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To the kind attention of:

- Minister of Welfare and Social Services
- Members of the Ministers Committee on Legislative Matters
- Legal Advisor to the Knesset
- Legal Advisor to the Government
- The Knesset Members
- Knesset's Information Center

Dear Sirs:

My name is Raffaella di Marzio and I'm a researcher in Psychology of Religion in Italy and the Secretary of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief. Since 1994 I have been studying, from a psychological and educational point of view, minority religions, also named New Religious Movements, and very often called "sects" or "cults", a derogatory word, usually used for stigmatizing religious minorities. I am attaching my Curriculum to this letter for your reference.

It was brought to my attention that a law proposal against "harmful cults" is about to be voted upon in the Israeli Parliament (the Knesset)

This law proposal is presented as a wish to protect individuals from harmful treatments allegedly taking place inside "cults", but, according to my experience and my studies in this field, such a law proposal is posing a real threat to the free exercise of the fundamental rights of individuals and families belonging to religious minorities.

In particular, I wanted to draw your attention on an idea which is repeated many times in the law proposal – the idea that "cults" perpetrate psychological abuses, or the so called "mind control" crime.

Unfortunately, badly influenced by media and the propaganda of "anti-cult" groups, some European governments set up courts of inquiry, parliamentary commissions, anti-cult squads and approved even laws against "cults", or, in other words, against the alleged "mind control crime" that "dangerous cults" would perpetrate against their followers, especially against children.

I have carried out extensive research about this matter for about 20 years and summarized results of my studies in my book *"Nuove religioni e sette. La psicologia di fronte alle nuove forme di culto"*, (*New religions and cults. Psychology facing the new cults*) published in 2010. I discovered that the theory of "mind control" or "brainwashing", or "persuasive coercion" as applied to "sects" has no scientific basis. I would like to cite the most important professional Association of psychologists, who published official statements about this matter.

### **The official position of APA (American Psychological Association)**

1987 - On February 10th, 1987, the APA joined other parties in submitting an Amicus Curiae brief in the Molko case, pending before the California Supreme Court, involving issues of brainwashing and coercive persuasion with respect to the Unification Church. The brief stated that, as applied to new religious movements, the theory of coercive persuasion "is not accepted in the scientific community" and that the relevant methodology "has been repudiated by the scientific community". To state such a position with greater clarity would be very difficult indeed. The brief also implied that, when applied to new religious movements, very often called "sects" or "cults", theories of mind control were uniformly regarded as "not accepted in the scientific community", be they referred to as "brainwashing", "mind control", or coercive persuasion".

1987 - On May 11th, 1987 another very important step in this matter was APA's refusal to approve the DIMPAC (Report of the Task Force on Deceptive and Indirect Techniques of Persuasion and Control), submitted by the psychologist Margaret Singer and other five scholars. The APA rejected the report in a Memorandum of May 11, 1987 because it "lacks the scientific rigor and evenhanded critical approach necessary for APA imprimatur". The APA stated in 1987 that brainwashing or coercive persuasion theories, when applied to new religious movements, are not scientific.

There have been further, similar affirmations of these statements in later years as well.

This law proposal calls for the introduction of a provision in the Criminal Code for a criminal offense making the abuse of psychological and/or physical weakness a criminal offense. The fact is that this kind of "crime" has no scientific basis and it is a danger for freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.

In Italy we had such a law. It happened in 1930, under Mussolini's Fascist regime: the "plagio" law (article 603), that was the criminal offense of putting someone in a "complete state of subjugation". The meaning of the Italian expression "plagio" [plagium in Latin] is the English word "brainwashing". These days, the propaganda of some anti-cult groups and the media makes use of some synonymous like "mind manipulation", "mind control", and so on ... but the meaning is the same: they affirm that a person can be subjected to "plagio" by "dangerous cults" or "sects".

The idea of Mussolini, when he inserted the law in the penal code, was that anti-fascists were anti-fascists only because they were under undue influence, and this law allowed him to put in jail some anti-fascists accused of exerting such influence on others who eventually became anti-fascists too. It was an easy way to put in jail the best of his opponents. Then, after WWII, the law was still in use but then it was used against the homosexuals. Homosexuality was considered to be a way to manipulate people and put them in a state of psychological subjection. The last scandal of this law was in the 70s, when a Catholic priest had been accused of estranging his young disciples from their families.

Following this scandal, the case was referred to the Italian Constitutional Court, which repealed the Plagio law in 1981. The article was repealed for many reasons amongst which:

- the first body of criticism was empirical: the phenomenon of plagio does not exist nor can it be verified, if we presume that such a condition of subjugation cannot be achieved merely with psychological tools. Most psychiatrists agreed on this point. The problem was that such a rule was too vague and undetermined, therefore contrary to the constitutional principle of legality.
- the second body of criticism was political: the critics argued that the rule masked an attempt at ideological discrimination. Following this line of reasoning the judges ran the risk of judging lifestyles and any ideas that were contrary to prevailing social opinion or even to the court's majority opinion under the pretext of judging methods of indoctrination.

I personally collected a large bibliography on this specific subject, including a total of 500 books, articles or studies, from 1970 to 2014<sup>1</sup>.

After a very careful survey of the literature and using my twenty years of experience on the field, I can assert the following: while the common anti-cult brainwashing or mind control theories have been largely rejected by the scholarly community (with few exceptions), forms of persuasion or influence based on false or otherwise unethical representations continue to exist in everyday life and also within some of the New Religious Movements. As a matter of fact, this kind of abuse can cause serious problems to people. However, misrepresentations are rather different from brainwashing, or “mind control” or “mind manipulation”.

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<sup>1</sup> (cfr. for example: Galanter, 1993, 1996; Anthony and Robbins, 1992, 1994, 1995b; 2004; Barker, 1984; 1988, 1989, 1995, 1998; Bromley, 1988, 1998abc, 2002; Bromley et al., 1992; Richardson, 1978ab, 1985ab, 1993; Introvigne, 1992, 1996, 1998, 1999ab, 2002; Fizzotti, 1994; Fizzotti et al., 2000; Aletti, 1994; Aletti et al., 1999; Anthony, 1990, 1999, 2001; Barber, 1961; Conn, 1982; Fromm and Shor, 1979; Orne, 1961-1962; Spanos, 1996; Paloutzian, Richardson and Rambo, 1999; Wuthnow, 1976, 1978; Zimbardo and Hartley, 1985; Bird and Reimer, 1982; Lewis and Bromley, 1987; Wright, 1988; Wright and Ebaugh, 1993; Stark and Iannaccone, 1997; Bromley, 1998; Saliba, 2004; Wulff, 2001; Luckoff et al., 1996; Buxant et al. 2007, Buxant and Saroglou, 2008; Namini and Murken, 2009; Healy, 2011; Rambo, 1993; Rambo and Farris, 2012; Rambo and Bauman, 2012; Cowan, 2014).

This law proposal asserts that “The gamut of possible injuries stemming from membership in a harmful cult is wide, and includes mental harm, physical harm, sexual harm, social harm and financial harm. In light of this, there is a need to formulate legislative policy on this subject.”

Being quite an expert on psychological and educational matters, as well as the subject of Freedom of Religion or Belief and religious minorities, I can tell you, supported by the scientific community, that this idea is not based on scientific data or empirical research. It is only the expression of an intolerant ideology of specific anti-cult groups that has already created tremendous harm to children and parents belonging to religious minorities in many countries, like Italy. I can confirm that in Italy, over the last 30 years, members of religious minorities, especially children, have suffered discrimination and isolation in different ways.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is my belief that to approve repressive laws to combat the crime of “mental manipulation”, as suggested by this law proposal, is not only useless, but also very dangerous for freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and democracy in general.

Would you have any question feel free to contact me.

Best regards,



Raffaella Di Marzio

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### **Curriculum**

Raffaella Di Marzio, a PhD Candidate in Psychology of Religion at Pontifical Salesian University in Rome, in 2001 set up a Centre of Information on Cults, New Religious Movements, Cult-Watching and Anti-cult Groups: the Online Center <http://www.dimarzio.info/en/>

She is the secretary of the Executive Committee of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB), member of the managing board of SIPR (Italian Society of Psychology of Religion) and of Editorial Board of Psychology of Religion e-Journal (PREj).

She is also a member of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion (IAPR), and ICSA Today's News Co-Correspondent for Italy.

She has published more than 100 articles about cults, mind control, New Religious Movements and anti-cult groups, is a contributor to CESNUR's Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy(2013) and to Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices, 6 vol., ABC-Clio, Santa Barbara [California] 2010), J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann Editors.

Raffaella Di Marzio has B.A. degrees in Psychology (University "La Sapienza" of Rome, 1981), Educational Science (Pontifical Salesian University, 1981) and History of Religions (University "La Sapienza" of Rome, 2003) and Religious Science (Institute for Religious Studies Ecclesia Mater, linked to the faculty of theology of Pontifical Lateran University, 1986).

She is a Catholic religion teacher in a senior high school in Rome since 1981 and she has been Professor of Psychology of Religion at the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences "Auxilium" in Rome. She is regularly invited to lecture at pontifical and state Universities on Cults, New Religious Movements and topics regarding the Psychology of Religion in general.

She is in demand as a Cult and New Religious Movements expert for TV and radio shows, Conferences and Lectures widely.