

# FECRIS CONFERENCE –2<sup>ND</sup> JUNE 2018 – Education versus Cults

## Presentation by Laurence PEYRON – MIVILUDES

### EDUCATION IN THE FACE OF SECTARIAN RISK in France: Observations and elements of analysis

#### Introduction

The theme for this conference, "Education versus Cults", will be considered in this presentation through the lens of French legislation.

As a preamble, here are a few remarks on the terminology and on the approach I have taken.

The term "education" is here understood and taken to be the teaching of minors. The education which we are speaking about is that which will enable him/her to develop his/her personality, to be fulfilled and to be socially integrated, having acquired a solid base of knowledge, skills and culture. Thus the minor, on becoming an adult, will be able to face his/her personal life and manage it as a responsible (and fulfilled) citizen of the society in which he/she is evolving as a person.

I will not use the word "cult", but instead the notion of sectarian deviance adopted by the French public authorities in 2002 (Creation of MIVILUDES). This term is more in conformity with French law, notably with respect to the texts relating to freedom of belief and laity.

Having defined the terminology, we can now broach the subject of "**Education in the face of sectarian risk**", in a clear and concise manner.

The first part of this presentation will allow us to define the context in France over the last few years. To do this, we will briefly explain the current legislation and then indicate the most pre-occupying issues at this present time.

Following that panoramic view, the second part will allow us to analyse the risk factors relating to the education of minors due to this context, in France.

#### I Context

France is since 1990, a signatory of the International Convention on Children's Rights; education is a right guaranteed by the State and must allow and encourage the healthy development of the child's personality and the development of his/her mental and physical aptitudes, but must also prepare the child to assume life responsibilities within a free society, in a spirit of peace and tolerance (...).

#### The institutional Context

> In France, "Education is the first national priority". It is governed by the **Educational Code of Law** which states that, "The right to education is guaranteed to all in order to allow him/her to develop his/her personality, to raise his/her level of initial and further training, to integrate social and professional life, to exercise his/her role as a citizen."

The Educational Code of Law does not apply to extra-curricular activities such as educational hobbies, the scouts, overseas holidays.... which will not be dealt with here.

My presentation is focussed on school teaching as it is defined by the public authorities. Teaching is obligatory from the age of 6 to 16 (and will soon start at 3).

- > Obligatory teaching has the objective of enabling the child by the end of his/her schooling (age 16) to have acquired a common foundation of knowledge, skills and culture which has been defined by law. Such teaching is obligatory, but not schooling. A child can thus be taught in a teaching establishment OR not be placed in a school, but taught by the family.

There are two main types of teaching establishments in France:

- \* State schools or private schools operating under contract with the State, all covering more than 12 million pupils. The State schools are all secular and the private under contract are mainly religious, or secular with specific characteristics. (83% of pupils are in State schools and 17% in private establishments)

And

- \* Schools that are not under contract, covering about 74 000 pupils

Private schools under contract with the State are under educational and financial control by the State. They apply the educational programmes set by the Ministry of Education. Many religious establishments are thus under contract with the State. This contract obliges them to enrol children without any consideration of their origin, opinions or belief. In return, the State pays the teachers, who have passed competitive, qualifying exams equivalent to those of the State system and the Local Authorities finance the running of the establishment to the same proportions as they do for State schools.

Schools not under contract: Families and associations fully finance the costs of the establishment, including both the salaries of teachers and the running costs. They are not bound to respect the national curriculum, BUT MUST bring the children under their care to the level of the "common foundation of knowledge, skills and culture which has been defined by law."

- > **State supervision:** National Education inspectors supervise the whole of the education system (6>3 years to 16 years) in accordance with procedures defined by the legal Code for Education.

### **How does French Law deal with the protection of minors against sectarian deviance in the field of education?**

The situation of minors in the face of sectarian deviance covers a multitude of circumstances. The child may have parents who are already adepts, or be taken to be a "vector", (for example a practitioner who decrees that the child is an Indigo child), or adolescents may be seduced by some absolute and alternative discourse. Prevention and anticipation are central to our legislation. Sectarian deviance is taken on board in terms of risk and no longer just in terms of fulfilled danger (The Law on Child Protection of 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2007).

With this logic to prevention, we favour an approach involving a gathering of risk indicators relating to sectarian deviance susceptible to harming minors:

- Isolation and social exclusion
- Physical harm
- Inadequate diet
- Interruption of medical follow-up and the prevention of medical care
- Dropping out of school
- Significant behavioural changes in a child
- Recruitment (indoctrination)

- Stereo-type discourse or lack of autonomous expression

**Prevention against the sectarian phenomenon** is acted upon by the National Education system and since 2012 is ruled by a Government circular entitled, **Prevention against the Sectarian Phenomenon**. The authorities delegate responsibility for this to correspondents in each Region as well as at national level. These are MPPS advisors who have been in very close communication with MIVILUDES. The Circular explains the rights of children with respect to education and defines the fields targeted in the monitoring work against sectarian deviance: the different places where the child may be taught, but also the agreements with associations which operate within state managed establishments and educational support organisations. They explain how to identify a risk factor, what is the chain of responsibility, the obligations to comply with, as well as the actors involved in the process: ALL National Education staff.

The legislator has thus set a framework which allows parents to retain their freedom of choice with respect to education, whilst protecting children against the risks involved and giving himself the means to foresee and manage the risk of sectarian deviance in the educational field.

The "current news" context

We have in this country, in recent years been facing the growth of a discourse that seeks to discredit the National Education system as well as the powerful entry of "well-being" in many forms, in the field of education.

The discredit is being pushed by associations that fight for "freedom of education", "the right to be different", "home schooling", etc., and we can observe not only propaganda from many different horizons, but also a sort of amalgam that is willingly nurtured between the very different alternative teaching methods being offered. Nebulous organisations are born and proliferate, all claiming to offer miraculous solutions to the root problems.

What are the visible consequences of this?

### Teaching within the family:

The teaching of children can take place in the family by choice, or when a child cannot be placed in a school. Teaching within the family, often called home schooling, must allow the child to acquire the knowledge and the skills defined by the common foundation of knowledge, skills and culture. The teaching given and the child's progress are monitored by inspectors on an annual basis. This concerns about 7 500 children. Those who cannot go to school because of various reasons (health, high level sport or music...) are not counted in the same way as they have lessons by official correspondence. The CNED (The Centre for National Distance Education) is responsible for its administration.

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Graphique:

Titre: The growth of home schooling from 2007-2017 (Ministry of National Education)

Growth in the number of home schooled children

As a percentage of the children subject to obligatory education

NB pour les pourcentages mettre des points à la place des virgules

Children not enrolled with the CNED

Children enrolled with the CNED  
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The observation is very clear: we are facing a very strong progression in home schooling over the last few years, as there were almost twice as many home schooled children in 2014 as in 2007.

What are the arguments developed by the families which have chosen to educate their children by themselves?

First of all out of personal choice, for example: "Teaching one's own child is above all to allow learning and discovery within the heart of the family, putting teaching at the heart of education. Learning happens quite naturally at the heart of the family as the child grows. Parents can easily adapt to the specific way their child functions and can take the time necessary to allow the child to deepen his/her preferred subjects. The child is bathed in a warm and positive environment which enhances self-esteem." (Source: Web-site C.I.S.E. Association: Choisir d'Instuire Son Enfant - Choosing to teach one's child)

But also and increasingly so, because of rejection of the national education system: If some families choose to educate their children from the start, others decide to withdraw them from school because of painful experiences at school. It is true that some children are not able to be fulfilled at school and can even lose all their enthusiasm and living joy. Not being able to dialogue constructively with the teaching staff, the parents decide on home schooling.

Quote: "Schools today mainly use teaching methods that do not allow all children to flourish because they only encourage the use of one part of the brain." (Source: C.I.S.E. Association: Choisir d'Instuire Son Enfant - Choosing to teach one's child)

Hence, some put forward personal convictions and others give credit to the deemed failure of the education system, or both.

We are at the same time witnessing the **sprouting up of schools that are nor under contract**, that is to say, that are not integrated within the State education system.

It is not very difficult in legal terms to open a school that is "not under contract" in France. It is only necessary to find a place for classes, to have the baccalaureate, not to have a police record and to make the appropriate declaration to the relevant authorities (Town Hall, Prefecture and the National Education Authority.) The arguments against the opening of such a school relate to "moral standards" and health and safety conditions, but not the so-called "educational" project.

A few figures: We note that within schools that are strictly not under contract, in 6 years the number of children taught is in strong progression; exponentially so. This evolution is tied to a 93% increase within schools for children under the age of 10 years, whilst the number of children in secondary schools is slowly diminishing (by 18%). The overall increase of 11 402 children is minimal compared to the more than 12 million children in State schools and private schools under contract, but what raises questions is the rapid increase. The numbers have doubled in 6 years.

We are currently facing the growth of schools offering alternative teaching methods that are more or less recognised as such, or even so-called democratic schools with evocative and enchanting names such as: "The sowers of schools", "Flown away, The school of Autumnal learning", or even "The Sparkling School." In order to really understand this development, the first so-called democratic school opened in Dijon at the beginning of the school year in 2015. At the 2017 school year start, there were 37 and more than 50 such projects were submitted for opening in 2018. Local press articles continue to be published every day. Their educational project is described as their mission: **Our mission: fostering an approach which allows children to make their own choices with respect to learning and all other domains relating to life.** The young should be allowed to choose what they do, when, how and with whom, as long as their decisions do not transgress upon the freedom of others to do the same. They should also enjoy equal rights of decision over the functioning of their organisation, notably with respect to the internal rules and their application, thus participating in the establishment of a framework of freedom, trust, security and respect.

The mode of functioning of these schools is of a "sociocratic" nature and a child learns what he/she wants when he/she wants, the adults being "facilitators" of learning. Some of these schools open in eco-villages and integrate the alternative life-style of the village. Or sometimes they found an "eco-village" around an alternative education project in line with the school's teaching methods, as for example the village of

Pourgues: **"The Pourgues Village**, launched in 2017, is a place of living founded on the values and methods of the democratic **Sudbury** schools.

*At the heart of this 50 hectare area of habitation, our project encourages us to review our vision of the child, of our neighbour and of ourselves at the bosom of a **democratic collective which promotes liberty equality, responsibility and the respect of the life and nature around us.***

*The village of Pourgues has the vocation of being a place of welcome: training programmes, events, intensive courses, collective projects...."*

Here then is a quick panorama of the proposals that do not cease to sprout and to progress in terms of "non-school" education. It should be well noted that these shoots are very well maintained and irrigated by structured and organised networks or federations. Festivals or other events now regularly take place to which diverse and varied non-conventional practitioners are invited. The potentially sectarian dimension as well as an analysis of the risks will be considered in the second part of this presentation.

We end this image, which is deliberately not commented upon, by what can also be revealed "in the school" (The State education system):

**And in the school?** More than 12 million pupils

In parallel with the discrediting which encourages leaving the State education system, we are also facing an infiltration, or a move to enter into the heart of the establishments managed by the State, of proposals linked to "we-being" in school, and also a masked attempt to seduce young adolescents by organisations that are sadly well known to us all. For example the Church of Scientology sends into the State schools documentation on causes that are likely to seduce the young: humanitarian for example through the association; "Youth for human Rights" (YFHR). This isn't new! And more, in establishments for further education (post-baccalaureate) individual offers of multi-level sales, fasting and trekking, meditation, coaching in "stress management" to prepare for exams... I won't expand on these matters which do not really concern minors; although they do touch State managed establishments.

Let us stay a short while with the proposals relating to "well-being" which are linked to alternative medicine. On the pretext of "living better together" or "managing stress", some associations are offering sessions on meditation, teaching on NVC (non-violent communication) , or even massage between children in classes led by relaxation therapists (Sophrology). A multitude of pseudo-educational propositions are being seeded at the heart of State managed establishments, leading to both problems and questions. The practices being offered are sometimes linked to non-conventional therapies for which no serious scientific study has ever proven their efficacy.

Thus, associations generally having quite common titles such as, "XXX and education" use fairly classic commercial strategies:

- Honourability: The Web-sites, the references and the persons involved are all presented as being founded on sound scientific bases and experience.
- Deliberate confusion: Recognised training (not in fact recognised by the public authorities), qualifications...
- The seduction of teaching staff: "We have the solution" to your problems (of school environment, of learning children's difficulties, well-being, performance...)

The example of a meditation course offered on its Web-site by an association which reveals a great understanding of the education system seems very "honourable" and presents a well-structured programme. Here (fee-based) training sessions are offered to schools with well-defined objectives:

- " Week 1: Developing body and breathing awareness
- Week 2: Deepening body-breathing sensitivity
- Week 3: Strengthening anchorage, balance and vitality
- Week 4: Exercising concentration capacity
- Week 5: Becoming conscious of one's emotions
- Week 6: Learning to face stress and emotions
- Week 7: Developing self-confidence
- Week 8: Cultivating listening, kindness and altruism
- Week 9: Opening oneself to heart presence
- Week 10: Sharing and transmitting"

This association is not approved by the National Education system, but everything on its Web-site would make one believe that it is. It has more than 200 trainers in France and offers courses for school children, but also the training of trainers (also fee-based) for an exclusively developed programme.

In the same way prudence is called for in the face of the rise in adult training offered, notably to National Education staff on "non-violent communication", or also the Enneagram test for personnel in private schools under contract.

## **II An analysis of the risks by MIVILUDES**

At MIVILUDES, our vigilance focusses on those contexts which are propitious to the emergence of sectarian deviance. It is a matter of warning of potential risks. We know that the sectarian approach is often masked and presents itself under a multitude of different facets. It is the "initial approaches" that we know reasonably well and that are quite easily identified by people who are sufficiently informed. (This nevertheless represents quite a few restrictions!) For example, when associations linked to Scientology attempt to make an entry into schools, even if some don't spot a fire, the establishment is warned to be watchful. Recently, the Ministry of Education sent letters to the local academic authorities to warn them of these campaigns and calling for vigilance.

MIVILUDES is regularly solicited by the education authorities to evaluate potential risks of deviance related to individuals or associations working in classes or training for teachers. It is not rare for us to find links with groups or associations which have been drawn to our attention as being deviant or susceptible to this.

In terms of risks, we will analyse what can be the result of these teaching practices or pseudo-teaching practices:

- Imprisonment (real or symbolic)
- Indoctrination of thought
- False teaching
- The violation of fundamental rights

The anxiety of parents for the future of their children, their distress in the face of a child's difficulties in the area of school or education in a wider sense, or even their deep convictions, can led them to turn to practices which will, little by little take hold and drift, drawing their away child with them.

The development of establishments that are "not under contract" with the State, offering alternative methods of education, is particularly attractive for children in primary as the number of those enrolled here has nearly doubled in 6 years. The teachers that we find in these establishments can be presented or grouped in terms of a few "tendencies", where we find:

- Problematic teaching methods: Steiner
- "Innovative" but un-evaluated teaching methods: For example so-called "democratic" schools based on the Sudbury model.
- Teaching methods which are known but which have strayed: Montessori (a name sometimes used to mask other influences)
- Religious schools: traditionalist or fundamentalist movements...

The programmes of these alternative schools, both very vague and inadequate or extremely structured, do not always allow the child to embark on a serious learning programme. The problems range from amateurism to charlatanism passing through dramatic situations where violence is sometimes exerted on children by ill-equipped pseudo-professionals. On the 24/04/2018, there was a court case following serious dysfunction in a school bearing the Montessori label. The director and a teacher were judged for "violence against children under 15 by a person with authority". The pupils were having siestas in the toilets or ate cold meals out-side the usual meal times. The court hearing lasted 11 hours, revealing that these "teachers" were confronted by children with difficulties and being overwhelmed, had recourse to brutality on very young children. An interior decorator, the director took training in this alternative teaching approach before opening the "not under contract" school. This unfortunate example shows that there is no guarantee of serious teaching or of the respect of the declared teaching method.

Amateurism clearly presents certain risks, but we must also and especially be the protectors that warn against (potential) sectarian deviance. The education dimension almost always suffers when a child is in a situation of sectarian risk. In a more general way, as soon as practices are imposed within an educational establishment to the exclusion of all other practices, or a discourse to the exclusion of all other discourses, there is a risk for the children.

The development of home schooling can deprive children of contact with other children and lock them into a harmful parent-child relationship, leading to the loss of learning opportunity with its consequences on the child's development. This type of teaching also enables certain groups to put children under undue influence. In 2016, the case involving children in a Christian inspired community, Tabitha's Place, was monitored by MIVILUDE and the Ministry of National Education. The situation of the children is extremely preoccupying: Corporal abuse, playing banned, inadequate teaching. After refusal to comply with injunctions following investigation; the case was reported to the judicial authorities.

At the heart of schools managed by the State, the multiplication of offers linked to meditation, lauded as good for everything, but particularly so for children and also tied to well-being, needs to be monitored. We must ensure that the teaching, the discourses and the actual practices aimed at these young people correspond to the declared objectives. The efficacy of meditation has not been evaluated, the training courses are not regulated and the spiritual dimension of this practice, though more or less present, is often hidden.

In the face of the increase in training programmes for National Education staff in "Non-violent communication", the minister is calling for prudence. MIVILUDE is calling for vigilance because of the fact that under the cover of non-violent communication, certain individuals or groups can pursue other objectives, take the upper hand over a person or a group and possibly abuse of their power. Some notifications we have received reveal that that certain groups put forward introductory courses or workshops on non-violent communication in order to gain the confidence of schools, professionals and private individuals.

Deviance often takes root in fear and the search for "miracle" solutions when confronted with real problems.

**Conclusion:**

Education is a new market. There is a desire to penetrate it to offer services that respond to needs. These emanate from structures that announce success where the State is presented as having "failed". There are clearly financial stakes, but also the means to control thought. Thus, groups that do not necessarily share the same objectives combine within this picture; ranging from amateurism to fraud and passing sadly through mind control. We are obliged to be attentive as we seek to apply our capacity to perceive and to interpret in order to respond rapidly and reliably to a situation which could become problematic.

I believe that this conference will give us some areas of light for us to apply our full vigilance in the field of education and thank you for your invitation.