



## What are “sectarian deviances”?

It is a strange kind of strangulated expression because both words are so loaded.

Sectarian, used in this sense, has a negative and pejorative connotation for a minority or new religious movement that does not fit within the accepted norms of the group which is defining the term itself. It is certainly not an academic definition of sectarian.

The French word “derives” which is translated here as deviances but can also mean ‘excesses’ or sometimes ‘drifts’ is meant to refer to practices which are considered criminally wrong.

The point being that the law criminalises practices which are arbitrarily identified as ‘wrong’ and are committed by what are perceived as negative influence religions (or cults/sects) in society.

# What are these practices?

Oddly, the law also targets the natural health field as well as the religious field because due to the same kind of marginalisation that smaller religions have been subjected to in France (and elsewhere), so have natural health practitioners.

The reasoning that puts natural health practitioners and integrative doctors under this law is that they are kind of “health gurus” and so manipulate peoples’ choices against mainstream medicine.

In their case, the law penalises free medical choice and expression.

It should be noted here that there are clearly some practices which can cause harm whether it be sexual abuse, fraudulent acts, financial activity or actual physical harm. We see this in majority religions as well as minority ones. However, existing law covers these offences. It is not necessary to make convoluted legislation to criminalise free choice whether it be religious choice or health choice.

# The key provision

The law covers quite a lot more than the paragraph below but for brevity I focus on this particular section.

The law states that “placing or maintaining a person in a state of psychological or physical subjection resulting from the exercise of serious or repeated pressure or techniques likely to impair their judgement and having the effect of causing serious deterioration of their physical or mental health” – none of the key terms are defined – “is punishable by up to three years of imprisonment and a fine of 375,000 euros (or 5 years for a leader and higher fines).”

What we are essentially talking about here is the concept of mental manipulation which is the supposed power of certain individuals to persuade others to do things that are against their will or better judgement. It is the same concept as brainwashing, which has long been discredited as both a valid legal concept as well as in extensive academic research.

The term ‘psychological subjugation’ is smuggled into this law with the same meaning as brainwashing but under different wording.

# The consequences

There is no time to go into this in detail but you could even consider that many advertisements repeated over time, especially providing questionable claims (or not disclosing others), could fit into this definition. Alcohol, processed foods, expensive consumer items ... the list goes on.

In a religious context this could apply to:

Meditation, prayer, fasting, following the teachings of a guru or saint or leader, submitting to fasting or frequent prayers especially in the middle of the night, over a long period of time..., and many other things.

Under this law an apostate, of which all religions are likely to acquire some, may claim that they had been suffering from psychological subjugation after years in a monastery, a nunnery, or on a Buddhist retreat, or in a minority religion, or a 'sect', and after becoming disillusioned and somehow coming to their senses they realised they had been brainwashed. There are indeed many examples of apostates justifying their departure in this way.

This would fit within the parameters of the law and so the relevant leader could be prosecuted for these criminal acts.

# Definitions and the MIVILUDES

The law does not define the terms but expressly provides the possibility for magistrates to consult any relevant government agencies, especially the MIVILUDES, to “*enlighten*” them on whether this new article of the penal code applies to the matters referred to them.

What is the MIVILUDES?

The MIVILUDES is an acronym ***Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires***; **Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Sectarian Drifts**. It is a French government agency created by presidential decree in 2002. It is charged with observing and analysing the phenomenon of cult movements, coordinating the government response, informing the public about the risks arising from sectarian aberrations, and facilitating the implementation of actions to aid the victims (Wikipedia definition).

# The MIVILUDES

This is a government agency currently situated within the Ministry of the Interior (in various incarnations it has even been in the Prime Minister's Office). For over 20 years it has provided government funds to other private anti-cult groups and encourages them in their anti-religious propaganda.

This agency is little understood and known about, yet is an anomaly not seen in any other Western European governments.

It amounts to the State sanctioned thought police of religious practice.

However, with an understanding that this government body exists in a country that is a secular state, it becomes clearer how such legislation can come about.

# France and secularism

This is all set against a French society which has adopted, and continues to mould itself towards a certain type of secularism.

I see nothing wrong with a secular state but when it is taken to the extreme of striving to exclude the presence of religion in society then it becomes its own fanaticism.

Against this background we see bans on turbans, headscarfs and what are classified as other religious clothing or symbols in public schools.

French women athletes have been prohibited from wearing hijabs when competing in the Olympics this year (even though it is not a violation of Olympic rules).

A law from a couple of years ago very tightly controlled home schooling which was basically targeting religious and especially Moslem groups.

Over the last 6 months or more there have been raids on various groups but especially one practicing yoga. There are many other examples, not the least of which have been outlined in the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom yearly reports.



# What to do?

Firstly, it is important to become aware of this law and this trend. I suggest further reading and understanding of the law.

Secondly, this can spread. It is not inconceivable that other French-speaking countries could be persuaded to take a similar line. There is precedent for this in the past. There are even signs of it in the Bloom report published last year.

There is nothing to be done to change the law now. It has been adopted. However, it still has to be implemented and it may come to the point that concern about the way in which it is applied needs to be expressed.

It is important to know that this erosion of religious freedom is occurring in a neighbouring country and whilst clearly, this is nothing compared to some of the religious discrimination in other parts of the world, it is happening on our own backyard and we should not be complacent about that.

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