

The New Heretics of France: Minority Religions, La République, and the Government-Sponsored “War on Sects,” by Susan Palmer. Oxford University Press, 2011. 304 pp., b&w illustration, £45.00/\$74.00. ISBN-13: 9780199735211.

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An interesting book on cult controversies in France has been published by Susan Palmer. The background is that from 1960–1970, there has been an expansion of religious minority groups in the West while church attendance in great religions as the Catholic Church and classic Protestant churches was plummeting. The emergence and the expansion of what we have called “new religious movements” was not something new. There have been many other religious outbursts as in the nineteenth Century in the United States or well before, in Mediaeval Europe.

The problem was that the appearance and success of new religious movements—Neo-Pentecostal Christians, new esoteric movements, new Hindu spiritualities like Hare Krishna, Japanese (Sokka Gakkai), UFO religions (Raelians), neo-pagan groups (Wicca)—created concerns in many Western countries. In fact, on one hand, the majority of parents would not accept their offspring converting into new religions, on the other hand the great established confessions would see in them an undue competition, and lastly, atheist circles like rationalist freemasons were scandalised to see a revival of beliefs that they considered irrational and contrary to progress in a world dominated by reason.

Susan Palmer presents and analyses France’s response to this problem. Why? Because France is one of the democratic countries which has fought minority religious groups with the greatest determination. In several countries, the fight against cults was led by associations of parents of the NRMs’ converts. These associations were sometimes created with the support of rationalists or Catholics. The French case is particular since in 1983, the radical socialist French government rendered the fight against minority religious groups official by financing private anti-cult associations and then by creating a cult-fighting government agency in charge of the coordination of all ministries (Justice, Police, Intelligence services) to this end. The following administrations whether right- or left-wing, maintained this anti-cult agency.

In her book, exhaustive and easy to read, Susan Palmer describes France's response against minority religious groups that had settled in its soil. She also indicates that France in accordance with the spirit of the French Revolution and wishing to bring the light of reason to the world wanted to be the leader in "cult" persecution, particularly by counselling the Chinese government.

Many French authors have described aspects of the fight against minority religious groups and Susan Palmer quotes them. Few French scholars have solicited English or American publishers to reveal the repression of religious nonconformity in their country. This phenomenon has remained unseen throughout the world. Thanks to Susan Palmer's book, published by the Oxford University Press, and to its publication in the English language, this phenomenon can be brought to the knowledge of the entire world. It should be remembered that James Beckord had published *Cult Controversies* (London, Tavistock Publications, 1985) but the author dealt with the subject on a global plane. The French case was mentioned, which is good already, but it was a case among others. Susan Palmer's book has the merit of being entirely dedicated to France.

The author describes in detail all the trouble several religious movements underwent: Raelians, Mandarom, Scientology, and Jehovah Witnesses. She also describes defamation launched by anti-cult associations and legal cases. Susan Palmer also reveals the underground actors of this new inquisition: the Catholics eager to preserve their monopoly on the goods of salvation and the freemasons of the rationalist and atheist *Grand Orient de France* order. The mixed involvement of the Masonic group *Droit Humain*—to which belongs a socialist female member of the current MIVILUDES (French anti-cult agency)—should also be mentioned.

Susan Palmer also analyses the fight against minority religious groups. She sets forth possible causes of the fight against these "new heretics" as they have been explained by French scholars: fear of American infiltration and fear of a hold on free thinking. She shows that the "brainwashing" notion is continuously quoted in France by opponents of minority religious groups, but also by French psychologists, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists, while it is considered as unscientific by the American Psychological Association.

Doubtlessly because she was focused on groups which had trouble with the authorities due to their beliefs, the author omits to mention that the French fight against minority religious groups does not apply to radical Islamic sects which are present in France and have made attacks. Oddly enough, entities as the MIVILUDES or anticultist associations seem to ignore them. They never warn youth against their proselytizing in big city slums. They focus on the

assumed danger of Pentecostals or Jehovah Witnesses with much less attention to more serious issues such as the radicalization of Islam and French Muslims.

This useful and interesting book is meant for anybody concerned by intolerance on religious freedom and human rights. Of course it is also intended for students and scholars of sociology studying religious minorities, who will find an extra illustration of the already old conflict between “sects” and society that Max Weber and later Bryan Wilson, outstanding figures of sociology, had mentioned.