

PROTECTION OF THE YOUNG FROM THE INFLUENCE OF DESTRUCTIVE SECTS

Review article

DOI: 10.7251/DEFEN1401006M

UDK 2-79:343.97-053.2

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Abstract:

The last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have been marked with a large number and fast spreading of religious sects, which have turned into a worldwide pandemic. Crisis of the value system and the disorientation of society pose a fertile ground for the emergence of sects and ever so easy recruitment of the young into these sects, which offer help and solution to the young, often manipulating them for their personal benefits. Sect members are the young aged 12–20 who are subjected to different psychological methods and “brainwashing” in order to embrace a new value system, contrary to the religious norms and social system in general. Most often in the background of these sects is procuring members to prostitution, drug use, pedophilia, crime and alike. Some sects force the young to commit suicide so they would sacrifice themselves for the Satan. All this points to a serious social problem which is unfortunately still perceived as “a myth” and “a taboo” in our society. For this reason the aim of this paper is to indicate some traits and features of sects, along with parents and teachers, as well as behavior change in order to timely identify the young who have joined up a sect and raise awareness of people about the need for the prevention of this phenomenon in the family and schools.

Keywords: *sects, manipulation, suicide, the young, value system, social exclusion.*

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INTRODUCTION

Cult rituals and religious ceremonies we saw in horror movies in the 1970s seemed bewildering and completely unreal to us, just to become a tragic everyday reality in the 1990s. The media often report about various vandal events such as demolition of monuments, destruction of church property, drawing of an inverted cross on monuments, drawing of different satanic signs and similar. Often the culprits of such criminal acts are members of other religions, hooligans, drunks. Also, there is a rise in the number of young people who commit suicide, the reasons for which are never found. All this points to the fact that different sect members are responsible for such actions and that these acts represent initiatives and recruitment of new members, showing loyalty to the sect, moving up in the hierarchy of the sect and alike.

Burdened with everyday life, existential problems, being under the constant pressure of social, political and economic crisis, the family have a hard time controlling their children, and society and its socializing factors are becoming more and more dysfunctional. Such environment breeds sects which use the entropy of the value system to justify the purpose of their teaching contrary to church teaching and its norms and values. The period of adolescence, numerous problems that the young are faced with at this period, a desire for independence and proving that they are no longer children facilitate sects to meet their needs through false solidarity and friendship in order to gain new members who upon joining this vicious circle have a hard time getting out. Sects have a destructive influence on the individual, family, society and state. It is a disease which destroys physical, mental and spiritual health. Therefore, this paper will try to elucidate this form of addiction which has been spreading in the last thirty years like an epidemic on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. This problem is not debated enough in the public, due to lack of experts on the issue, on the one hand, and prejudice and lack of information of citizens about the influence of sects and their teaching, on the other.

THE TERM AND OCCURRENCE OF SECTS

The term "sect" is ambiguous even today: the word most probably comes from the Latin verb which means "separate", but the experts today agree that the root comes from the verb "follow". Namely, the word sect comes from "sequi" which means follow, go, accompany. During the Roman Empire, a *sect* represented a certain way of thinking, lifestyle, a political party or philosophical school that one supported or followed (Vujaklija, 1970).

The origin of sects dates back to the classical period that arose from the discontent of some believers brought about by religious dogmas. Some of them even tried to reform the Church, but it fiercely attacked their teachings thus causing them to separate from it and establishing their own religious community. Many religions started off as sects. The most notable example is the Nazarenes. They were a reformist movement within Judaism established by the apostles of Jesus, which became the most spread religion in the world today known as Christianity. In the Middle Ages the Church used the term "sect" to denote all teachings which were opposite to its own. In a broader sense, the term denotes heresy. Later on the word sect stood for every branch of a religion, and in that sense it is used in the modern society (Blagojević, 2005).

Mass spreading of sects took place just recently, in the mid 19th century, when industrialization and secularization repressed religion. During those times of “instability and crises”, sects offered people answers to questions, truth, safety, fellowship, equality. Sects offered people an illusion of sense, purpose and direction, which was difficult for some to find somewhere else or within themselves. They offered a refuge for the lonely – an illusion of belonging, family, fellowship, action directed towards a greater cause. A flattering belief in one’s own “dedication to secrecy” was very important – being one of the chosen ones builds up in such persons the feeling of pleasure and superiority that intoxicates them (Vukomanović, 2004).

The emergence of sects is seen by many as a result of the weakening of major religions. Faced with the new worries of our time – unemployment, social insecurity, questionable progress – new religious groups are formed in order to replace the role of traditional religious communities which failed to give a soothing interpretation of the world to their followers. Sect members usually come from different social classes. For the most part, they are members of social community who feel disappointed, repressed, shunned by society, inferior. They are usually lonely, unsuccessful and complex persons. Majority are uneducated, although there are many of those who are educated and intelligent. By recruiting such members, religious sects, each in its own way, explain the cause for the state the person is in, thus building up their willingness and motivation to fight for a new society in which everybody will be happy. This new society is established in the afterlife, and on the Earth as well when “new conscience” takes over control. In order to create such society, religious sects require from their members to accept the organization of life based on certain principles and live by a certain regime. Often sects discard many norms and values imposed by a broader society and replace them with beliefs and practice which the disbeliever often finds strange. Their emergence is often linked with great social crises, when old norms of social life are abandoned and the entire value system breaks down. It is then that these sects offer new forms and a new value system, which they regard more suitable for the new circumstances (Luković, 2003a).

Based on their teaching doctrines, sects can be divided into:

- Religious,
- Psycho-therapeutic,
- Political,
- Commercial.

In times of globalization, people are prone to a more dynamic lifestyle by trying to keep up the pace with technological development and survive the overall recession which has been present over the past years. In such social surrounding, focused on career, and on existence in general, people have less and less time for family, conversations with their children, understating for their problems, needs and demands, as well as their views on the world they live in. It is precisely these disturbed family relationships that different sects make use of by offering relief, understating and spiritual fulfillment. By deploying false promises they mislead a large number of people, particularly those whose life is stressful and disappointing, and the number of such people in our society is on the rise. Destructive actions of some religious sects and cults on the family and society are becoming more emphasized and they are turning into a serious security threat.

Religious sects in the world

Today, there is a large number of sects in the world. It is difficult to determine the exact number, not only because they are covert in nature and act in secrecy, but because many of them shut down, while others emerge. Otherwise, the literature and the press usually mention the following: “Children of God”, “Hare Krishna”, “Moonie”, “Scientology”, “Peoples Temple”, and so on.

Jehovah’s Witnesses are a sect whose members put a great deal of importance on the end of the world. They believe that salvation will be bestowed upon less than 144,000 people, which means that everyone should demonstrate asceticism in their life. In order to succeed in this, members are encouraged to sever certain social ties, e.g. to refuse to receive a blood transfusion even in a case of emergency.

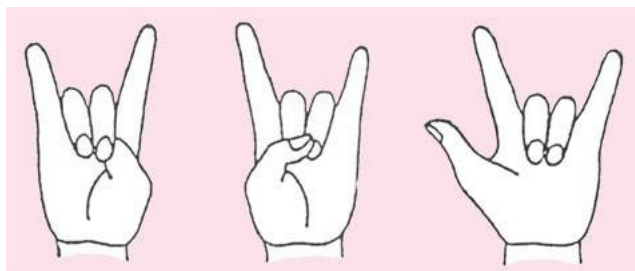
“**Hare Krishna**” is a religious sect which operates as an international association for cognition of Krishna, a second god of Indian religious trinity. The founder of the sect is an Indian guru called *Prabhupada*. His teachings are entirely devoted to idolatry of Krishna. Members of the sect live off of their publications, and they are mostly recognized by their shaved heads. The sect “**Moonie**” was founded by Sun Myung Moon in South Korea. Members of the sects are required pre joining the sect to hand over their property to the church, which would, according to the sermons of the church founder, be used for the unification of world Christianity. In that way, this sect runs lucrative commercial affairs, beneficial mainly to the sect leaders. They operate mainly in the USA, but also in some other countries. “**Scientology**” was founded by Lafayette Ronald Hubbard. Its branches stem throughout the world and it gathers millions of followers. Recruitment of members is primarily executed through expensive courses that teach believers religious philosophy, which helps them improve “communication” on “the way to God”. The sect “**Peoples Temple**” was founded by a certain James Warren “Jim” Jones with its headquarters in San Francisco. It is best known for the events in 1978 when its followers, over 900 of them, committed a mass suicide/killing in a jungle in Guyana. It was discovered that “the supreme leader of the reverend peoples temple”, Jim Jones, a mentally ill person, brought his followers from the USA to a jungle in Guyana and established a settlement with over a thousand people and children in it. According to official records, the mass suicide and killings were executed with the help of potion mixed with a deadly poison. After the ritual, in the settlement called “Jonestown”, 923 dead members of the sects were uncovered, along with their leader. “**The Raëlians**” is a sect which is probably most known for their claims that they have cloned people on several occasions. The main postulate of their “religion” is that people were created in laboratories 25,000 years ago by aliens and were “planted” on Earth. Claude Vorilhon, the founder of the church, was given this important piece of information by none other than those same aliens which he bumped into while he was going for a walk. Today, this former journalist and a car-test driver is the head of the church, which amasses its fortune (and his) on sympathizers who give away ten percent of their property to the church. Aside from cloning, the members believe in sexual freedom, and by having orgy they await the arrival of aliens which will take place in 2035. “**Order of the Solar Temple**” was founded in the 1980s of the last century in Switzerland. *Ordre du Temple Solaire* was a secret society which was supposed to carry on the tradition of the Knights Templar, thus joining other numerous sects and societies competing for that role. However, this sect stands out for the fact that its followers supposedly sacrificed a child who they believed was Antichrist in the 1990s of the last

century. The founder of the order, Luc Jouret, and his team committed suicide several days later. The order was banned in France (Milanović, 2010).

On the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the most famous and dangerous is undoubtedly a sect called the **Black Rose**. The sect has been active around 40 years. It was originally founded as the Church of Lucifer in America. This sect first appeared in Croatia and Slovenia, and several years later in Serbia and Montenegro. When the Church of Lucifer first appeared in Croatia, a local branch separated from its mainstream and began operating on its own. Some of famous homicides and suicides have been executed by the members of the Black Rose in the last 30 years. Till this day it remains unknown who runs the sect. It is presumed that it is someone who is very powerful or rich. If a member of the sect does not kill himself, others do it for him. In the mid 1980s the Black Rose spread in Croatia and recruited a greater number of young people; a number of those young people advanced through the teachings of the sect, while the other number was used as a “sacrifice” for the advancement of the former. The members of the organization believe that they absorb the energy of these young people who commit suicide and draw strength from their deaths. The philosophy of suicide in the sect hierarchy is clear. The one who manages to persuade the other to commit suicide becomes important in the eyes of the leader. Thus, he gets closer to the object of worshipping, the Satan himself. Suicides are a part of the ritual of initiation into the highest level of the hierarchy. Accordingly, when “a priest” manages to persuade a young person to commit suicide he then gets accepted into the highest twelfth level of the hierarchy. These twelve levels violate universal God’s principles, for they believe that this universe is a bad place, and that God is evil. They hold an opinion that by violating God’s principle they will pass on into another universe, their own. This religion is complex and it dates back to ancient Egyptian myths and beliefs, ranging from the cult of God Seth, black Gnostics who were the antipodes to real Christians, to black Kabbalah and the influence of black Tantra in the east. Mainly, their incentives are not motivated by financial profit, but they believe that their power in the world rises when they persuade children into committing suicide.

There are “black masses” which the satanic sect the “Black Rose” organizes for the admission to the sect. During that ritual everybody eats black bread, and the prayer Heavenly Father is said backwards. The main ingredients of the bread are flour and blood from some animal, but they also have to use their own blood. The mass ends with the consumption of drugs and orgies. Then the entire body is tattooed with signs resembling the devil, which they refer to as Lucifer or Tigota, a pentacle, a hexagram, sixes or the letter F. There are those who tattoo a cross on their soles so they can tread on it.

Image 1 – version of a satanic sign



Characteristics of sects

What separates sects from other religions and religious movements are the teachings about “a new truth”, a new interpretation of the Bible, the teachings about a neobiblical source of authority, “another Jesus”, neobiblical teaching about God’s nature, change of theology, strong leadership, salvation through actions, false prophecy. Many believe that the new religious movements are marginal compared to major religions. Although statistical findings may vary when it comes to the number of new religious movements, sects and alternative movements in the world, we will try to point to some data in order to get an objective image of these social phenomena. There are over 10,000 new religions and movements among tribal people, in Japan several thousands, in Europe 2,000 and the same number in the USA. There are over 20,000 sects, small religious communities and new religious movements in the USA. Over 450 Christian communities and denominations are active in the USA. On average, Americans tend to change their religious beliefs three times in the course of their life (Kovačević, 2012). “In great Britain every seven days a thousand people change their religious group, and among most frequent ones are Islam, Buddhism and New Age” (Vukomanović, 2001, p. 111).

There were 200,000 different sect members by the mid 1990s in Austria, and in Russia 9,000 religious groups within 40 different religions. France accounts for 1,300 groups, gathering around 700,000 members. Sects are also present in Germany, Belgium, Hungary, Albania, Japan, Ukraine, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The most important reasons for the increase in the number of sects and their followers are a hard economic and political situation, as well as financial security some sects offer to their members.

According to Max Weber (1989), sects are formed within marginal social groups. Social classes that are outside the mainstream of economic, political and cultural life have a feeling of being discarded and underestimated. These people are susceptible to the actions of different sects, for in their ideology and organization they find what they lack in society. They put special emphasis on a morally correct way of living. However, it is important to mention that the history of sects shows that they were formed in different areas and that their members came from different classes. Different crises, especially social ones, lead to the formation and spreading of sects.

According to Luković (2003), the main conditions for the actions of sects are:

1. Religious lack of education – Most people are average connoisseurs of religion, and they often join the first religious sect they come across.

2. Crisis of the family – Dysfunctional families and many other causes have led to this phenomenon. The young, faced with everyday problems and insufficiently built up competence to deal with them, seek refuge, understanding, answers. Since most parents are incapable of satisfying the needs of their children, which are often unrealistic, the young can fall into temptation, turn to the alternatives that sects offer them. There are many causes which have led to the crisis of the family with us. The last two-three generations have witnessed the transition from a patriarchal to a liberal family with changes roles, enormous influence of the media and similar. Presence of crime and drugs, entropy of morality and values, war environment are the outcome of all of that. The young seek refuge, support, understanding, affirmation, answers, sympathizers, and only after their criteria are build up do they find and choose a company.

3. Seeking affiliation – Due to a broken down traditional way of life, people overall, not only the young, have a feeling of loneliness and alienation, starting from the family, school to society in general. The race for a financially good life and being successful in it is primarily the main criterion for social affirmation today, without going into the details of obtaining one such. Thus, some individuals have accomplished this goal but many desolate souls and frustrated individuals have remained in the drab of normal. Sects offer this “small man” human warmth, attention, support, protection and the feeling of uniqueness and belonging. People often feel lonely and discarded so they feel a need to belong to someone, to be useful to someone, to be important. It is precisely sects that develop a high degree of sense of uniqueness, they encourage solidarity and mutual respect.

4. Seeking answers – Different types of media, which are often contradictory, bomb people with information on a daily basis. As a rule, sects give brief and clear answers to the questions of their members and their view on the man, humanity, history, cosmos, current social and individual problems. In sects the man finds the purpose of life, of course under the guidance of the sect leader, which most often consists of brief and concise answers.

5. Seeking identity – We live in times of transition from one value system, communist-cosmopolitan, to another, ecumenical-universal cosmopolitanism. Sects criticize even communist atheism and supposedly sinful and polytheistic Orthodoxy for revering saints. The sect teaches that time wants it and its members, the first in the order, to find out the whole truth and free themselves from the misconceptions of the past, and for its members to renounce their family without any remorse and entirely devote themselves to the sect, which, as the chosen ones, leads them to salvation. In this way its members lose their country, nation and family in an instant. With all their “love and attention”, sects provide the complete and real truth. The followers are taught how to become model citizens of the world, but only if they do everything what is expected from them. If at that moment the individual loses the sight of the family, school, church, a charismatic leader of a sect is born.

6. The need for being “something special” – People often feel a need to escape from anonymity and gain a feeling of being something special, and not just a number in a multitude. It seems that sects provide special care for the individual. Sects convince their members that they are the ones, the only ones who will be saved because they belong to an elite community.

One of the main characteristics of sects is a constant contact between their members, solidarity, empathy, special connection between the members, absence of individual interests, blind compliance with the teachings of the sect, obedience, etc. They reject many norms and values of global society, replacing them with uncommon beliefs and practices.

WAYS AND TECHNIQUES OF RECRUITMENT

According to Gavran (1994, p. 283), the process of recruiting new members into sects is conducted through the following four stages:

First stage: a potential follower is enticed by a member of the opposite sex by inviting the potential candidate on a rendezvous, usually at the end of the week. Then, an

old sect member talks about how he had problems before, but ever since he joined the sect things have been going really well for him and that he is happy now and successful at everything.

Second stage: the other sect members lavish the new candidate with great attention and love, i.e. they “bomb” him with their “love-bombing” so he does not run away.

Third stage: most often the new member is further “worked on” through seminars or other forms of initiative, he is informed and formed. In the meantime, the ambience is firmly controlled, whereby the new member is severed from his family and friends, in order to adopt new the ways of thinking and behavior.

Fourth stage: the new member is involved in the life of the sect in all aspects and at this point he starts to be a missionary, and begins to recruit new members and take specific positions in the sect hierarchy. Namely, most sects have more or less standardized program that new members have to go through. The smaller or the recent sect, the more informal will be the way of recruitment. Also, they offer attendance to different lectures and mastering of the main beliefs of the group. After some time, the lectures tend to become rather standardized. In some sects moving up in the hierarchy is accomplished only through a level system. Every member has to master certain teachings and become perfect in the practical use of techniques at one level so he can obtain the information from the next level. During the time of training and learning, which can last from couple of months to several years, new members can use all their free time for exercising and learning about their new religion. During this period the process of religious achievement is completed in which every convert becomes a priority in every contact with the sect.

Schools pose a good place for recruitment of new sect members, for winning over the young. Most sects want to influence the young and secure the future of their ideology, strengthen their power. Sects influence the young by using different propaganda materials, they invite them to praying sessions, events that seem appealing and attractive considering the entertainment and content they offer. They usually target a person who is lost, vulnerable, depressive and through their program they offer exit out of crisis, realization of inner peace and a happy life. The young and the old are an easy prey of elaborate techniques and methods, which are often nothing more than a combination of sympathy and deception. By being cordial they entice the victim and start manipulating it. Sects intensively monitor the behavior of the individual and spot his weaknesses, which allows them to control his every thought. After they attract people, the new religious movements aspire to a certain control over the soul, often using unapproved methods of changing behavior, and impose norms of thinking, feeling and behavior. The techniques for recruiting new members include a sophisticated process of introduction of the convert and progressive acquainting. Dominance techniques include e.g. “love-bombing”, enticement of future members and other. They give ready answers, friendship, but in some cases they rely on extortion of decision through the use of force. They frequently deploy flattery for the purpose of gaining new members, they offer money and medicines (Ivanović, 2008).

Some sects, like most cults, put high demands in front of their members. Sectarian groups are known for their strict standards, doctrinal and behavioral and/or choice of unconventional model of worshipping or piety. Some sects use isolation for the purpose of controlling the process of thinking, removal of exterior information or the influence of the family and others, which could shatter the fascination and the process of assimilation of feelings, attitudes and behavioral patterns. The recruited are presented with abandon-

ing of the “past” (former) life. Generally, sectarian groups demand from their members to devote them more time than major religious communities do. Thus, sect members make more social contacts within and outside the group.

The most dangerous domestic satanic groups are: the Black Rose, Black Scorpions, Satan Dukes, Satan Knights that recruit the young aged 12–20 usually via the Internet, free language courses, trips abroad and events of alleged humanitarian organizations (Luković, 2000b). Parents and teachers need to pay special attention to the following: sudden changes in behavior, changing of company, going out late at night at the same time, dressing up in black, changes in eating patterns, wearing necklaces with strange signs, getting tattoos (often on the private parts of the body), dilated pupils, since they are often offered some opiates, avoiding conversation with parents, avoiding religious events (celebration of religious holidays and similar), taking away valuable things from home and excessive spending of money compared to earlier period, seclusion, cuts on hands and forearms (they cut themselves so to let couple of drops of blood during a ritual), dark rooms they spend their time in (they regard darkness as their natural light) and alike. Often the so called “priests” of religious sects hide behind the organizations such as association of citizens that organize free language courses and teach the young in order to single out individuals who are lonely, have physical anomalies, show depressiveness, seclusion, who are not satisfied with their life, or who have some problems in their family. These individuals are the perfect candidates for victims because sect representatives offer them friendship, show empathy for their problems, emphasize their virtues and abilities, solidarity, and then they provide them with another form of teaching which sheds enlightenment and the way out from the current situation. It is precisely the current situation that society is in today, its disorientation and the crisis of the value system that lead to the recruitment of the young and their naïve joining up sects (Luković, 2003b).

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AS ONE OF THE RISKS FOR JOINING UP A SECT

Social exclusion is a multifaceted process which weakens the tie between the individual and the community. A person can be excluded from accessing goods (e.g. the right to a financial fee) and services (e.g. the right to education), and from the labor market, i.e. they can be excluded from exercising human and social rights. The more the person is excluded, the more it becomes vulnerable. Generally speaking, individuals, social groups and areas are regarded as socially excluded if they are in an unfavorable position in a political, economic and social sense. The fight against social exclusion in principle means empowering the threatened and boosting up their capacities, establishing priorities in favor of the poor and the threatened, raising up the capacities of associations which work in the interest of socially threatened groups. A big problem poses a lack of reliable statistical data on the social status in the country, without which there is no efficient social and health policy (Bureau of Human Rights, Tuzla, 1998). Deluge of new religious movements represents a challenge, and sometimes a threat to society, regardless whether it concerns believers or disbelievers. The period of youth is a period of most destructive clashes and alienation between the children and the parents. The main problem of adolescence is the fight for independence, the desire to become free very fast. The most vulnerable and the most suitable group of young people who join up sects are unem-

ployed young people who come from broken up homes, members of ethnical minorities or who live in places that are severed from the church. There are many reasons why the young join up specific sects. Some seek happiness in them, warmth they lack in their family, material benefit, and some join up sects to satisfy their religious needs (Nikić, 1998).

Taking into account the hard economic situation that are society is in, the current ambience poses a fertile ground for the increase in the number of new movements, especially religious ones. A great challenge for families and society in general will be preserving the basic cells of society. Fast pace of life, weakening of family control, lack of communication and a lot of obligations contribute to an uncertain future, when it comes to life paths the young choose. But no group, even sects that offer security and fulfillment of aspirations of the young, can replace the family warmth and the values that are rooted in the early childhood.

CONCLUSION

An alarming and concerning fact is that there are around 120 organizations in Serbia today that can be referred to as sects, and approximately 500,000 people affiliated with them in one way or another. The answer to the question whether these sects are registered is negative. There are nowhere in the world organizations registered as sects.

Teenagers are most definitely a population susceptible to manipulation, hence many sects recruit the young. Due to the negative impact on the young and an increasing number of suicides in the world, attributed to sects, researchers from the USA and Europe are doing their best to classify the “sect syndrome” into the international classification of illness and cause of death, as a new diagnosis. The sect syndrome would be defined as a set of physical and mental disorders as a result of belonging to a sect. Also, the sect syndrome would require causal and symptomatic treatment. In order to make diagnosis and treatment successful, it is necessary for medical and paramedical staff, and the others, to acquaint themselves with the basic teachings and actions of sects. The required literature on the issue is mostly written in German and English, so it is necessary for the responsible ministry to publish the translation of these books. All medical institutions, especially those that deal with mental health, should, according to the practice in the world, open departments or clinics for sect problems. Joining up sects is more and more seen as a new form of addiction, since, among other, possible escape from the sect is followed by a classical abstinence syndrome. Likewise, if we know which way to direct a drug addict, an alcoholic, a cardiac patient or a man with a broken leg, then we have to have an institution for treatment of sect victims, i.e. patients with the sect syndrome. A psychiatrist, a clinic psychologist and an internist would have a major role in this institution, but there would also have to be an established cooperation of priests of the church (traditional religion) the patient used to belong to before joining up the sect.

When it comes to sect prevention, the best way of protection is definitely proper informing of the entire population and passing of laws, both of which fall under the jurisdiction of authorities, as is the practice in the world. By passing laws on religious communities, it is necessary to introduce a curriculum subject in schools, aside from Catechism, in senior classes, called “Security Education”, which would deal with the contents of prevention from different forms of addiction, delinquent behavior and alike. The peo-

ple in rehabilitation process from the sect syndrome, rehabilitated individuals, parents and family members of these individuals should be organized into interest groups for providing self-help and help to others.

Also, addressing the issue publically via the media and the consequences the young are faced with upon joining the vicious circle, the presence and influence of sects will no longer be construed as a myth, but a reality and an actuality that we encounter on a daily basis. Accordingly, this paper will try to elucidate the issue which is becoming more accentuated among the young, and which has a negative effect on the development and formation of their personality, and their socialization overall.

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Paper submitted: 11.19.2013.

Paper approved: 15.2.2014.