

June 13, 2011

To the minister of Welfare and Social Services, Moshe Kahlon

A response to the recommendations of the team for "examining the cult phenomenon in Israel"

Dear Sir,

In light of the publication of the recommendations of the team established by the ministry for Welfare and Social Services for "examining the cult phenomenon in Israel" we, academics engaged in studying religions and spiritual movements, would like to voice our professional reservations about the report, as well as our concern about its recommendations. Naturally, we welcome any initiative aimed at supporting and helping the victims of violence, sexual harassment and abuse by those in power and authority (be it institutionalized or spiritual). However, our assessment is that the report relies on sources, literature and definitions academics have long recognized as biased; and even, in part, representing the perspectives of interested parties.¹

Firstly, we object to the use of the term "cult", a term presupposing that any new or unfamiliar religious or spiritual group is involved in negative activities. Contemporary research avoids this term, and it is usually replaced by the more neutral "New Religious Movements."

Secondly, and on the same note, we object to the term "cult victims." We accept that there are spiritual and religious groups where the individual relinquishes independent thought, and that sometimes this is used against them. But, as far as we can tell, it is very difficult to distinguish between obedient membership in a group genuinely attempting to explore spiritual truths; and between forced subservience to a group abusing and "enslaving" (so to speak) its members. Accordingly, we expect the ministry to clearly distinguish between various groups, and between various activities within each group. Therefore, we call for avoiding any governmental interference in the activity of new religious or spiritual groups, unless it has been proven that group members or leaders have broken the law. Even in the case of a crime, we oppose any attempt to blame or persecute a whole group because of the crime of one of its leaders

¹ Zaidman-Dvir, N. and Sharot S. 1992. "The Response of Israeli Society to New Religious Movements; ISKCON and Teshuvah" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31 (3): 279-295.

or members. It should also be noted that there is evidence that new religious groups also work to benefit individuals and the general society.²

Thirdly, we reject the use of the term "mind control." This term lacks scientific validity, and the consensus among researchers is that it should not be used in the context of new religious movements.³ Research indicates that people choose to join new religious movements of their own free will, and also choose to leave them of their own free will. Furthermore, many studies indicate that most of the people that show initial interest in these movements choose, eventually, not to join them – or join, and then leave after a while.⁴ These data contradict the claim that these movements achieve "complete control of mental processes and behavioral patterns", as the report says (p. 22).

Objections as to the validity of charges of "mind control" in new religious movements have not only been published in prestigious academic forums – they have been presented to many courts around the world. For instance, in 1980 the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the American Sociological Association declared, in front of the U.S. Supreme Court, that there is no academic support to the claims of "mind control" in the context of new religious movements; and the American Psychological Association made a similar declaration in front of the Supreme Court of the state of California in 1987.⁵

We also claim that the sweeping attempt to decide for members of new religious movements that they are indentured to their leaders, lack free will and the ability to decide for themselves, seems to be both anti-democratic and a severe violation of their rights. Using the terms "cult" and "mind control" might be used to remove members of religious and spiritual groups from the sphere of free citizens, imbued with free

² For instance, many studies show that members of new religious movements report rises in feelings of satisfaction, personal fulfillment and a sense of personal control in their lives, and that psychological assessments find them to be of sound mental health. See C.A. Latkin. 1987. "The Self-Concept of Rajneeshpuram Members", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29: 91-98. Also see Buxant, C., et al. 2007. "Cognitive and Emotional Characteristics of New Religious Movement Members: New questions and data on the mental health issue". *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 10(3): 219-238.

³ E.g., Richardson, James T. "A Critique of "Brainwashing" Claims about New Religious Movements" in Dawson, Lorne L. (ed.) *Cults in Context: Readings in the Study of New Religious Movements*. New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers, pp. 217-228.

⁴ E.g. Galanter, M. 1989. *Cults: Faith, Healing and Coercion*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 140-43; Also see Barker, E. 1984. *The Making of a Moonie*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p, 147.

⁵ http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Brief_Amicus_Curiae_of_the_American_Psychological_Association and Richardson, James T. 1991. "Cult/Brainwashing Cases and Freedom of Religion", *Journal of Church and State* 33: 55-74, respectively.

will and innate rights – and put them into the legal category of "minors", in need of appointed guardians.⁶ We fear the recommendations of the committee might be used to persecute groups just because they hold beliefs or customs not conforming to the norm. The position of several European states towards new religious movements demonstrates a more sober approach: for instance, a Belgian federal agency recommended against passing laws centering on new religious movements⁷; and the Italian senate decided not to adopt a law against "mental manipulation" in new religious movements.⁸

In conclusion, we claim that passing laws or regulations directed specifically at religious or spiritual leaders and at members of new religious groups is in opposition with contemporary academic knowledge, and also in opposition with the preservation of civil rights and the freedom of belief and religious practice in the state of Israel.

In order to make informed decisions in these matters in the future, we will be happy to assist in the implementation of the committee's recommendations to build a database and a training program for social workers on the subject of new religious movements; assuming both of these are based, among other things, on academic knowledge gathered around the world during the years.

The letter is signed by 26 academics; but since I did not ask for their permission to publish their names in international forums, and since this is an unofficial translation, I will not list them here.

⁶ And, indeed, see the following recommendation on p. 10 of the report: "Changing the 'legal responsibility and guardianship 1962' law: the team recommends amending this law so that it explicitly states that a person under substantial control by another person in his life, or unfair influence upon him, will be considered incapable of taking care of his own affairs, and so the court is authorized to appoint him a guardian."

⁷ <http://www.cesnur.org/2006/belgium.pdf>

⁸ http://www.cesnur.org/2005/brainwash_11.htm