention against deviant groups.

During this enriching day, the speakers from FECRIS showed that women in cults suffer serious harm to their integrity and dignity. The testimony of a former follower of a group directed by a woman provided a touching illustration.

It has shown, once again, that the cultic system is a totalitarian system that does not respect the fundamental freedoms that are the foundation of democratic societies. Their practices must be continually condemned.

FECRIS commits to doing so through its actions in international organisations

Annex : Testimony of Nicole Schneider, author of “Seven Years Under Influence”¹²

My name is Nicole. Today I am 59 and mother of four children. I have been divorced twice, I live alone, but not isolated, in a very rural and wild setting, which reflects many of my personal character traits, those that I always had.

Because it was that side, the wild, natural, simple side, that attracted me to Guy-Claude Burger's cult. He promoted a “return to nature”: eat everything raw by trusting our instincts, just like before the invention of fire and sedentary life.

As a teenager, I was part of the scout movement. I lived my first experiences of freedom with my peers: evenings singing, drinking and dancing around a fire in the middle of the forest. My parents were very strong supporters of scouting. They were part of the La Rochelle group since they were teenagers. They may have met each other there. In the 1970s, they would take us camping with the “nudists”. I don't know why they liked that, walking around naked. I didn't.

When I attended Burger's conference on anopsology (eating raw), my father was sitting beside me. He was the one who suggested I come. He had always been interested in nutrition, more for managing his weight than concern for his health or ecology. He only found it interesting. For me, it was a revelation. I just came back from a two month stay in Vietnam, a country still at war then. I had seen misery and hunger, everywhere, the violence of war, the devastation caused at each level. I was 17. On my return, I was traumatised and confused. But I didn't have any one to talk to. If one sentence caught my attention during Burger's conference it was this: eating raw calms nervous tension. Raw food eaters are calmer. Additionally, eating only what nature offers us allows us to feed the whole planet. There would be no more hunger, no more violence. There would be no more wars.

This shortcut could make you smile. And it made many smile, I guess, in 1974, at the time that Burger stated this. For me, it was the total opposite. I couldn't see how I could continue my life where I had left it before leaving for Vietnam. But a man, Christ-like, a scientist and musician, offered me a solution that could fit ALL my needs: calm my worries and my guilt by allowing me to act, while not necessarily opposing the values that my parents had given me. I could be an actor in this movement that wanted to change the world through healthy nutrition and a simple life in the country. When Burger asked me if I wanted to join him on his farm where he lived in a community

¹² by Mon Village, 2002

with his wife and six children, because, according to him “I would fit in well in the country”, this declaration, however weird, made me ecstatic: I said YES.

I still had not reached 18 when I entered the main room of this farm for the first time, located in the Gros-du-Vaud, a place where I would spend several difficult years. But I still didn’t know that. Accompanied by my parents, who came with me that day, and Burger, it was never supposed to be more than a six month “internship” before I was to start at the Source nursing school in Lausanne, where I was already registered.

The idea of this internship in the country probably pleased my father, who read Mao and spoke to me of these young Chinese who had to go to the countryside before, for those who wanted to, go on to higher education. And the image of the broader family in the perfect natural setting reassured parents who would much prefer the farm than knowing their girl was in a nightclub consuming too much alcohol, like most young people were doing at my age.

Burger immediately sized me up. He did what no one had ever done – he gave me responsibilities and his trust in my ability to fulfil them. It was very gratifying for me, as I had lived in the shadow of a powerful and constraining mother. I was finally someone, a capable person, someone you could count on. I worked very hard. And I quickly proved my worth and became the manager of the bio-food store located in the basement of the farm. I spent my days there under the neon lights. But I liked to prepare the orders, wrap up the fruit and vegetables that we sent to followers of anopsology. I piloted this ship to port every week, and on Fridays and Saturdays I loaded the bus for the markets in Geneva and Lausanne to sell our bio products. We were like a precursor to eating well and eating bio. And I liked it.

When the end of my internship was approaching, Burger offered me another deal: No to go to school and stay with them. In return he would provide me with a course from a follower who was a doctor, a sort of training programme that would allow me to receive patients who came to Burger because they were unhappy with traditional medicine.

This traditional medicine had condemned Burger, who had throat cancer but which was healed by raw food. He explained this in detail to me to change my mind.

Traditional medicine wasn’t reliable. Anopsology was the medicine of tomorrow.

He was so persuasive that I gave up my studies. Of course, I never received the training that I was promised.

And this was the role of women, at least in this community. For Burger, women did not need to be trained but needed to work. He always encouraged the men to complete their studies. Those that he associated with were all graduates: a doctor, two mathematicians, a biologist, an architect, etc....he himself was a physicist.

Women were only good for housework, administrative tasks, sales, repetitive and difficult work.

Additionally, he denigrated women’s bodies. Starting from puberty, but above all from the moment where hips and breasts developed, his look changed, accompanied by humiliating and unflattering remarks. Women’s bodies, sensuality, eroticism seemed to turn him off. Make love to a mature woman, and above all to enjoy it and want it, was a form of failure for which he blamed the woman who, according to him, made “men fall into a basic state, an animal state, focusing on reproduction” and dragged them down to the “bottom”. The other, second state, a state that opened one up to the “extra-sensorial, the spiritual”, could only be experienced between initiates, particularly between a man and young or very young people.

That's how it was for women in this community. And, despite the distaste he had for women, they nonetheless had to be “tossed into the pot” as our grandmothers would say, the goal being to mark their bodies while his statement marked their spirit.

These “relations” (again a term from our ancestors), at least those I experienced, were only “formal”. The act was mechanical, accompanied before and after with a drawn-out speech that hid

the deviance of the abuser, his affective poverty, his need to control and dominate the other, etc. I never felt destroyed after this “act”. It was no more or no less than what women experience with their spouses all the time, just a bad moment to get over with. In contrast, everything else was destructive. The fact that this man was my father’s age, the fact that he tried to force things on me, take control of my life, his contempt. I could only describe it as paradoxical with what should have been a moment of exchange, beauty and love. I guess it affected me very deeply, surreptitiously, and had serious consequences subsequently, both for my life as a woman and for my children, especially my daughter.

Abuse never leaves you unscathed, either physically or mentally. In the case of the women in Burger’s community, the abuse took place both physically and mentally.

We no longer owned our bodies and our minds. Burger did what he wanted, controlling all our relationships (sexual, friendship) with others, building them from scratch to serve his interests.

This is what happened with the father of my children.

Burger knew that I needed an affective reason to stay, and he did what was necessary. Like he did what was necessary to “get rid of” my first pregnancy, judging that the time was not ripe. As he did what was necessary to have control over the father of my first son and prevented him from leaving the community while I was praying he would. And for a long time, he succeeded in keeping us in his prison, until his craziness, his deviance, became too much and ended up alerting the man that became my husband. We left the cult with our two very young children before they could fall, like we did, into the hands of the guru.

After having written the book that told the story of my time in Burger’s cult, titled “Seven Years Under Influence”, I often heard, and justifiably so: you are lucky you could leave! But it is a sentence that only those that have lived the same experience can say. First, for me, during that period I was not aware that I was living in a cult. No one was talking about cultic communities in 1982, at the time me and my husband found ourselves alone with our children. In this regard, before I could express anything about this topic, I had to listen to others, which made me realise that I was not crazy when I suffered, that my suffering was legitimate, not pathological as the guru said. Someone had to express the suffering that they would have felt if they had been in my situation, because I could then look in the mirror and access my own suffering. But it didn’t happen. And for years, I wasn’t able to talk about this experience, and the suffering remained deep inside, leading to life choices that harmed rather than healed my life. Additionally, and even when being taken care of, which can be the case today for victims of cultic excess, the process is long and hard. We left the cult, the guru, the followers, the rituals, etc., but we remained bound, influenced, subject to ways of thinking that did not belong to us, and in such an insidious way that we could live years under the influence, without even knowing it.

Leaving a cult, like any other form of influence, does not solve the problem permanently. On the contrary. To free oneself, if and when you can do it, you need patience and help. Without it, one’s mental health can be strongly altered, as it was the case of the first of Burger’s chosen ones once they left the cult. I don’t quite understand by what miracle I was able to escape. Probably thanks to my children who, just by being present made me want to fight. Thanks to them and thanks to the work that I did for myself, over time, when I was able to let my experience emerge, what I was able to write about it and that my life allowed me to meet several particularly good people who listened to me helped me transform this trauma into a work, an account to transmit to my children so that, in the words of Boris Cyrulnik, “the ghost returns to its grave”. This ghost that haunted our lives for so many years.

Yet it still haunts mine, sometimes. But no longer in the same way. Today, I take care of my wounds slowly, after I finally understood that no man, irrespective of his love, can heal me in my stead. I envelope it, I cradle it, in order that it feels recognised and placed where it should be, its rightful place, not intrusive but not inexistent. In my heart. An integral part of who I am.