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## **ICSA annual conference on "sect issues": a step towards dialogue rather than confrontation**

HRWF (11.07.2012) – Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7th July, the "International Cultic Studies Association" (ICSA)\* organized its annual conference in Montreal under the title "Manipulation and Victimization". More than 100 workshops were held by a wide range of actors: sociologists of religions, psychologists, criminologists, former members of faith or belief communities, representatives of Hare Krishna and the Unification Church, representatives of state agencies, and others.

### ***Confrontation or dialogue?***

By inviting and giving the floor to some usually demonized religious groups, the organizers have contributed to a free exchange of information and opinions, a constructive dialogue between habitually conflicting parties and a better mutual understanding.

In the framework of the platform provided by ICSA, former members of the Unification Church and Hare Krishna debated in mutual respect with officials of the movement they had previously defected from.

No European organization similar to ICSA has ever invited new religious movements at its conference. In Europe, the positions between the "anti-sect" actors and "sects" are quite entrenched and have only led to a fruitless dialogue of the deaf until now. The initiative of ICSA has the merit to start breaking some barriers. Their initiative is only a modest first step but it is made in the right direction: conflict resolution through dialogue

### ***The "sect issue" as seen by the United Nations***

**Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l** had registered for ICSA conference and our director, Willy Fautré, was assigned the topic "Cults and religious freedom around the world" for his workshop (See full text on the homepage of <http://www.hrwf.org>). On this occasion, he raised a number of sensitive questions regarding UN human rights instruments:

Is there a distinction to be made between cults or sects and religions? Should religious freedom be only accessible to so-called historical religions and their members? Should other minority religious or spiritual movements called "sects" or "cults" be denied the enjoyment of the provisions of international declarations and covenants guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief? Should the individual right to change one's religion be restricted? Should abduction and de-conversion under coercion of adults be carried out, be tolerated or be encouraged?

Quotations from UN instruments are clear: **NO is the UN answer** to all these questions. As this was not known by most of the participants, HRWF Int'l contributed in its way to another perception of the issues dealt with by ICSA.

HRWF Int'l also addressed a number of issues from the perspective of the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, in particular *Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow v. Russia* and *Kokkinakis v. Greece*, such as proselytism, the individual right to change

one's religion however unhappy family members may be, the state duty to protect its citizens, the neutrality of the state, which implies that state institutions or state-funded organizations cannot make value judgements on beliefs, and so on.

***About the necessity of a common neutral terminology and well defined concepts***

HRWF Int'l stressed that the terminology to be used when discussing these issues is of utmost importance. The UN language in this regard is neutral and universal. It is not influenced by the perception in a particular cultural and religious context or in a particular part of the world, such as European and American countries with Christian traditions.

The UN experts and treaty bodies use the neutral term "religious or belief systems" to cover the broad spectrum of religions and worldviews, and the term "religious or belief communities" to encompass the various forms of religious, spiritual and non-religious communities or organizations. They never endorse the terms "sects" or "cults".

Terms such as "sects", "cults", "brainwashing", "mind control", "psychological manipulation" or "deprogramming" are not endorsed by the United Nations human rights instruments. Nor have they been by court decisions of the European Court of Human Rights the jurisprudence of which concerns the 47 member states of the Council of Europe and their 800 million citizens.

The use of a neutral terminology and a common language which is acceptable in the legal field is a necessity for the efficiency of future dialogue attempts and should be prioritized by ICSA.

(\*) ICSA was founded in 1979 under the name of the American Family Foundation. It is not affiliated with any religion or political organization. It is not financed by public powers. ICSA is a membership organization and not a movement artificially kept alive by massive state subsidies as in a number of European countries.

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