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The approach to the question of cults usually triggers off passionate reactions by defenders of these movements inclined to claim a religious dimension under the contestable name of "*New Religious Movements*" or under the even more pernicious label of "*minority of conviction*". I do not think that our day of reflection can escape a systematic attempt by cultist movements to exploit the recurring topic of a pretended attack to fundamental freedoms of which they are the supposed victims. The title of our debate will certainly be interpreted by them as a provocation:

*"Cultic drifts: a challenge to democracy and human rights"*.

The cults would certainly have preferred that the INGO conference continues to follow them in their customary inversion of values which have become the leitmotiv of their lobbying activities when complaining of the alleged attacks against fundamental freedoms by national policies aiming at assisting the victims of cults/sects (**assistance to the victims** and not **anti-cult**). Each year, cults further attempt to involve various international institutions, whose good faith can sometimes be abused<sup>2</sup>, in the direction of pretended "attacks against religious freedom".

Little by little however it seems that, except within cultic special interest groups, more and more people are beginning to understand that contemporary cults have nothing in common with the old interpretation of the word "cult" which meant a religious dissidence.

One of the first criticisms to which I expose myself is to hear my general approach of the phenomenon invalidated by some people who will argue that one cannot speak of one or another cult in the same manner because each one has its specific characteristics. I am not unaware of this criticism, which aims to cut short any reflection, but I maintain that there are also some unvarying cultic characteristics, fundamental ones, around which a useful debate can be launched.

### **Contemporary cults have nothing in common with religion**

The cults assert and use this confusion, with a certain success, for several reasons:

- to obtain a form of legal immunity under the pretext that convictions should be respected
- to obtain tax exemptions attached to religious status,
- to benefit of social recognition,
- to produce a cultic group cloned on the basics of a religious organisation: a practice in which cults excel,
- to legitimate the guru by giving him the status of spiritual guide,
- to show the guru as a reassuring being, worthy of a blindly granted confidence,
- to induce the conviction that the guru and his cult are altruistic and charitable,
- to introduce a misleading confusion between religion and spirituality

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<sup>2</sup>See for example the recent report of Mrs. Asma Jahangir, "special rapporteur on the freedom of religion or conviction" in the United Nations of March 8, 2006.

To continue viewing the question of contemporary cults from a religious angle results in that the essence of the phenomenon is today overlooked in the fields of health, wellbeing, personal development, psychotherapy, business training, science, culture, etc.

The confusion between cults and religion strengthens the error behind which cults hide with all the more virulence that they manage to persuade their followers to spread their delusion, bringing it figurative life and making of them militants and propagandists of their cause.

Actually, the purpose of this confusion is to inhibit the analysis of the cultic phenomenon in its essence because the cult's core is an exclusive and totalitarian idea. Religion is only one of the masks, among many others, adopted by certain cults to attract and make future followers feel good.

The analysis of Max Weber, still used by some, (which believes that the sect constitutes the first phase of religion) is a XIX<sup>th</sup> Century concept which does not take into account the XX<sup>th</sup> Century's totalitarian experiment. I am tempted to say that NRMs (New Religious Movements) are actually very often NTMs (New Totalitarian Movements).

To introduce today's presentations, I should first clarify what I mean by such concepts as "cult" and "cultic drifts".

### **The concept of cultic drift**

The term "*cultic drift*" in the title of today's working group, should be understood as covering those new media of influence of a cultic nature which escape the definition of the term "sect/cult" in its religious old-fashioned meaning.

A clarification of vocabulary: the concept of "*cultic drift*" bears in itself the seeds of possible confusion. It could ultimately make one believe, wrongly, that only the "drifts of cults", i.e. ordinary penal acts that cults might possibly be blamed for, should be taken into account, which we can assume is merely a useless tautology and could be interpreted by cults as a proof that they are not dangerous because the victims do not often promote legal actions.

On the contrary, the concept of "*cultic drift*" must be understood in the more open sense whence ideologies, practices or techniques mainly of new age inspiration can drift towards a cultic form. But as soon as the drift becomes clear, i.e. when within a group an individual is subjugated by another who has, via doctrines and practices, auto-declared himself leader, it is a cult we are dealing with and all beating about the bush is superfluous. I therefore prefer to call a spade a spade!

This being said, I am not tempted to become a totalitarian fanatic and remain resolutely in a non ideological and respectful approach of the convictions of others, convictions that, furthermore, do not interest me apart from the intellectual analysis which can be made of them.

For over thirty years, I have been consulted by, listened to and tried to help cult victims. This work has taught me, on the one hand, to attach importance, with understanding of course, to the victim's words (that cults purely and simply deny and dismiss by describing them as "*words of apostate*") and, on the other hand, to note the fact that no former follower ever spoke of drifts but simply of the relation of influence of which he/she had suffered.

Cults today **are mainly abusive structures of power** and they should be approached under that angle. The main objective is to protect the followers from the aggressions to their personal freedoms to which they are subjected as members of a group and secondly to ring the bell at political level against the cults ultimate bid for power.

To stay close to the title of this working day, I shall consider the aspect of "**challenge to human rights**" as constituted by cults - or cultic drifts - firstly by describing the processes of deconstruction under influence to which followers are submitted inside cultic groups. Then I will endeavour to explain the "**challenge to democracy**" by cults. Two chapters therefore: one on the individual within the cultic group, the other on the cultic group and its existence in civil society.

### **Cultic undue influence is a violation of human rights**

The concept of influence, of course, is contested by the cults and shall briefly be developed below.

Two **contemporary definitions of the concept of the cult** will give you an idea of what this term covers:

The definition given by **the CNCDH**<sup>3</sup> (National Advisory Commission of Human Rights) qualifies them as "*groups which arbitrarily give themselves a totalitarian social status tending to make of their members subjects out of the norm and the laws, thus preventing them from making free and voluntary decisions*".

A second definition is given in article 223-15-2 of **the French penal code** (Law About-Picard of June 2001) which allows a clearer idea to emerge by explaining the process of constraint:

*"a cultic movement is a grouping which undermines human rights and fundamental freedoms (title of the law), with has as objective or result to create, maintain or exploit psychological or physical subjection of individuals taking part in these practices, subjection resulting from the exercise of serious or reiterated pressures or of techniques likely to deteriorate their judgement, while fraudulently misusing their state of ignorance or their situation of weakness, thus leading these people to carry out an act or abstain from acting, in both cases events seriously prejudicial for them. The guru is the de facto legal leader of such a group."*

These two definitions help to understand that today the cultic group can no longer be defined as having a religious dimension even if sometimes the latter is used as a façade.

Another definition falling within the concern of **the Council of Europe** which considers that cults are "*organisations which may have illegal activities to an extent which deserves that notice be taken at a level of competence of the public authorities and that of policy guidelines for actions to undertake in view of prevention and sanction*".

The two definitions which I have pointed out above have the merit of initiating the notion adding to other current infringements (i.e. physical violence and damage to property) that the illegal activity of cults also causes a loss of freedom to persons under influence. But these

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<sup>3</sup> **CNCDH** (Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme)

definitions do not account for the "*challenge to democracy*" except to consider, rightly, that democracy is not an immediate achievement but is built brick by brick by dedicated individuals but that cults could possibly break it down.

### **The specificity of cultic victimisation**

A short explanation on the subject of the uniqueness of victimisation due to cults and "cultic drifts": cult followers are chronic victims who undergo **prolonged and repeated** victimisation in an undefined lapse of time with **multiple traumatisms**. They are always (whatever the cult) victims of undue influence and whose state of **weakness has been abused**. Contrarily to current victims of tangible aggressions, visible or sudden, caused by a third person, the cult followers are **unaware** of their state of **victim** and are not conscious of **the mental influence** of which they are the object. One can thus affirm that they are deprived of the lucidity which should accompany the freedom of assent to which the decisions of the European Court of justice attach so great an importance. Not being subject to **any visible constraint** (threats, burglary, aggression, rape or sequestration) the follower believes he is **free** to come and go, free in his choice and acts. In fact, this pseudo freedom consists of becoming dependent of the guru who has persuaded him that he is a prisoner only of himself and of his personal determinisms from which the guru can release him... provided that he blindly follows what the guru orders.

**The unconditional trust and love** given by the "victim–follower " to the "aggressor–guru", combined with a child-like relationship, loss of character, dependence, created by the "Master" leads the follower (whatever his age) to suffer a kind of an **incestuous traumatism or its contrary, an incestuous atmosphere in a non incestuous environment**. This is what the jurist would have to analyse as an attack on human dignity.

Under cultic influence, the follower inevitably feels guilty when he **doubts**, when he uses his **discernment**, just **to think for himself, to dare criticize** the words, the acts, the writings of the guru, **to disobey**.

He is also guilty of **blocking his own development** (or what is presented to him as such by the cult), of slowing down the cult's development, of polluting and "pulling down" the guru. The follower, persuaded of his guilt, feels guilty for having **failed in the mission** for which he believes that he is "predestined".

You can legitimately ask yourselves about the conditions set up for this breaking down of the individual inside the group?

At this stage, having ruled out any existing confusion with a religious dimension even though the group may claim this dimension, if only to proclaim itself an "atheistic religion" or to cynically assert their religious dimension as a tool for financial profit, we should explain what a cultic group is.

### **The concept of « cult »**

**The cult whatever its size has a dogmatic state-like official structure.**

**Official structure** because the cult is a genuine "mini-State" organised and managed by its own created government.

This dimension, not detectable at first sight, except in cults like the Japanese "Aoum of supreme truth" which had distinguished itself by criminally spraying Sarin nerve gas

into the Tokyo subway and had gone as far as setting up its own government, becomes obvious if one thoroughly analyses the cultic movement's operating mode.

Official structure as the cult has all the constitutive attributes of a State legitimating, on the one hand, the guru's sovereignty in the eyes of the followers and, on the other hand the cult's **prevalence on profane society**. These royal attributes are articulated around a certain number of concepts:

- Gouvernamental empowerment
  - Legislative: the guru, generator of internal standards, enacts his own laws which will, depending on the specific cult be more or less elaborate. The cult's legislative system considers itself above national law, (this justifies false evidence for example in legal procedures and the theft of files...)
  - Executive: The guru empowers himself to apply his own law inside the group.
  - Legal: it is the guru himself who sanctions any failure to respect the cult's standards.
- A territory, be it real, has surveyed limits registered in the cadastre, or be it symbolic, will be either "a place of energy" or "vibrations" the purity of which has to be protected by borders which little by little become prisons to the followers.
- A people: constituted by the group of followers consolidated around a conviction and considering that it is an elite.
- A leader: the guru is the head: omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent be he dead or still alive.

The artificial and phantasmal construction of this new form of State, built around several components reinvented by the guru's delirious imagination, into a very "new age" "**change of paradigm**" pack. Concept of change of paradigm which hijacks all the "new methods" which are sometimes themselves "cultic drifts" which, when examined under the loop, are nothing but old warmed up recipes.

Among the components of royal attributes of these mini-states, one can find:

- A specific form of speech (a kind of Orwellian language)
- A registry office (each follower receives a new name)
- A filial relationship and genealogy, often founded on karmic bonds
- An educational system for the children
- Teachings for adult followers
- A medical system
- A collective mythical history in which each member receives a predestined role including the gurus hagiography
- A stereotype aesthetic mostly of painfully poor quality
- A group culture (sterilised and sterilising).

This state-like cultic structure is a **hegemonic structure** insofar as it implies supremacy, political and social superiority... over other institutions (thence the need to penetrate the social structures, when it does not seek to participate in a puerile project aiming at an implication in a "world government of wise men"). This hegemonic official structure is also totalitarian because all power is held by a single party (the guru's) and any form of opposition is banished.

Such aspects, which could be illustrated by many cases drawn from current cultic groups, should alone make you understand why the cult, the cultic scheme of things, is a challenge to democracy. The invasion of the countries of the ex-communist block by cults illustrates this process of power grabbing disguised under the pretext of helping to introduce democracy whereas they were only attempts to replace a collapsed order by an old-fashioned tribal one which is that of the cults.

This state-like hegemonic structure that contemporary cults represent is headed by an absolute self-appointed authority, the guru, who declares himself invested of "superior" knowledge, and has been incarnated on earth to carry out a "divine mission". This leading authority has no counter-checks since it does not benefit of any internal or external anti-establishment force made impossible by the confusion of power in the guru's hands, therefore no possible control emanating from other sources of civil society (medical, social legal, educational, etc.) It was extraordinary to hear the hullabaloo made by cultic sympathisers in France on the occasion of a surprise visit to a cultic group by the ad hoc parliamentary board of inquiry investigating the delicate question of children in cults, to measure the degree of cultic rejection of all counter evaluation!

I should stress the fact that there is no separation of power inside the cultic group (legislative, executive and legal) which makes the guru an uncontested and undeniable totalitarian leader and refer you to Montesquieu's writings<sup>4</sup> on the subject. It is this absolutist capacity, exerted by only one person, which characterises one of the main cogs of the concepts of guru and cult. Just a brief word on cultic judicial power which ignores the elementary requirements for the protection of the person on trial, like the double level of jurisdiction, rights of defence or representation, deficiencies which would certainly be severely judged by "secular" jurisdictions.

But the authoritarian state-like structure constituted by the cult could not exist if the group which it directs was not driven by a **utopian project**. It is at this level that the criticism about each cult being different, applies. I quite agree with this criticism and it is essential, once the fundamental cultic basics have been exposed, to know and analyse the specific ideological contents of each cult in order to understand how the influence on the followers was perpetrated. There is no time here for this kind of analysis but it is fundamental, particularly within the framework of assistance to the victims, who happen to be the victims of one cult in particular.

The hegemonic state-like structure that constitutes the cult uses mental manipulation to subjugate the individual follower.

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<sup>4</sup> Montesquieu: "When legislative and executive powers are in the same hands or of the same governing body, there is no freedom" and he adds "Freedom is also absent if the power to judge is not independent of legislative and executive powers".

Mental manipulation<sup>5</sup> is in fact a psychological process obtained by repeatedly exerting serious pressure on an unsuspecting person so as to create or exploit a state of weakness or dependence, and to influence this person without her being conscious of it to carry out seriously prejudicial acts (the subject being always under the impression that he carried out the act by his own free will and judgement). To be strictly accurate the cult has industrialised the state of weakness.

This mental manipulation and state of control can only be achieved by applying **the interpretative grid of magic thought**: every act, every event, every thought, every emotion, is interpreted in a projected way through a reading grid distorting reality, resulting in the follower's being plunged in permanent confusion in a reorganised illusory cultic world.

This process of mental manipulation pilots the follower towards psychological, intellectual, emotional and, occasionally, physical deconstruction. Physical deconstruction is the only symptom which can sometimes be perceived by outsiders when it leads to acts which break the penal code. Between the guru and the follower a relation of dogmatic dependence is established: alienating, addictive and controlling.

Through a subversive and insidious approach of mental manipulation, the follower loses little by little all the former marks of reference structuring his being and becomes transformed according to a fantasy and virtual standard to become a kind of psychic clone.

Progressively losing contact with reality, the follower, isolated from all his former emotional ties becomes a social and professional drop out and slips into a state of deconstruction and depersonalisation.

This deconstruction makes the follower lose his personal dimension as an individual and a citizen. Adhesion to a cult constitutes the end of a person's specific story and of every individual project this person may have had as well, it is replaced by the group's mythical story and by a shared mission.

The state of cult follower is contradictory with that of citizen.

It is in this regard that a cultic project also constitutes a danger to democracy. The Charter of basic rights signed by European Union on December 18, 2000 recalled that the European Union is based on indivisible and universal values

of **human dignity** (chap. I of the Charter)  
of **freedom** (Chap. II)  
of **equality** (Chap. III)  
and of **solidarity** (Chap. IV)

The utopian cultic project, which genuinely cements the group, makes each follower believe that having wiped out impurity, the good (the cult) will overcome evil (the outside unbelieving world). Then the realisation of paradise on earth will begin where only the cult's chosen people will survive.

This utopian project aims at the creation of an "ideal superman", without ego, doted with super human capacities (aimed at imitating those that the guru claims to have) and able to

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<sup>5</sup> Many different interpretations of « mental manipulations » exist in English with different nuances i.e. mind control, undue influence... (translators note)

carry out higher instructions to perfection (to exist only as a false copy of the central system) in order to serve the ideal taught by the guru. This stage, once reached, is akin to fanaticism!

At this point the cult concept also becomes a challenge to democracy.

### **The cult as a challenge to democracy**

This utopian project also aims to create a fantasy world that the guru, "god" who incarnated on earth, dictates. It's about an ideal society, a kind of science fiction, organised along a predetermined model composed of flexible, obedient and robotised subjects who will mildly carry out the guru's fantasy.

It goes without saying, although the mainly esoteric message is only destined for followers, that in such an ideal society the temporal is subordinated to the guru's self referenced spiritual beliefs, "spiritual" herewith understood as ideological content.

It means to regress into the historical confusion between secular and spiritual power known in the past by civil society, and that constitutes the essential danger of cultism as regarding social aspects and politics insofar as the model's vocation is to duplicated itself and overcome all secular structures under cover of a "change of paradigm". This concept of change of paradigm used by the cults is passed under silence most of the time, whereas it is working all the time through the "new age" phenomenon which undermines the fields of health, education, well being, etc., privileged spheres where "cultic drifts" are rampant.

Personal dramas experienced by many followers, who had been sincere and convinced of the founded effectiveness of delirious medical practices, who later wished to testify (often before dying from these practices) about the fraud of which they were victims, convince me that such madness should never be considered as part of human rights.

One of these changes of paradigm has recently attracted the attention of the Council of Europe worried about the dangers of creationism in education<sup>6</sup> : it's about the destruction of the scientific paradigm which the theory of evolution represents. There is some pressure to replace this by a paradigm known as creationism or "intelligent design". Beyond the concept of creationism that some people wish should be taught in schools, the paradigm of science is in cause.

The refusal on June 26 2007 by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to vote the resolution about the dangers of teaching creationism in schools against the theory of evolution, either illustrates the difficulty of understanding what represents a danger to democracy in the form of an antiquated theory that various cults have been teaching their follower's children for a long time, or shows the influence of the fundamentalist lobby. The next retrograde step could be a declaration that the earth is flat which no one will want to contest under the pretext that one has to respect the balance of doctrinal beliefs.

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<sup>6</sup> Doc. 11297 8 June 2007

The dangers of creationism in education

Report : Committee on Culture, Science and Education

These indivisible and universal values can be protected only if they are based on the principle of democracy and the State of law. The Charter thus places the person in the centre of its action by instituting citizenship of the Union and by creating a space of freedom, safety and justice.

The European Union contributes to the safeguard and the development of these common values and the preamble to the Charter stresses the need to reinforce the protection of basic rights in the light of the evolution of society, social progress and scientific and technological developments...this should be enough, it seems to me, to throw back into a forgotten past the cultic obscurantist ideology expressed from diametrically different points of view, opposed to social progress and to science while asserting high and strong for changes of paradigms which amount to denying and fighting the values on which modernity is being built in Europe.

The Charter recalls that the benefit of basic rights involves responsibilities as well as duties to the rest of society, the human community and future generations.

It's time to open one's eyes and not to allow cultic groups to fool us, past masters as they are to using the pretext of human rights for their own benefit, whilst their members, no longer apt to use them against their own cultic masters, are deprived as they are of any critical vision.

The examples which will be evoked by other speakers should convince you that one cannot use one's rights (right of association and belief) to undermine another's rights (dignity, freedom, equality of the individual). If the jurisdictional authorities both national and European, became aware of the reality of the cultic phenomenon, they could finally consider that dignity should always be placed first, particularly when the criterion of free acceptance becomes illusory because of the constraint. The European institution could then, if it's not too late, play the role which any society must play via the legal authority, that of the intervening actor ready to restore balance between those who are vulnerable, who have become followers, and the dominant that represent cultic power. Dare I hope that this working day will help to awaken awareness?