

**Speech of Laurette Onkelinx,
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of
Social Affairs and Public Health, Belgium
(FECRIS 20th anniversary Conference, 24 March 2014 in Brussels)¹**

Mr Chairman,
Dear André Frédéric,

Ladies and Gentlemen

My thanks to FECRIS for bringing us together to discuss a societal phenomenon unfortunately still very much in the news these days.

The society in which we live, with its economic crises, its crises of values, its violence, its obsessive individualism, its nagging uncertainties in the face of insecurity, is very destabilising for individuals. Contemporary society can be disorienting and deceptive for some of us, seemingly unable to come up with answers to these apparently insoluble problems. And this makes fertile ground for the worries and weaknesses that cultist movements build on.

Such movements, with their touch of irrationality, surrounded in mystery, occultism, practising strange rites, or conversely adopting a pseudo-scientific discourse, are keen to attract individuals demanding answers to the malaise or fears they feel.

Among such a target cohort, we find above all people weakened by illness and who maybe feel lost or without any perspective or hope. Cultist movements, gurus, pseudo-healers, pseudo-therapists or pseudo-scientists – under whatever title they conceal their dangerous activities – manipulate and abuse the weaknesses of such easy prey, with sometimes dramatic consequences.

I've spent a long time fighting these harmful organisations. Some eighteen years ago, at that time as Minister of Education, I initiated a number of awareness-raising campaigns against cultist movements, including the campaign “*Gourou, gare à toi*” (Guru, watch out). I also fought against “sectarian schools” whose aim it was to get children out of state schools and into private institutions, shutting them off from the outside world.

At a later date, as Minister of Justice, I pushed through amendments to the Criminal Code aimed at punishing people who abused the ignorance or weakness of others. My aim here was to facilitate the fight against cultist movements.

We also improved the way the Belgian Observatory for such matters – the CIAOSN/Centre d'Information et d'Avis sur les organisations sectaires nuisibles (*the Information and Advisory Centre on Harmful Sectarian Organisations*) – functioned.

Now, as Minister of Public Health, what I am seeing is that sectarian movements are developing strongly in this field. This is unfortunately confirmed by the specialists in this matter, including the Belgian CIAOSN and the French MIVILUDES, which report that

¹ Original French

currently sectarian movements in the field of health make up nearly 25% of notifications received. This is the reason why I have put patient protection on the top of my list of priorities for this legislation.

We need to take action against the “*Dérapeutes*” as MIVILUDES calls them: people who, whether maliciously or irresponsibly, benefit from legal loopholes or patient weakness to cause considerable harm to already destabilised people.

In this sense, together with the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, we have introduced a legal framework for the exercise of psychotherapy, establishing strict requirements in terms of training and quality of care for gaining accreditation as a psychotherapist and the licence to practise psychotherapy.

Up to now, this sector was not regulated and, as a result of soaring demand for mental healthcare, proved to be fertile ground for sectarian movements.

Without the law, anybody could call himself a psychotherapist. A great danger! Several manifestations of sectarian movements are, for example, very active in the fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy.

This legal framework is set to be adopted this week. It proposes the licensing of serious and trustworthy professionals, and greater transparency for patients turning to them. I have similarly initiated the enforcement of a 15 year-old law on non-conventional practices.

The goal here is to set the requirements needing to be met to practise the following disciplines: homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic care and acupuncture. Here again, we also need greater transparency and better patient protection. My goal – and here I agree with the discussions of the Belgian College of Physicians at a symposium held recently on the topic – is not to uphold “official” medicine, thereby rejecting all other forms of practice. Alongside conventional medicine – which is by no means an exact science and which is in a constant state of development and self-questioning – there is room for complementary practices supporting a patient's well-being.

The law allows more action to be taken against practices which are supposedly alternatives to conventional medicine and whose practitioners are out to completely isolate their “patients” (i.e. “victims”) from conventional care, with a view to excluding them from society and being better able to subject them.

These two issues, mental health and non-conventional practices, have been identified in the context of the work of FECRIS as the priority fields of action of sectarian movements.

Moreover, when my ministry or I find ourselves confronted with movements with sectarian tendencies, as was the case with “total biology”, I systematically instruct the government departments within my competence to denounce the reprehensible machinations of health professionals or persons claiming to be such to the competent authorities: the public prosecutor, colleges or chambers, the police, the mayor, etc. However, though these bodies in most cases show the utmost diligence, their lack of means of action regularly lead to an admission of helplessness. In a number of cases, we have seen that court proceedings initiated against them have come to nothing - something that is not acceptable.

Ladies and gentlemen, there's still a lot to be done, and it's a fight requiring perseverance. Cultist/sectarian currents are constantly developing and changing form. When one road is blocked, they just change their field of activity, though always with the same underlying intention – Approach-Seduction-Subjection – and, at the end of the day, the same harmful effect. In my opinion, it is absolutely necessary to have a debate at national level on this, with the aim of getting the various competent bodies to work better with each other and to strengthen their means of action (public authorities, colleges and chambers, judicial bodies, scientific observatories, etc.).

One example of an initiative underlining this necessity was the symposium held last year by the SPF Public Health on the development of sectarian movements in the field of healthcare, which ended with an action plan which I hope I shall still be able to present during the present legislative period.

I am also of the opinion that we need better coordination at international level, where certain sectarian movements are one step ahead of us in terms of presence in international forums, and lobbying at this level. In this vein, today's conference similarly underlines the need of taking action. I look forward to proposals for new initiatives.

Thank you for all your work up to now. Rest assured, I am well aware how difficult it is to work against these dark forces threatening the health and dignity of too many of our fellow citizens.

Laurette Onkelinx