



European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects
Participant in the Fundamental Rights Platform of the European Union since 2010
NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations since 2009
INGO with participatory status at the Council of Europe since 2005

Address by Luigi CORVAGLIA, FECRIS representative, Warsaw Conference on the Human Dimension, 30 September - 11 October 2024

While noble and lofty principles such as 'religious freedom' are extolled in institutional contexts and labelled as endangered, in the real-world citizens' rights to freedom, safety, dignity, self-determination, etc. are trampled on the basis of these proclaimed values. Since rights cannot conflict with each other, it is obvious that those who profess these principles in order to allow abuse act under a deceptive guise like the wolf in sheep's clothing. Religious freedoms were never undermined by the associations in defence of the victims of cults.

Waving the spectre of threatened religious freedom as a bogeyman is just one of the argumentative fallacies used by cult apologists. In particular, it is the construction of a straw man that is useful in contexts like these to incite the public to shoot it down.

It was, Jean-Paul Costa, former President of the European Court of Human Rights, who declared in 2020 that "it is necessary to protect freedom of conscience and religious pluralism while addressing the abuses committed in the name of religion or by pseudo-religions that dress up in the cloak of religion to quietly carry out new, even heinous, activities'.

This is why a federation such as FECRIS, which was founded 30 years ago, in order to defend victims of undue influence and sectarian deviances, has Participatory Status at the Council of Europe and consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC), and is included in the European Union's human rights platform. France, followed by Belgium and Luxembourg, have passed a law to protect people from abuse.

Nevertheless, the Federation, its member organisations and their individual representatives are the subject of shameful smear campaigns. Freedom of expression is gagged by cultic groups, not only within the group in relation to its members, but also in society outside the group, by trying to silence activists, scholars and whistleblowers, such as former followers who are labelled as apostates.

For the same reason that the true defence of rights leads to harmony among activists, conflict arises when someone cheats. Indeed, to defend high ecumenical principles and protect cults, there are associations whose members come from contexts where human rights are not considered and whose relations with controversial organisations, often already the subject of criminal convictions, are not even particularly hidden.

Democracy is universalisation of rights. So, the claim that what is unacceptable outside a cult in terms of dignity and rights is acceptable inside it, and even on the basis of liberal and democratic rights that apply outside, is a paradox that can only be defused in one way: By placing the constitutional charters of democratic states above the identity defence of the cult. Those who wield the hatchet of religious freedom and do not care about the rights of citizens instead want to place the special identity of cults above the universalisation of rights. They dress in flamboyant clothes, but the king is naked.