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Worries over religious schools

Flanders Today (03.11.2010) - HRWF (22.11.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The clash between religious and secular thinking continues to raise concerns, as Flemish education minister Pascal Smet last week promised to send inspectors to two religious schools to see if their beliefs were in breach of guidelines.

In the first case, a Protestant evangelical primary and pre-school in Borgerhout, a district of Antwerp, was revealed to be using a fundamentalist Bible basis to teach children to question evolution. "We say that there are many people who believe that is how the world came about," said Luc Borkes, director of the Zonnebloem School, which has 29 pre-schoolers and nine first-year pupils. "We're not saying that creationism is proven, but we raise questions about evolutionary theory. In religious lessons, we learn the Creation story. And in biology lessons, we say that the hand of God is involved in our existence."

Smet's problem is that the school is subsidised by the government and is required by law to adhere to guidelines regarding the content of lessons. However, evolution is only on the official syllabus of secondary schools, and religion education is not in the government's remit, making intervention impossible.

A similar problem arose when a number of Jewish schools in Antwerp were revealed to be censoring textbooks in order to, for example, black out the appearance of a women's bare arms, remove words like "poppe" and "church" and, like the Protestant school, remove any mention of evolutionary theory.

Matters like sexual education are passed over completely. Michael Freilich, editor of the magazine Joods Actueel, defended the policy. "In our community there are no rapes, no teenage pregnancies and no sexually transmitted diseases," he told De Standaard. "Other people in Jewish schools say almost exactly the same is true. They all explain that it is due to the strong teaching about sex and the relations between men and women, or boys and girls."

Forced marriages and honor killings in Muslim communities: the Federal Sect Observatory keeps silent

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (05.07.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Since 2008, the non-profit organization "SOS mariage forcé/ crime d'honneur" has helped 200 girls under threat of forced marriages/honor killings through its hotline 0800 23243.

According to a 1999 survey of the Free University of Brussels (VUB), 27% of Turkish and Moroccan women said they got married under coercion. In 2004, the University of Louvain-la-Neuve surveyed 1400 youths aged 15-18 years and found out that 25% of them had been confronted to attempts of forced marriage.

According to the 27 April 2007 Law "any person who through violence or threat will have coerced someone into a marriage will be punishable by a one-month to two-year prison term and/or a fine of 500 to 2500 EUR.

At the end of June, Amritpal Kaur, a 17-year old Belgian girl, was found dead by hanging in India after being sent to the country of origin of her family for a forced marriage. Suicide or honor killing? The question will probably remain unanswered as her body was hurriedly incinerated before any police investigation could start.

Awareness campaigns are carried out by some NGOs and public institutions (*) to combat this phenomenon. However, the Federal Sect Observatory which more and more looks like a lobby group against a few religious and belief communities (Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, Raelians, etc.) once more keeps silent about this sort of "sectarian deviation". The Observatory also applied double standards concerning sexual abuse and molestation: warning the public against the possible but unfounded danger posed by a marginal belief group while keeping silent about the mass-scale cases in the Catholic Church, which is financed by the Belgian with the income tax of ALL taxpayers. The Observatory also kept silent about a case of exorcism which led to the death of a Moroccan girl.

(*) For more information

<http://www.faitsetgestes.cfwb.be>

<http://www.kbs-frb.be/publication.aspx?id=229066&LangType=2060>

<http://www.niputesnisoumises.be>

forced.mariages.belgium@gmail.com

Belgian files complaint over church sex abuse raid

Robert Wielaard

AP (29.06.2010) - HRWF (30.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Belgian man who says he was sexually abused by a priest filed a complaint with Brussels prosecutors Tuesday after his confidential testimony to a church-appointed panel was seized by Belgian police.

Jan Hertogen, a 63-year-old sociologist, said he told his story to the panel on the condition it would not be passed to authorities. He said the police raids - which also targeted a Catholic cathedral, church offices and a crypt - were an invasion of his privacy.

"After all those years, I told my story to the (sex-abuse panel) insisting it not be shared," he said, adding that he was now willing to speak to the media because he was so distressed at the victims' loss of privacy.

Hertogen wants all 475 men and boys who contacted the panel with allegations of abuse to complain to the Brussels prosecutor's office and register as "injured parties."

That would allow alleged victims access to information about any prosecutions resulting from the June 24 raids, which sparked a storm of protest by the Vatican after files were confiscated, bishops detained and holes drilled into a prelate's tomb to search for documents.

The Belgian police are investigating clerical sexual abuse after the country's longest serving bishop stepped down in April, confessing he had sexually molested a boy. Several other men and boys had said they had previously told Cardinal Godfried Danneels, who retired in January, about abuse but their complaints had not been investigated.

His home was among the targets of the raids.

The Catholic Church says it had the right to investigate allegations alongside police and the head of the panel accused prosecutors of using them as "bait" to lure frightened victims into the open. Pope Benedict XVI called the raids "deplorable."

But in a sign the row may be abating, Belgian officials will meet a papal envoy within days to discuss the raids, said foreign ministry spokesman Bart Ouvry. He did not give a date for the meeting between Archbishop Giacinto Berloco and Foreign Minister Steven Vanackere.

Belgium trumps Vatican on church abuse probes

Robert Wielaard

AP (28.06.2010) - HRWF (30.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Belgium insisted Monday in a dispute with the Vatican over credibility that Belgian law enforcement authorities - not the potentially biased Catholic Church - will investigate sexual abuse cases involving clergy.

A panel created by Belgian bishops 12 years ago to look into abuse cases disbanded on Monday, saying last week's seizure of its 500 case files rendered its existence pointless. Its chief, Peter Adriaenssens, accused authorities of betraying the trust of hundreds of victims and using his group to tap into information and testimony from abuse victims.

"We were bait," said Adriaenssens, a child psychiatrist. He urged Belgian authorities to clarify to abuse victims - many of whom talked after being promised anonymity - "what is going to happen" to the allegations they made to his church-appointed commission.

Belgium's government doesn't appear to be concerned about having pushed the panel to the sidelines, despite an outburst from the Vatican that Thursday's police raid was an unprecedented intrusion into church affairs.

"I respect Peter Adriaenssens, but his commission was created by the Church," Glenn Audenaert, head of Belgium's judiciary police, said after last week's police raids. "That commission cannot start a prosecution. Only the justice department can."

In Belgium, it has been doing that with unusual force.

On Thursday, scores of police officers seized documents, computers, DVDs and CDs at the Belgian archbishop's residence in Mechlin, north of Brussels, and detained a dozen Belgian bishops who were meeting there. Also detained for nine hours and told to surrender his cell phone was the Vatican's envoy to Belgium.

Using power tools, police also opened up a prelate's crypt in Mechlin's St. Rombout Cathedral looking for documents. Simultaneously, police carted off 500 sexual abuse case files against Belgian clergy from the office of Adriaenssens' panel in Leuven, just east of Brussels.

As the Adriaenssens' commission stepped down, it said it was now up to Belgian bishops "to care for victims and follow-up their complaints" of sexual abuse.

Rik Torfs, a canon law expert, says the Catholic Church has a poor record of doing that.

"It has failed badly in its treatment of many of these cases," he said. "The church always found their fate less important than its own prestige. In that sense, today's papal protests are unimpressive."

The commission Adriaenssens led was founded in 1998 to investigate sexual abuse by clergy. For long a do-nothing group with fast changing leaders, its case load in its first 10 years of existence never exceeded 30.

What accelerated matters was the April 24 resignation of Belgium's longest-serving bishop, Roger Vangheluwe. He stepped down after admitting sexually abusing a young boy both when he was a priest and archbishop casting a vast cloud over former Archbishop Godfried Danneels who retired last January.

The resignation came after reports of hundreds of abuse cases worldwide exposing cover-ups by bishops and evidence of long-standing Vatican inaction to stop it.

Since Adriaenssens took charge of the abuse investigation panel in April, its case load rose to 475 as hundreds of men - now in their 60s and 70s - have come forward.

Only 100 agreed that their cases could be relayed to justice officials. Adriaenssens said his panel had planned to issue a report to the Belgian bishops in October.

A lecture on Islam disturbed by young Muslims

HRWF (12.04.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - On 8 April, the court of Antwerp ruled that a penalty of 25,000 EUR would be imposed on anybody who would disturb the lectures of the Dutch writer Benno Barnard or intimidate him and his audience.

On 1 April 2010, Benno Barnard was to give a lecture on the dangers posed by Islam at the University of Antwerp under the provocative title "Long live God. Down with Allah". A group of young Muslims entered the conference hall and prevented him from having his conference. The police had to intervene and took away the demonstrators. The mayor of Antwerp, Minister of the Interior Annemie Turtelboom and the head of the Minority Forum Naima Charkaoui condemned this violation of freedom of expression.

Belgium moves to ban burqas worn in public

by Stephen Castle

NYT (02.04.2010) - HRWF (12.04.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In a reflection of growing anxiety in Europe over the use of Islamic symbols, a committee of Belgian lawmakers voted Wednesday to ban the wearing of burqas in public, paving the way for the first clampdown of its kind on the Continent.

The proposal, which will be put to the full Parliament after the Easter break, highlights the political sensitivity of Islamic dress for European politicians grappling with the challenges of integrating its expanding Muslim population.

It came in the midst of debates in France and the Netherlands over the wearing of head scarves or veils, and followed a referendum vote in Switzerland against building minarets.

Analysts noted that in Belgium, where the sight of women wearing burqas is relatively rare, the measure would have a limited practical impact, though it could prove politically symbolic.

"This is a very strong signal that is being sent to Islamists," the French-speaking liberal deputy Denis Ducarme said, adding that he was "proud that Belgium would be the first country in Europe which dares to legislate on this sensitive matter."

The bill could mean a ban being imposed on wearing burqas, or full-length garments that prevent women being identified, in streets, public gardens and sports grounds or buildings "meant for public use."

Exceptions would be possible for some festivities if the municipal authorities decide to grant them, and those breaking the law could face small fines or imprisonment for between one and seven days.

The unanimity with which the measure was approved by the home affairs committee suggests strong cross-party support when the measure is discussed by the full Parliament of Belgium, a predominantly Roman Catholic country.

The vice president of the Muslim Executive of Belgium, Isabelle Praile, criticized the move as an infringement of civil liberties.

"Will it be the Islamic veil tomorrow and the Sikh turban the day after?" she said, according to the Belga news agency. "I am against the imposition of such clothing, but also against banning it."

Caroline Sagesser, a social policy expert at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, said the move was more significant politically than in terms of social impact.

"Since there are so few burqas in Belgium, it is highly symbolic and is to appease public opinion," she said.

Ironically, some of the most likely offenders against any new law could be wealthy visitors from the Gulf states staying in the city's luxury hotels and visiting its most exclusive stores, she added.

Ms. Sagesser said that the more salient issue in Belgium, over the wearing of veils or head scarves in schools, rests with the tier of government devolved to the different linguistic communities in Belgium. That removes it from the authority of the Belgian federal Parliament.

In Dutch-speaking Flanders, wearing of head scarves by pupils is banned in public schools but not private ones.

It was assumed that the law prevented teachers both in Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia from wearing head scarves, though a recent ruling in Charleroi permitted a mathematics teacher to continue to wear a simple veil, Ms. Sagesser said.

"This is something the public feels strongly about, and we have the impression that, in France, they were able to take some tougher measures. But we are failing to tackle the real issue of integration which is a socio-economic one," she added.

But even in Belgium the picture is mixed; in June last year, Mahinur Özdemir became the first lawmaker to be sworn into the Brussels regional Parliament wearing a hijab, or Islamic head scarf.

Across the European Union the pattern is not uniform, either. Britain has no laws against Islamic dress, for example.

On Tuesday, France's top administrative body, the State Council, advised the government that there were no legal grounds for a complete ban on the wearing of full-face veils in public - a proposal a panel of French legislators has endorsed - but added that the burqa could be outlawed in some places for security reasons.

France, where secularism is an important element of public life, passed a law in 2004 banning the wearing of head scarves or any other conspicuous religious symbols in state schools.

In the Netherlands several possible measures on the wearing of veils have been discussed, including measures that would ban the garments for teachers and civil servants.