

Summary

Although the subject of cults regularly appears in the news, the most recent comprehensive study that was conducted in The Netherlands dates back to the beginning of the 1980s. An *Undercover in Nederland* television documentary about a cult called Miracle of Love caused quite a stir in 2011. The Minister concerned, however, observed that no criminal offences could be established. After having watched the programme, various members of the House of Representatives urged the Minister to order a study into abuses in cults, with a focus on the adequacy of the set of instruments at the disposal of the law and health care services, because there was no up-to-date picture available of the state of affairs regarding cults and the way abuses in cults were tackled in The Netherlands.

There is a lot of debate on what exactly constitutes a cult, particularly because of the negative connotation of the term. For that reason, the (more neutral) term new religious movement is also used. New religious movements are characterized by the following elements:

- a group of people
- who have followed / follow a leader
- with a particular, recognisable religious / spiritual ideology
- and of recent origin (from the Second World War onwards).

Abuses are divided into criminal (potential violation of the law) and psychological abuses.

Research methods

This research study was based on a multimethod approach. This means that information was gathered from various sources: a review of the literature, questionnaires, interviews, an analysis of police records, jurisdiction, LexisNexis reports, Internet forums and reports to Report Crime Anonymously (Meld Misdaad Anoniem).

Abuses are the abuses which have been called as such by the people who have experienced them in this way. By definition, this includes a subjective element. The number of people who have participated in this study and are still members of a cult is almost nil. Wilson (1994) was among those who warn against a too heavy reliance on the statements of former cult members. This research study used several sources of information; thus the accounts of former members were not the only source of information. Moreover, the abuses mentioned in the interviews were elaborated upon in a critical manner. The study was neither meant to draw a representative picture of cults in The Netherlands, nor to sketch the extent of the abuses.

Literature on new religious movements

New religious movements originate as split-offs of existing religious movements or come into being spontaneously as a result of the teachings of a charismatic leader. The relations between new religious movements and society vary per new religious movement. Mass media often play a crucial role in the creation of a cult's – often negative – image. Older studies have shown that abuses did indeed occur in such movements, but not to the extent as had often been suggested. The size of the cults may vary between two and several thousands of members and the members' individual backgrounds are also quite diverse. Charismatic leadership is a common characteristic of cults. According to the people involved, the leader has a personal bond with his followers and often also with God or a spiritual supreme being. There are various reasons why people join cults. For example, people may feel attracted to a cult that fits in with their own beliefs, cults may offer meaning, mental growth and answers to religious questions, and cults may also serve as families because of the security, safety and warm reception they provide their followers with. The reasons for leaving are also diverse. Reasons mentioned included oppression, pressure, superficiality, arbitrariness, isolation, relationships that were not allowed and a lack of openness. Studies from the 1980s and 1990s have shown that cult members' mental health was not a direct cause for concern. A large part of former cult members looked back on their days in the movement rather positively. Nevertheless, part of the members who left the movement experienced problems afterwards. They were angry, sad, ashamed or felt guilty or anxious.

Cults, leaders and followers

In the empirical part of the research study 84 cults that had been associated with abuses were found. The total number of cults in The Netherlands is not known, but several hundreds of cults are estimated to exist. This research focused on abuses and was not aimed at taking stock of cults in The Netherlands. Half of the cults had a religious, Christian foundation. The other cults were more spiritually oriented. Approximately three quarters of the cults found, which have a known number of followers, had one hundred members at most. From the various information sources it became clear that cults may arise from a dynamic process between leader and potential followers. The cult, sometimes the cult leader in particular, tries to find members and the follower is searching for identity, warmth, meaning or 'something'. The interviews with former cult members and family members showed that various people first came into contact with cults through family members, friends, colleagues, coaching programmes, courses, lectures, training courses, or because they were referred by social support services – regular or otherwise – or physicians. Both experts and former members stated that feeling very welcome played an important role on first acquaintance.

Approximately two thirds of the cult leaders were male. The terms gifted, talented and charismatic regularly popped up in the interviews. The leaders seemed to possess a certain gift, talent or some sort of charisma, had great verbal skills, held some kind of attraction

and seemed to be well able to create a personal bond with their followers. Claiming a position of power, such position being acknowledged by followers and not being accountable to anyone seem to be important elements for abuses to arise.

In two thirds of the cults studied the male to female ratio was equal. Five cults had slightly more female than male members and two cults had slightly more male than female members. None of the cults in this research consisted entirely of men. Five cults, however, consisted entirely of women.

The majority of followers in the cults studied appeared to be first-generation followers. Second-generation followers were predominantly found in Christian cults. Ages and levels of education of members varied per cult. The sources referred to indicated that followers could often be characterized as searching for something, and as being vulnerable and servile / dependent. These characteristics might make them susceptible to joining a cult.

The distance between cult leader and followers or the period of time followers spent with the cult varied. For example, weekly meetings might be held, but there were also followers who lived with their leader in communes.

From the interviews with the respondents roughly two ways in which followers left cults could be distinguished: withdrawal or expulsion. Withdrawal means that the cult member leaves the cult more or less voluntarily. Expulsion means that the follower leaves because of pressure from the leader or other followers. Nearly all of the cult members interviewed looked back on an unpleasant period of time with the cult. Several former cult members were coping with mental discomforts or problems after they had left. Nearly all followers who had left the cult sought (professional) help in order to cope with these problems. Respondents, and former followers in particular, regarded the leader as the most important person in the cult to commit abuses. Joining a cult or withdrawing from it can be regarded in terms of a cost-benefit analysis. Initially, the benefits of having joined the cult are high and for some people they will remain higher than the costs. For other people the costs will outweigh the benefits in the course of time. This is the moment when they can leave the cult.

Abuses

From the sources of information referred to, in particular the information from former members and family members, various abuses emerged that could point to a violation or potential violation of the criminal code (46 of the 84 cults about which abuses had been reported were associated with such abuses). These criminal abuses pertained to various acts. Only a very limited number of cases (murder, kidnapping) could be backed up with more objective data, for example because relevant police records were available and the police had investigated the matter. A large part of the information about abuses came from respondents' subjective experiences (usually from former members). Sexual abuse was most widespread (in 22 of the 84 cults studied). This concerned both children and adults. Assault and threat / intimidation were also mentioned. These abuses were mentioned in relation

to various cults (in 14 and 13 of the cults in our study, respectively). In six cults parents were deprived of parental authority over their children, according to the people concerned. Other criminal offences, such as economic exploitation, fraud and deprivation of liberty, were mentioned a few times by the sources. Murder and attempted murder had taken place in two cults.

Almost all cults (76 out of 84) about which abuses had been reported were associated with psychological abuses according to the sources referred to. In eight cults only criminal offences were reported, which does not mean, however, that no psychological abuses had taken place. It only meant that no information was found on this matter. Respondents reported that cult members were 'brainwashed', psychologically manipulated (by the leader), as a result of which they had behaved in certain ways which contravened their principles – as they stated in retrospect. During the interviews and in the answers to the questionnaires many examples of psychological abuses were mentioned, such as having donated money to the cult or cult leader under pressure from the group or from the leader or having had to pay much money for all sorts of courses. Some members did not have private lives any more, were not allowed to have their own opinions and became isolated from their families in the course of time. Other examples included intrusion on existing relationships and members having had to give up their own identities. These are not isolated examples but examples that are associated with one another and can be traced back to the psychological mechanisms that may exist in groups, especially in groups that are to a large extent inwardly oriented and do not want to be involved with society at large.

The experts who had been interviewed about the abuses thought that in case of violations of the law, and the Criminal Code in particular, the authorities (police and the Public Prosecution Service) should take action. Opinions on the psychological abuses were divided, however. Some experts did not think these were abuses because often it concerned former members' negative assessments of their days in the cult. The aspect of voluntariness is also of importance here. Other experts did think, however, that the psychological abuses were detrimental. In their work they were confronted with members who had left the movement and who were experiencing psychological problems. A number of experts took an intermediate position. Although they recognised the seriousness of psychological abuses, they saw no role left for the authorities to take criminal action because of the freedom of religion.

Set of instruments for law and health care services

Former cult members and their families did not always go the police after having experienced abuses. Shame was one of the reasons, but also their expectations that the police could do little against the psychological abuses or because the offences were time-barred. In some cases of criminal offences the police had indeed taken action. Respondents thought the tax authorities should take action against abuses of the so-called ANBI status (ANBI stands for 'Algemeen Nut Beogende Instelling', an Institution Intended to Benefit the

General Public.) by some cults. They also felt that staff of institutions such as the Child Protection Board or Youth Care Office lacked knowledge of what is going on in cults. Other reasons why members who had left the movement did not always seek help included the fact that they did not trust authorities or agencies, or because they just wanted to forget their days in the cult. Those who did turn to social work or to a psychologist for help found that their problems were not always taken seriously or were not always recognised. They felt health workers' expertise and affinity with their problems was wanting and sometimes they had had to seek long and hard before they eventually found a health worker with whom they did feel a real connection. Respondents stated a need for a central information and incidence reporting centre that citizens could turn to if they had any questions regarding cults or where they could share their own experiences.

The experts interviewed thought that the Criminal Code offered sufficient possibilities for protection to counteract criminal offences. Article 284 of the penal code (regarding punishable pressure) is not widely known, but might be applied in cases of psychological abuses, even though the experts deemed chances of success were not very high. Some experts felt that an extra provision in order to protect vulnerable persons (in a general sense), like the one in force in Belgium, would be worth considering, but regarded demonstrating vulnerability – after the event – as difficult to prove. The possibilities civil law offers to protect children and adults and to take action against financial abuses were considered to be adequate. More stringent requirements for church sects were considered inexpedient because of the separation of church and state and the small extent of the cult problem. An option which might be considered is monitoring the institutions that have been granted ANBI status.

In a general sense, the experts interviewed agreed that the set of health care instruments to tackle the abuses that people have experienced in cults was adequate. Victims of criminal offences can appeal to Victim Support (Slachtofferhulp) for help and Correlation Foundation (Stichting Korrelatie) provides 'zeroth health care services' that are widely accessible, and, if necessary, can refer people to professional help and support agencies. No role would be left for national or local authorities with respect to people who are still members of cults. Concerned family members can appeal to so-called *exit counselling*, a private enterprise at present. Regular institutions could deal with the former cult members' appeals for help, provided that – and this is an important condition – they have sufficient knowledge and / or affinity with problems related to cults. This also applies to support and care services for cult members' children.

Conclusion

A total of 84 cults have been found where abuses had taken place according to the sources referred to. The research study was based on a broad approach in order to acquire the best possible picture of the various abuses. Information on abuses came mostly from former cult members and their families. They have had bad experiences in the cults. No research was done with respect to people who are still members of cults now and who might be more

positive about their joining the cult. Establishing the truth or listening to both sides of the argument was not a research goal. The former cult members' and family members' subjective accounts were the most important source of information to describe the abuses.

The things that take place in cults can largely be understood in terms of sociopsychological processes at work, such as group pressure, us them thinking and conforming to what the leader says. These kinds of processes have been established in scientific experiments repeatedly. It is a well-known phenomenon that people in certain circumstances may follow a leader and may – temporarily – forget about their values and standards in the process. In cults, where people lead rather isolated lives with respect to society at large, this phenomenon may occur to a greater extent. For family members these may be worrisome situations. For the people directly involved this is not so sure during the time that they are still members of a cult; only afterwards can they distance themselves from what they have been through and do they experience certain situations or events as abuses, sometimes with all the corresponding feelings of guilt, shame or regret.

Considering the scope of the research study it can be concluded that the problems observed do not pose a danger to the legal order or to public health, just as had been concluded in previous research in The Netherlands in the 1980s. At the macro level the extent of the problem is limited. At the individual level – that is to say at the level of former members of cults and their families – there may indeed be intense, poignant situations. Experts, former cult members and their families agreed that there is a need for a neutral institution that should supply information and provide for reporting and referral opportunities, and above all, offer an attentive ear.