Brainwashing Theories in European Parliamentary and Administrative Reports on Cults and Sects*

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INTRODUCTION

Religious minorities in Europe today are often perceived as a social problem, traditionally thought of as “a condition which is defined by a considerable number of persons as a diversion from some social norm which they cherish” (Fuller & Myers, 1941, p. 22). Recent scholarship suggests that although a social problem’s beginnings are subject to empirical verification, the way they develop and are represented, constructed, or negotiated is the result of complicated social processes (Richardson, 1997).

In the 1970s, the concept of “moral panic” was developed (Jenkins, 1998) to explain how some social problems generate exaggerated fears. Moral panics are defined as socially constructed social problems characterized by a reaction, in the media and in political forums, out of proportion to the actual threat. They are often based on folk statistics that are passed on from media to media, and may ultimately inspire political measures. According to Philip Jenkins, “the panic reaction does not occur because of any rational assessment;” rather, it is “a result of ill-defined fears that eventually find a dramatic and oversimplified focus in one incident or stereotype, which then provides a visible symbol for discussion and debate” (Jenkins 1996, p. 170). Jenkins also emphasizes the role of the “moral entrepreneurs” who have vested interests in perpetuating these fears.

“Sects” and “cults” are often quintessential targets of moral panics. “Sects perform a convenient integrative function by providing a common enemy, a ‘dangerous outsider’ against which the mainstream can unite and reassert its shared standards and beliefs. . . . [T]he tension between sects and mainstream community might result in active persecution or it can take the form of ostracism and negative stereotyping” (Jenkins 1996, p. 158). Moral panics usually have some objective basis. Nobody would deny that some new religious movements have been guilty of criminal activities, ranging from cases of fraud to the horrors of

the Solar Temple. The real problem, however, is prevalence, rather than existence. Most scholars of new religious movements would subscribe to the conclusion of the Swiss federal report on Scientology that “the immense majority of these groups [sects or cults] represents neither a danger to their members nor to the State” (La Scientologie en Suisse 1998, pp. 132-133). Few scholars, on the other hand, would agree with the French (Assemblée Nationale, 1996) or Belgian (Chambre des Réprésentants de Belgique, 1997) parliamentary reports that listed dozens of groups—from Mormons to Quakers and Baha’is—as sects or cults actually, or potentially, dangerous.

Moral panics start with a basis in reality, but escalate through exaggeration when comments appropriate to particular incidents are generalized. This happened in the United States after Jonestown (in 1978) and is currently evident in Europe following the Solar Temple incidents of murders and suicides (in 1994, 1995, and 1997), especially as demonstrated by so many official reports on new religions, or “sects and cults.” It is in the escalation, rather than the creation, of moral panics that moral entrepreneurs with vested interests enter the picture. They include different anti-cult movements, some of which currently receive considerable public support in some European countries.¹

1. Cults or Sects Are Not Religions. First, the model claims that some minority religious groups are not really “religions” but something else: namely, “cults” and “sects.” The two words are used almost interchangeably in Europe, with the word equivalent to “sect” (e.g., secte in French, setta in Italian, or sekte in German) being the most derogatory in several languages. Because religious liberty is recognized in Western Europe as a value often constitutionally safeguarded (including by international treaties and declarations), the best way to discriminate against a religious minority is to argue that it is not religious at all (Dillon & Richardson, 1994; Barker, 1996; Introvigne, 1999b). As sociologist Larry Greil says, religion is “a cultural resource over which competing interest groups may vie. From this perspective, religion is not an entity but a claim made by certain groups and—in some cases—contested by others to the right of privileges associated in a given society with the religious label” (Greil, 1996, p. 48).

2. Brainwashing and Mind Control. Second, since religion is usually defined as an exercise of free will, it is argued that a nonreligion can be joined only under some sort of coercion, which is quite often couched in “brainwashing” terms. The hypnotic paradigm used against Mormonism, the Shakers, and other groups by 19th-century counter-cultists (Miller, 1983) resurfaced—after the Cold War had

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TYPE I OFFICIAL REPORTS ON SECTS AND CULTS IN WESTERN EUROPE

Within this context, some European parliamentary and other official reports generated in the wake of the Solar Temple incidents have adopted an interpretive model that offers a virtual guarantee of inflating, rather than deflating, moral panics. “Type I” (Introvigne 2000) official documents, which include the French reports (Assemblée Nationale, 1996, 1999), the Belgian report (Chambre des Réprésentants de Belgique, 1997), large parts of the Canton of Geneva report (Audit sur les dérives sectaires, 1997) and of the same Canton’s report on brainwashing (Commission pénale sur les dérives sectaires, 1999), the deliberations of the French Prime Minister’s “Observatory of Sects” (Observatoire Interministériel sur les Sectes, 1998) and of its successor, the Mission to Fight Against Sects (MILS 2000) all adopt a four-stage interpretive model, described as follows:

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