

Introduction

This Element introduces the reader to the phenomenon and problem of anticultism in France, with special attention to the history and present-day state of the Church of Scientology, which has been considered a quintessential example of a “cult” (or *secte*, which is the equivalent term in French) by anticultists. For decades, English-language scholarship has paid attention to the ways in which new religions or new religious movements (NRMs), which are two preferred and more neutral alternatives to the term “cults,” have been subject to discrimination and persecution in France (see e.g., Beckford, 1981, 2004; Hervieu-Léger, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Palmer, 2002, 2008, 2009, 2011; Duvert, 2004; Fautré, Garay, & Nidegger, 2004; Introvigne, 2004; Luca, 2004; Altglas, 2008; Willaime, 2010; Machi, 2013; Ollion, 2013; Garay, 2019; Adeliyan Tous, Richardson, & Taghipour, 2023; Westbrook, 2023). Typically, such works have examined, justifiably, the relationship between France’s particular brand of secularism and church-state separation (*laïcité*) and the efforts of anticult initiatives, including those funded by the French state, with the most notable example being MIVILUDES (*Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires*; Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Cultic Deviance). That is to say, discussions of new religiosity in France are inevitably bound up with questions of politics, power, regulation, and the law.

France, of course, is by no means the only European country with a recent history of intolerance toward minority religions or NRMs. Germany, Russia, and Hungary stand out as examples among others (see e.g., Arweck & Clarke, 1997; Richardson, 2004; Máté-Tóth & Nagy, 2011, 2017; Richardson & Bellanger, 2014; Introvigne, 2014, 2017, 2018; Besier, 2017; Nilsson, 2017; Chryssides, 2019; Folk, 2019; Morton, 2020; Weightman, 2020; Miklovicz, 2021; Arjona, 2021; Šorytè, 2021a, 2022, 2023). What makes France relatively unique, indeed perplexing, is that it represents the paradoxical case of a western democratic nation that upholds the separation of church and state and individual religious liberty yet has run up a track record of antagonism toward new religious groups and minority religious communities. The treatment of Muslims is surely the most obvious and well-publicized example (Bowen, 2007, 2010), which has received renewed international attention in light of the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris (Ables, 2023; Reuters, 2023), but new religions have been affected as well. For example, in their book on government raids on religious groups, Stuart A. Wright and Susan J. Palmer (2016) analyzed a variety of affected communities around the world (such as the Twelve Tribes, Branch Davidians, and Church of Scientology, among others). However, they

dedicate an entire chapter on the history of raids on NRMs in France – the only country to receive this level of treatment. Within France, Wright and Palmer discovered that of all the new and alternative religious groups that have been raided by the state since the 1970s, the Church of Scientology, affiliated Scientology organizations, and individual Scientologists were targeted more than any other group (twenty-one raids between 1971 and 2008 alone by their count; Wright & Palmer, 2016, p. 218).¹ “In some cases,” they explained, “we found that there were as many as ten simultaneous raids on members’ homes in conjunction with raids on the Scientology Church or its offices.” The authors continued, “Had we counted each raid on a residence, the numbers would have been much higher. It would be quite plausible to make the case that the actual number of police raids on Scientology/Scientologists in France was closer to 50” (Wright & Palmer, 2016, p. 221).

A focus on French anticultism and the Church of Scientology therefore makes historical and sociological as well as methodological sense. Indeed, an analysis of the history and situation of French Scientology is an ideal case study for situating the larger arc of anticultism in the country, especially since Scientologists have had a continued institutional presence in the country since the late 1950s. This approach with a focus on a single NRM also has the benefit of contributing to the academic study of Scientology outside of its origination points in the United States, by helping fill a lacuna that will hopefully encourage even more academic investigation, especially given the evident challenges for scholars of new religions in France. Bernadette Rigal-Cellard, one of the leading French scholars of new religions, has written powerfully about these obstacles in an article whose title speaks for itself: “Do Not Dare Speak of Scientology in France!” (2021). As Rigal-Cellard put it: “More so than any other minority religion, [Scientology] is held as THE tentacular cult that has infiltrated the major levels of government, the judicial system, and because of people like myself, the education networks” (2021, p. 182). “Consequently,” she went on, “if you are a scholar of religions in France, you will not have the slightest problem studying Scientology *per se*, but you run the risk of being seriously attacked by not only the iconic anticult brigade but also by society at large, by mainstream media and possibly by your own institution” (Rigal-Cellard, 2021, p. 182; see also Šorytė, 2021b). In this intellectual climate, it is not altogether surprising that a great many academic studies of France and NRMs, including Scientology, have come from scholars working outside the country. This Element is no exception and stands on the shoulders of a great

¹ Palmer and Wright compiled data on numerous other NRM raids in France, for instance on the Raelians, ISKCON, Longo Mai, The Family International, Horus, Aumism/Mandarom, Twelve Tribes, Steiner/Waldorf schools, and Community of the Beatitudes, among others (2016, p. 200).

many researchers, operating both in and out of France, including James A. Beckford, Bernadette Rigal-Cellard, Régis Dericquebourg, James T. Richardson, Susan J. Palmer, Stuart A. Wright, Willy Fautré, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Véronique Altglas, and Massimo Introvigne.

Section 1 of this Element provides an overview of anticultism in France, including the relationship between anticultism and modern French secularism (*laïcité*). Not only has France developed a culture of antagonism to *sectes* in ways that have expressed themselves legally and institutionally, but the country is the birthplace of the European-wide anticult network FECRIS (*Fédération Européenne des Centres de Recherche et d'Information sur le Sectarisme*; European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), founded in Paris in 1994 and now based in Marseille (FECRIS, 2024). A study of anticultism in France, therefore, offers a window into the problems and peculiarities of anticultism that exist elsewhere in Europe. At the same time, again illustrating the paradoxes at play, France is home to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR, in Strasbourg), which has at times served as a legal resource and counterbalance for French- and European-wide NRMs as they seek a voice and redress for discrimination and prejudice that may otherwise go unresolved or dismissed (see e.g., Richardson & Shoemaker, 2008; Fokas & Richardson, 2019; Adeliyan Tous, Richardson, & Taghipour, 2023). Much of Section 1 focuses on MIVILUDES, which receives state support, and the relevant example of Sonia Backès, a former Scientologist (who became a critic of the Church of Scientology) and who briefly held a cabinet position in the Borne-Macron government (2022–2023) that put MIVILUDES under her purview. It is argued that MIVILUDES represents an extreme, hardline, and activist expression of *laïcité*, one that is often unsupported elsewhere in the French government (and French society), where a comparably open-minded or tolerant form of *laïcité* reigns. This section makes use of material from interviews conducted with Scientologists, including Backès's stepfather. These were carried out during my first research trip to Paris and Brussels in early 2023. I conducted twenty-five formal interviews with members at the Church of Scientology Celebrity Centre (Paris) and another with a veteran Sea Org member at the Churches of Scientology for Europe campus (Brussels). A follow-up visit to Paris was carried out in September 2023, which allowed me to visit the Church of Scientology of Paris and explore the site of the Church of Scientology and Celebrity Centre of Greater Paris (Ideal Org) in Saint-Denis.

Section 2 examines as a case study the Church of Scientology, tracing its history and how it has arguably become the most prominent example of a so-called cult in France, as a result of the anti-Scientology propaganda of anticultists, MIVILUDES, and the media. This section draws even more

extensively on my interviews with French Scientologists as well as archival research and, as with this work as a whole, is part of a larger and ongoing project on Scientology in France (see e.g., Westbrook, 2023; Introvigne, 2023d). Since this volume focuses attention on anticultism and its expressions and effects – for example, legally, culturally, socially, and so on – material relevant to this theme is emphasized in the selected interview data (as opposed to other possibilities, such as an emphasis on lived or ordinary religious life and the benefits members receive from Scientology services).

A third and concluding section offers reflections on the future of new and minority religions in France, especially with respect to recent legal issues. Finally, an Appendix is provided with a timeline of major dates in the history of French anticultism, with particular attention to Scientology.

1 From the Solar Temple to MIVILUDES: Anticultism in France, Past and Present

In France, as elsewhere, the history of anticultism can be demarcated by particular incidents, the passing of seminal or controversial laws, or reactions of individuals (or the state) to particular groups and their beliefs or practices. In the United States, for instance, the tragedy of the murders/suicides at Jonestown in 1978 represented a paradigm shift – one that resulted in societal fears about the dangers of so-called “cults” – and in France perhaps the closest parallel came in the form of the murders/suicides associated with the Order of the Solar Temple (1994–1995, 1997). The Solar Temple incidents of the 1990s, as other researchers have acknowledged (Introvigne, 2000; Mayer, 2006; Palmer, 2011, p. 9), resulted in anticult backlashes, confluences, and fears of similar possibilities, most prominently, in France, with the calling of a Parliamentary Commission on Sectes, held in July 1995, that was followed by similar legislative commissions, for instance in 1999 and 2006. In December 1995, the French National Assembly first released its Guyard Report, as it has come to be known, which, among other items, listed 173 cultic groups and movements, including a number of well-known NRMs such as the Church of Scientology, Unification Movement, International Raelian Movement, Twelve Tribes, and International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), but also others, such as Evangelical Christian and Buddhist groups. Since its release, the Guyard Report has been heavily criticized, both inside and outside of France, including in an anthology coedited by NRM scholars Massimo Introvigne and J. Gordon Melton (1996). The anticult group MIVILUDES now maintains that there is no official list of *sectes* in France and that this earlier inventory is outdated and lacks utility. However, the public relations damage of the Guyard Report has

arguably been done. In many cases, the groups targeted in France by the late 1990s either no longer exist or have had their operations significantly curtailed. Indeed, the two largest NRMs still operating in France today are both American-born imports: the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Scientology.

Although the Order of the Solar Temple tragedy and Guyard Report are significant in charting the recent history of anticultism in France – and may well, in fact, represent sociological and legal powder keg moments (Mayer, 2006, p. 17) – it would be misleading and reductionistic to view them as the exclusive causes for the state-sponsored monitoring of *sectes* that has arisen in the last quarter century. An inordinate focus on them would also ignore the preexistence of *secte*-watching organizations, such as ADFI (*Association de défense des familles et de l'individu*, Association for the Defense of Families and the Individual; founded in 1974), CCMM (*Centre contre les manipulations mentales*, Center Against Mind Control; founded in 1981), UNADFI (*Union nationale des associations de défense des familles et de l'individu*, the National Union of Associations for the Defense of Families and the Individual; founded in 1982 as an organizing body for the ADFI chapters across France), and FECRIS (founded in 1994 in Paris), the last of which is now based in Marseille but coordinates a network of affiliated organizations across Europe under its “umbrella” (Arweck, 2006, p. 115). The anticult influence of FECRIS within and beyond France has been analyzed (and scrutinized) by NRM scholars as well as human rights activists (see e.g., Besier & Seiwert, 2012; Dericquebourg, 2012; Berzano, et al., 2022a, 2022b; Introvigne, 2023e) – and it should be noted that 90 percent of FECRIS's budget comes from the French government (Duval, 2018). Focusing on the Solar Temple and Guyard Report would also fail to properly take into account the cumulative influence in French society of anti-*secte* publications and critical media coverage, some of which are listed in the appendix timeline at the end of this work or discoverable in the bibliography. One example is the 1983 publication of *Les sectes en France* by Alain Vivien. This work was commissioned by Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy and established the concept of *secte absolue* (absolute cult) to refer to the most harmful and dangerous groups in France – a label, for instance, applied to Scientology by Vivien. Vivien would later become director of MILS (*Mission Interministérielle de Lutte contre les Sectes*, Interministerial Mission to Combat Cults), a precursor to the present-day MIVILUDES. And of course, a focus on recent anticult history in France would be incomplete without an understanding of legal history and precedent – extending as far back as the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen as Véronique Altglas has observed (2010, p. 495) – and extending into the early twentieth century with

laws regarding associations (1901) and the separation of church and state (1905) and into the twenty-first century with legislation such as the controversial About-Picard Law of 2001 and the role of “mental manipulation” in so-called cultic movements.

Paradoxically, France is also home to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. The ECtHR has served as a counterbalancing judicial force in response to human rights violations, including in the area of freedom of religion or belief (FORB), not only across France but elsewhere on the continent, as explored by James T. Richardson and others (Fokas & Richardson, 2019; Adeliyan Tous, Richardson, & Taghipour, 2023). However, challenges certainly remain within France, including at the level of state-sponsored forms of anticultism, with MIVILUDES as the most obvious and antagonistic expression of anti-*secte* informed *laïcité* (state secularism) in the country as of this writing. An investigation of MIVILUDES – past and present – in turn reveals the essential historical and legal context for some of the institutional difficulties faced by minority religious groups such as the Church of Scientology, as explored later in this section and especially in Section 2.

MIVILUDES, the French government’s agency to monitor and combat “cultic/sectarian deviances” (*dérives sectaires*) (MIVILUDES, 2023a), was formed in 2002, in the wake of a previous and similar but even more militant group, MILS, which was inaugurated in 1998. Susan Palmer (2011) has unpacked and analyzed the history of MIVILUDES and its predecessors, which operate with state funding that trickles down to affiliated countercult and anticult organizations, including UNADFI and CCMM. Anti-*secte* (i.e., anticult) presumptions about new or alternative groups are often predicated on ideas about mind control and brainwashing that have long been criticized as exaggerated and misleading, if not outright pseudoscientific, such as the work of French anticult psychiatrist Jean-Marie Abgrall (Abgrall, 2002; Anthony & Robbins, 2004), but the conflation of *secte*, cult, and mind control continues to influence popular perception about religious minorities (see e.g., Introvigne, 2022a). Moreover, even though the French government’s *de jure* separation of Church and State prevents it from deciding whether or not an organization is a bona fide religion, much less a *secte* (a term, incidentally, with no legal definition in France), this has not stopped MIVILUDES from singling out particular groups in its annual reports. In its report for 2021, for instance, the Church of Scientology and the Jehovah’s Witnesses are jointly discussed in a section as examples of “multinationals of spirituality” (*multinationales de la spiritualité*) (MIVILUDES, 2022, pp. 58–71), as evidence of French suspicions about foreign ideological influences such as these two American-born religious traditions (see e.g., Kaiser, 1994; Luca & Lenoir, 1998; Introvigne, 2023b,

2023c). On the one hand, the absence of an explicit list of designated *sectes*/cults, such as those put out by the controversial Guyard Report in 1995, might seem like a sign of improvement for religious minorities in France. On the other hand, it might be interpreted as an implicit sign of the success of anticult organizations such as MIVILUDES, UNADFI, and CCMM given that many of those same groups no longer formally exist in the country or have dwindled in numbers to the point of obscurity and irrelevance. As Wright and Palmer put it in their work on government raids on religious communities, “the [French] state has the power to drive many *sectes* out of business, underground, or out of the country with impunity. So in the final analysis, France’s ‘War on Sects’ may simply be a war of attrition” (2016, p. 224).

This war of attrition requires funding from the government to continue. For a number of years, especially in the late 2010s, it seemed as though MIVILUDES’s influence was beginning to wane, particularly in the face of French concerns about Islamic terrorism (Bowen, 2007, 2010). Since mid-2021, however, MIVILUDES seems to have been resurrected and is set to “experience a revival of sort,” with 1 million euros per year secured in state funding (Duval, 2021), which can be distributed to anticult associations such as UNADFI and CCMM. The reasons for this recent infusion of financial lifeblood into MIVILUDES seem at least partially bound up with responses to misinformation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to vaccinate the French public. The MIVILUDES website, for instance, devotes much attention to health and alternative medicine (MIVILUDES, 2023b). In a recent annual report, an introduction authored by Sonia Backès (a former Scientologist and politician in the Macron government who then had MIVILUDES under her purview, to be discussed at greater length in this section) noted the following: “Cultic phenomena deliberately undermine the freedom of conscience and the integrity of individuals. The health crisis has certainly been fertile ground for these movements. . . . By calling into question the science and the credibility of health authorities, these discourses jeopardize public health” (MIVILUDES, 2022, p. 7). Again, the Church of Scientology and the Jehovah’s Witnesses are arguably the two largest and most resilient of the remaining so-called cults in France; they both have received criticisms for their alleged views on science and health, and they both enjoy funding and institutional support from headquarters in the United States (and a membership spread around the world). Scientologists have also been instrumental in fostering interfaith efforts, especially among other new or minority religions, both in France and around the world, to raise awareness about persecution, religious freedom, and human rights. Scientology spokesperson and interfaith leader Éric Roux is perhaps the most visible

representative of the Church of Scientology in France and Europe more broadly. In addition to a growing body of popular and scholarly work (see e.g., Roux, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2018, 2021a, 2021b), he has encouraged open dialogue between Scientologists and French Freemasons (Roux, 2019), who are traditionally among the most vocal secular critics of religion in general and Scientology in particular. In 2022, for example, he fostered dialogue with the Druze at Scientology's European headquarters in Brussels (Churches of Scientology for Europe, 2022) in addition to dozens of other religious groups. Also in 2022, Roux was elected as the Global Council Trustee for Europe at the United Religions Initiative (URI), the first Scientologist to hold this position, and he joined the Executive Committee of this large international organization the following year (URI, 2023).

Despite interfaith progress and institutional resilience among NRMs such as Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses, the resurgence of anticultism in France represented by MIVILUDES poses a threat to not only minority religions but also other individuals and groups that are deemed problematic from the standpoint of public health and social welfare. On my trip to Paris in early 2023, I learned that MIVILUDES has begun to target nonreligious groups, including homeopathic practitioners and vaccination critics, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes sense in light of its attention to public health and alternative medicine. But MIVILUDES continues to target alleged "cultic deviances" or abuses in religious settings, with, as mentioned, Scientology and the Jehovah's Witnesses as the two largest organizations in its sights. In 2021, the French government even republished an old graphic novel, *Dans la Secte (In the Cult)*, which follows a young woman allegedly recruited into Scientology in the 1980s, implying once again that this group represents the quintessential example of a *secte* in France (Guillon & Alloing, 2021). The same work, remarkably, was distributed by MIVILUDES to an astonishing 11,000 school libraries (Centers of Documentation and Information) in France during the pandemic (Claude, 2022), with the support of a budget of 85,000 euros from the government's Interministerial Fund for the Prevention of Delinquency (*Fonds interministériel de prévention de la délinquance*).²

In Paris, I spoke with a Scientologist who is also an attorney on behalf of the church in France (and who has represented many other religious minorities, including internationally). He offered the following perspective on MIVILUDES and its mission:

² Freedom of Information document, provided to the author by Éric Roux, received on November 18, 2021 from the Interministerial Fund for the Prevention of Delinquency (reference number: 2021/FIPD/Radicalisation_065).