

## Economic climate a breeding ground for cults

LEESHA MCKENNY, RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS  
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Global fears of economic or environmental upheaval feed the growth of gurus and damaging cults that prey on the weak, a visiting French government expert has warned.

Georges Fenech, president of France's Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances, said it was working for greater international co-operation in dealing with sectarian abuses – with one in five French, or 12million people, affected in some way by a cult.

"We're going through an age where there are numerous crisis, whether it's financial, climatic, pandemic, and these create favourable basis where the gurus can work for their own benefit," he said.

The politician and former judge cited one instance where an Australian cult, the Order of St Charbel founded by the now-jailed "Little Pebble" William Kamm on the NSW South Coast, spread to France where members have since been imprisoned.

"So that proves there are no borders for that kind of group and that's why it's so important to have this kind of exchange and common vision between countries," he said.

The French government has a history of taking a strict line on monitoring what it considers negative "cultlike movements".

It has previously released a list of more than 170 groups deemed cults - including some groups considered religions in Australia - on the basis they met one or more of 10 characteristics.

"Some of these organisations anyway are huge organisations, like the Church of Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses, and of course these people are here [in Australia] as well."

Mr Fenech said the French branch of the Church of Scientology will return to court this week to appeal against its 2009 conviction on charges related to illegal pharmacology and organised fraud.

But the French approach to minority faiths, itself the subject of some criticism, has not always been vindicated by the courts.

This year the European Court of Human Rights ruled its government interfered with the the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses when it attempted to impose a retroactive tax worth millions on the donations received by the church.

Mr Fenech said Australia was part of the Anglo Saxon world that had a more "a laissez faire attitude of tolerance towards all religion", but he defended his country's record of religious tolerance.

"In France we do respect all religions but at the same time we do not tolerate that under the aegis of some kind of church some types of behaviour take place, and we confront these."

Mr Fenech said all religions had the potential to foster cultic deviances. His organisation had examined sub-cults established within the Catholic church.

"We can't leave this problem to private initiative because the problem is too serious and too difficult. It's just too much for associations to deal with it," he said.

Mr Fenech, who said he will address the federal Senate today, was invited to deliver the keynote presentation at a conference entitled "Cults in Australia: Facing the Realities" co-hosted by Liberal senator Sue Boyce and independent senator Nick Xenophon.

Speakers also include 2010 Australian of the Year, Professor Patrick McGorry, and Tom Sackville, president of the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sects or Cults.

Mr Xenophon said it was vital that Australia look at laws similar to those of France that provide protection for victims of mental manipulation.

"Right now some cults and groups here in Australia are getting away with unacceptable conduct and this is partly because our laws have failed to recognise the way people are controlled and coerced," he said.

There were about 3000 cults operating in Australia, Cult Information and Family Support NSW president Ros Hodgins said.

"We are asking that parliamentarians support measures to address the abusive groups we know as cults that have no accountability and cause psychological harm," she said.

"Australia has not yet taken these issues as seriously as other countries, especially Europe."



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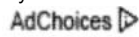


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