Coercion in new religious movements

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Abstract

The South African Constitution, in line with international standards, upholds the condition that participation in any religious practice must be free and voluntary. The belief in other countries that some religious groups (generally referred to as "new religious movements") are in violation of this condition seems to have been accepted in South Africa. This view became evident through the number of media reports over the past few years indicating that some alternative religious groups utilise unethical coercion methods to proselytise and maintain members. A means to address this issue is through a legal approach relying on the condition of religious freedom that no coercion may be used in religion. Other means such as dialogue with and information about these groups are proposed in order to resolve this issue. An ideal platform has been created for this by the South African Charter for Religious Rights and Freedoms.

Keywords Freedom of religion, coercion, new religious movements, unethical influence, brainwashing.

1. Introduction

The right to religious freedom is necessary in the light of the cruelties that have been perpetrated over the centuries in the name of religion. As a result of globalisation and competition between religions, the persecution of those who hold different beliefs and the way in which individuals are still forced in many instances to join certain religions has more readily come to be acknowledged. One important condition of religious freedom is that membership and participation in religion must be a free and voluntary act. It is believed, however, that some new religious movements like The Unification Church, Shoko Asahara, Aum Supreme Truth and The Boston Church of Christ, to mention a few, use coercion to entice individuals, not only to join but also to remain as members. This article will investigate what is meant by subtle force or coercion and how it is utilised in some new religious movements. It will further point out what challenge it holds for the authorities who must ensure that religion is practiced without

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any force. This article will also propose measures that could ensure an understanding of the diversity of religion and new religious movements and address coercion that may take place in some new religious movements.

1.1 Case study of a New Religious Movement (NRM) in South Africa

Scholars when referring in general to religious groups that are not part of historically established mainstream religion, more generally use the term "New Religious Movements" (NRMs). Opponents of NRMs, also generally referred to as the anti-cult movement, refer to these groups as "cults" or "sects". The incident that triggered reaction and a renewed debate in this field of unethical influencing by some religious groups was the mass suicide in 1979 in Jonestown, Guyana, led by Jim Jones where more than 900 people died. For the purpose of this article the term NRMs will be used to refer to religious groups that may also be known as "cults".

In South Africa, according to the 2001 Census, the religious scene was mainly made up of "Christian churches" (this includes all the mainstream Christian religions), and "Other religions." Other religions include African Traditional Belief, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and Other Faiths. Although not listed in the Census as such, South Africa has religious groups that are referred to as "sects" or "cults", mostly by the Christian church, some scholars and the media. These groups compare with what are generally referred to as New Religious Movements in other countries. It is clear from media reports about these groups in South Africa that families and so-called experts believe that coercion or brainwashing is used by these religious groups. Affected family members and friends turn to the Bill of Rights and the concept of religious freedom; particularly to the condition that participation in religion must be free and voluntary, in an attempt to address what they believe to be unethical coercion. But is this a viable option?

This case study about a NRM will focus on a religious group known as Church Team Ministries International (CTMI), but more specifically on the partner church, Grace Gospel Church in Durban, and the Concerned Parents' Group (CPG), a pressure group that believe that their children have been coerced into joining the church. The aim of this case study is to point out the impact of coercion in a few cases.

A number of publications in local newspapers, magazines and on a television programme called "Carte Blanche" recently reported on the accusations of concerned parents that their children were alienated with a resulting change in behaviour since they had joined the CTMI group (MNet Carte Blanche: 2010). Information on these allegations has been gathered through letters received from CPG, interviews with the parents and their children, reports of a pastoral therapist and other publications. Attempts to meet with the CTMI leadership were either ignored or cancelled at the last minute.

The CPG attempted to address their concerns with the leadership of CTMI in a letter. The letter especially pointed out their concerns that members (their chil-

dren), since they had joined the group, abandoned their family and friends as well as their support systems. As a result they became dependant on the leaders of the church. This dependence and separation seem to be manifested in the following, as was indicated in the letter of the CPG (2009:2-3):

- An uneasiness and lack of liberty on the side of the children to visit parents out of fear that such contact may primarily jeopardize the member's relationship with God and secondarily with the leader and other members of the group. As a result they break ties with family and friends seeing that it is secondary to their first priority – wholehearted commitment to the group. Children of the Brown family have broken all ties with their parents as a result of their perception that they are "actively persecuted" by them (Brown 2009).
- Studies and careers planned and agreed between parents and children are rejected for the "given life" in Grace Gospel Church or Mauritian homes.
- Assistance and support to families are replaced by service and total commitment to the leader and church.
- Control of the church over the parental care for their own children. A young man with cancer left his own home and stayed with members of the church because he felt uncomfortable that members of the Grace Gospel Church visited him in the family home. The family appealed for discussion on this issue. The family was deeply grieved and made a humble and impassioned plea to again care for their son as his health deteriorated. This was denied. The son died in the care of the church (Brown 2009:1).
- Match making. Parents who were members of the church were totally opposed to the hasty legal union of their daughter and the pastor's son. Arrangements were made urgently without their involvement – apparently because the transaction would facilitate a visa for Mauritius. The parents were invited to the event via a cellular phone text message sent to all church members (CPG 2009:3). Other parents also learned that their daughter was getting married without their consent or blessing. The father flew to Mauritius to object to the marriage but was too late and was denied access to his daughter (Goddard 2009:1).
- The ostracizing, closing ranks against and eventual public denigration of those who question or stand up against leadership. A pattern of immediate defensiveness and aggression with demands of repentance. Silk (2010:1), an ex member, explains the action from the leadership and church when he started questioning the teachings of the church. "When I started asking questions about certain teachings, I was sidelined and called names. Members told me that I had a bad attitude and I was ostracized by the group. Members are taught that our group is unique and superior to other churches. It's scary as we are

almost like robots, following these leaders without even thinking about what we are doing." According to him, members are forbidden to question elders about teachings.

- Change in the behaviour of the children. One parent explains the change in her son's behaviour as follows: "He completely alienated himself from long-standing, beautiful Christian friends and we noticed a complete personality change. From being a gentle child, he became judgemental and arrogant" (John 2009a:1). Another recent example is that the Brown parents' son was flown out from Mauritius to a meeting with residents in South Africa. He secretly visited people for two days without his parents' knowledge about the visit with a one-week old child (Brown 2011).
- Control over information. One member pointed out that members were told to avoid all outside books, Bible teachers and pastors. Members had to turn in all books of which the leaders did not approve (Moscovitz 2011:1).

Outside influences are even met with more stringent measures. In a particular case where a family expressed deep concern about the influence of Grace Gospel Church and wanted to intervene, they were threatened with a restraining order (Brown 2009:1). When the parents became increasingly concerned and were asking questions about the church, they requested their daughter to meet with a pastoral therapist to tell her how they were feeling about her involvement with the group. For the parents this seemed to be a way to communicate with their daughter as the culture and dynamics of the church complicated communication between parents and children. The daughter had eventually agreed to see the therapist alone, but the parents were now asking her for a session with them included. This was when the leadership of the church not only advised her, but also offered to take her to the Hillcrest Police Station, to get a restraining order against her parents. Although she did not go through with the process of obtaining the restraining order, her parents not only became aware that their once strong and healthy relationship had drastically changed, but also that the communication between them weakened (Goddard 2010:2). One member also reported on the fact that the leader's wife strongly encouraged some couples among the leaders to get sterilised so that they would be free to serve the church and receive people to live with them. The same member tells how he persuaded his wife, now estranged, to go through with the procedure. She has been unable to forgive him since then (Sukhdeo 2010:3).

The above case study indicates that a religious group can gain power or control over its members which can lead to prohibition of their right to associate with family and friends, to their right to freedom of expression to speak out when they do not agree with some practices or teachings. This control is kept in place by fear of

either offending the group or of losing their salvation. This particular case study is but one on a number of groups whose practices and dynamics raise concerns. It stands to reason that whatever religious group a person belongs to, he or she should still enjoy the right to freely associate and express him or herself.

2. Prohibition of coercion as a condition of religious freedom

The South African Constitution's provisions on religious freedom are founded on a number of International Human Rights instruments. These include the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR, 1948, art.18), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, art. 18) which proclaims that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

According to article 18, section 2 of the ICCPR another fundamental condition is indicated, namely that, "No one shall be subject to coercion, which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice". The South African Constitution (chapter 2, section 15 (2), (c)) also emphasises that participation in religion must be free and voluntary and in no manner should anyone be forced to participate in or attend any religious practice. This condition has once again been emphasised in the elaborated South African Charter of Religious Rights and Freedoms article 2, endorsed on 21 October 2010, which states that "no person *may be forced* to believe, what to believe or what not to believe, *or to act against their convictions".*

The right to freedom of religion has two dimensions namely: *forum internum* – the internal aspect and *forum externum* – the external aspect. *Forum internum* refers to the freedom to believe, which embraces the freedom to choose one's religion – to be either religious or non-religious. The internal dimension of religious freedom is *absolute.* No limitations are linked to this dimension of religious freedom and it may not be restricted (Martinez-Torron 2003:3). The other dimension, *forum externum,* refers to the expression of personal religious thoughts and beliefs. The external dimension, by its very nature, is *relative* and can be subject to limitations by the public authorities, according to article 9(1.2), ECHR (Martinez-Torron 2003:3). Also section 31(2) of the South African Constitution indicates that this dimension of religious freedom can be limited if exercised in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights (Government Gazette 1996).

It can be concluded that an important condition of freedom of religion is that no form of force or coercion may be used to make someone believe or participate in religious practices.

2.1 Force or coercion in religious freedom

A free and voluntary act is primarily understood in the sense that no physical force is applied in order to ensure that a particular activity is performed. The word *force* defined by dictionaries denotes power to influence, affect, or control, to compel, constrain, or oblige (oneself or someone) to do something, to bring about or effect by force (Dictionary.com n.d).

Force in the most general sense usually implies the exertion of physical power or the operation of circumstances that permit no options. The pressure or necessity can be applied through physical means that can bring about bodily harm (e.g. when tear gas is used to force fugitives out of their hiding place [American Heritage Dictionary n.d.]). It means to overpower a person using measurable influence to incline a person to motion; make a person act or do something prematurely or unwillingly (Pocket Oxford Dictionary 1970:319).

Contrary to the above popular definition, physical force is not the only means to coerce someone into performing an activity. A person can also be forced through intellectual or emotional pressure. This kind of coercion is particularly successful in a conducive environment such as religious groups where people tend to be more vulnerable for coercion because of the authoritative nature of religion and since acting along with the rest of the group is subconsciously accepted as the norm. This does not mean that people in these groups cannot act for themselves, but that such a decision requires more willpower as a result of the pressure to conform in the group.

In this sense coercion means the applying of emotional or spiritual force in order to ensure that a particular activity is performed. The action is sanctioned by the threat that disobedience will result in some form of punishment, in the case of religion, eternal punishment. The difference between the two dimensions of coercion is that physical force precedes and stimulates action, whereas with intellectual or emotional force the threat of an anticipated consequence for disobedience or non-conformity motivates action.

In some NRMs the process of proselytising new members normally commences with an appealing emotional experience (or experiences) known as "love bombing" that gives the perception of real interest in the wellbeing of the person. The affectionate attention relaxes and makes the person more susceptible to the new ideas of the group (Singer & Lalich 1995:114). This opportunity is utilised by the religious group to point out the defects in the potential member's value system, worldview, view of God, educational, religious and political structures, in order to create doubt in the person's own mind. Progressively through doubt about the person's current world, an emotional and spiritual need for change is established. But what is more important is the establishment of a subconscious emotional pressure to change the inadequate circumstances. The solution is presented in the lifestyle and doctrine of the NRM. Emotional pressure is ap-

plied mainly through making potential followers believe that their world is inadequate in ensuring salvation. They are left with two choices: either to join the group that claims to have the solution or reject the fact that their world is inadequate. If the followers accept it, the degree of commitment to the particular group is normally demonstrated by confessing to the insufficiencies of the person's own world followed by a radical break with this insufficient world and lifestyle. Such radical action, although it can be justified as the result of conviction, is obtained through emotional force. To facilitate the solution and therefore the new members' adaptation to the world or the NRM, their own worldview, frame of reference, belief system and identification structures are replaced by the particular group's culture, doctrines, prescriptions and belief system. A redefining of the ''self'' occurs. Adaption to the NRM further requires obedience to the commands of the group, which is equalled to pleasing God and systematically enforces behavioural change. This change is best achieved in a more isolated environment, which alienates and separates members from the outside world. Membership to the particular group signifies not only true salvation, but also to be specially ''chosen''. This belief motivates followers to be obedient to all the commands of the group at whatever cost; even if they at times may question some of the commands, the fear of missing the ultimate goal of salvation motivates them to obey. In this sense the belief portrayed by the NRM about salvation and the requirements for that salvation serve as a motivation for followers to obey and follow instructions. The intellectual or emotional pressure at work is fear of losing salvation. Salvation, according to the NRM, can only be obtained through membership of the particular group followed by meticulous obedience to all the commands of the group. To ensure that new members follow these commands a system of continuous reprimanding, even punishment, if rules are broken, is established. Punishment includes – being ignored, shunned or overlooked or by aggressive legalism, being questioned, openly censured or asked to leave the group (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:67-68).

Members, as a result of the culture they are subjected to, realise that the best way to overcome their own inability, to stay on track and to please God is to surrender totally to the instructions and guidance of the leader. The dynamics of the group succeeded in establishing intellectual and emotional pressure to conform without analysing. Systematically, the ambitions, critical thinking faculties and personal viewpoints of members become a lower priority. Instead the emotion of fear functions strongly in directing the followers in these groups. The main fear is imbedded in the belief that leaving the group will result in divine judgement, eventually losing salvation (Zukeran 2006:4). Followers have thus become physically, emotionally and spiritually dependent on the instructions and directions of the group since that will ensure salvation. Another form of fear is instilled by the measures taken by some NRMs to punish or correct straying cult members. The harshest form of punishment entails being ignored or rejected by the other members until the victim confesses. It can also include

doing the dirty work in the group and can even include placing curses on members and informing them that they or their family will become sick and die if they leave the group or disobey orders. Internal spying among cult members is another way of obtaining information about straying members (Singer & Lalich 1995:77).

In one new religious group in South Africa known as Emmanuel Fellowship a male member of the group was excommunicated when he asked to be excused from one Friday night youth meeting because he was very tired. The leader reacted furiously, accusing him of being lazy and not committed and stating that he would never be allowed in any meeting again. This particular member went back to the leader after a while, begging him for forgiveness and a second chance in an attempt to break the excommunication and to be accepted by the group again (Van Niekerk 2004).

It is clear from the above that emotional pressure can be used to get followers to proselytise members, but also to ensure conformity to the commands of NRMs. Without preceding physical punishment or force, followers are emotionally moved to adhere to the commands of the group, founded in the belief that total obedience is essential for obtaining the ultimate eternal goal. It can be argued that members of these groups, although they might have been forced through emotional pressure, still acted on their own conviction. Emotion is an integral part of religion, but emotional pressure used to create a dependency or control over members that in turn can lead to the violations of the follower's rights, raises a concern. These rights include the right to freedom of association, freedom of movement and freedom of expression, to mention a few. In another group in Limpopo followers are not allowed to come and go as they see fit. Although the gate at the farm is not guarded, guards are set up in the minds of the followers through the unspoken rules. Proper permission is needed to leave the farm. Followers of this particular group always go to town in a group to ensure better control over their doings. One member compared the underlying emotional and psychological control and pre-planned lifestyle to a prison (Brooke-Smith 2008:6).

2.2 Coercion in new religious movements evaluated

In practical terms coercion as defined above is applied in some new religious movements by what is known as "brainwashing", "mind control", "thought control" or "coercive persuasion". Barker (2001) indicates that there are a number of different approaches to the study of NRMs which can be categorized in two main approaches. The first group of scholars have arrived at the assertion that recruitment to certain religious groups has been essentially involuntary in the sense that powerful techniques such as brainwashing and coercion have rendered the process of conversion and commitment psychologically coercive and non-consensual notwithstanding its formally voluntary status (see Clark 1976; Ofshe 1986, Zablocki 1997; and McManus & Cooper 1984, Possemaï & Lee 2004 and Singer 1986).

Another analyst of these techniques, Enroth (1984:141), describes this kind of coercion as recruitment and indoctrination that effectively induce behavioural and attitudinal changes in new recruits. Their religious choices are irrational and based on emotion, instinct, debilitation and automatic conditioning rather than reason and conscious consideration, in other words, "unthinking participation" in group activities. This is brought about by a schedule designed to deprive followers of sleep and a conditioned reflex which is reinforced by group interaction (West 1975:2). The coercion theory also often tends to posit the emergence of a false self-identity which this kind of cultic conditioning and mind control is said to superimpose on the authentic, developmental self of the convert (Clark 1976:2-3).

A second viewpoint held by another school (see Introvinge 2001; Richardson 1985; and Baker 1995) is that the tragedies recorded with respect to some of these NRMs would not have occurred had the anti-cult movements not existed and carried out actions that created these results. The anti-cult movement's approach can be considered as one-sided and lacks taking into account aspects such as the "NRM scene" – the aspects that surround the particular group, such as the members of the wider society, the quality of information about these groups, the involvement of governments and other role players such as family and other religions who, for personal or professional reasons, contribute to the complex of relationships between NRMs and the rest of society (Barker 2001:1).

They further believe that the concept of brainwashing or mind control used by cults, which scholars cite as a reason to introduce regulative measures, is based on "moral panic", a concept developed by Jenkins (1998). Moral panics are defined as socially constructed social problems characterised by a reaction, in the media and political forums, out of proportion to the actual threat (Jenkins 1998:158). This viewpoint of these scholars does, however, not deny the presence of coercion in NRMs as a whole, but emphasises the fact that although there are some valid components of the mind control stereotype (authoritarian movement, manipulative leaders, zealous devotees and a group with violent proclivities), there may also be substantial distortions and exaggerations. One such distortion is that the brainwashing theory is based on the assumption that the subject is passive without a choice or freedom of will to escape his or her brain being laundered. In contrast, however, when a number of factors over a long period of time affect some people but not others, the impact is evaluated more in terms of disposition properties of targeted individuals (personal traits) than in the power of the techniques, even when the impact on particular people may be substantial (Zimbardo et al. 1977:190-191). Although members of the NRMs under discussion may not be passive without a choice or freedom and although disposition plays a role, the psychological techniques used by these groups must not be underestimated in terms of being success-

ful in obtaining an unhealthy control over many followers. It is more correct to say that not all potential members that are approached by these groups fall victim to their control.

However, both viewpoints accept that manipulative leaders of some religious groups may use improper psychological techniques, given the susceptible environment of religion. The particular culture and functioning of these groups not only lead to abuse, but also restrict their members' right to freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of movement.

2.3 Dynamics of religion

Addressing these abuses in NRMs from a political or legal perspective is problematic in the light of the dynamics of religion. What is viewed as coercion or unethical influence from a political, social or psychological point of view may be viewed by a religious person as a necessary sacrifice in order to obtain eternity. Methods utilized by religion to ensure compliance are not necessarily viewed as undue force or coercion, but as measures needed to ensure salvation.

Religion is universal and characterized by the belief that there exist forces that cannot be seen with the natural eyes, and that not even science can make visible. Religious people believe that these forces matter for their lives, now and even after their physical existence on this earth has come to an end. These people further believe that "these forces command goods or evils that have higher value than anything money can buy, political power can impose, or attachment can bestow" (Engel 2011:2). As a result of the transcendental nature of religion, the correctness of religious belief defies proof. It is the transcendental nature of religion that carries the most weight for the believer and, for the believer, eternity itself is at stake. For believers, the commands of their religion have infinite value and surpass earthly goods and may not be compromised (Engel 2011:10).

Religious people are willing to endure much for the sake of their religions (Leiter 2008:7).

For a believer not everything is known about their religion or belief and faith thus substitutes for knowledge. Believers from different religions believe that dis–obedience to the commands of their group will lead to illness and misfortune even to being lost for eternity (Engel 2011:6). In some religious groups tangible punishment can be inflicted on such members for disobeying commands (Acre and Sandler 2003:2373, 2376).

Faith increases people's vulnerability not only because of the belief that eternity is at stake and mistakes will be fatal (Leiter 2008:15), but more so because the believer has learned to navigate uncertainty through faith.

It is understandable that in the light of the above explanation of the dynamics of religion that the transpiring radical actions of members can create the perception that those members are unduly influenced. It is, however, also not improbable for religious leaders to exploit the internal susceptible environment created by the practices and beliefs of the group to obtain certain selfish results. This particular belief that some NRMs are guilty of exploiting their members through the use of excessive psychological techniques has resulted in court cases, reports and investigations[2] being undertaken in Europe without a constructive remedy. Thus to address alleged coercion within new religious movements poses a legal challenge.

3. Challenge posed by the prohibition of coercion

The upholding of the prohibition of coercion within NRMs poses a challenge to governments. The intention of this condition is to ensure that governments do not interfere in religious matters except in ensuring that every citizen enjoys this right. The coercion under discussion in this article refers to some NRMs (discussed above) that use freedom of religion to justify internal dynamics and processes that may be coercive and in violation of other basic rights of members. In this regard governments are thus faced with internal belief systems that are grounded in eternity with resulting internal rites, practices and a code of conduct that may involve unethical coercion methods. Furthermore, religion may also view constitutional protection as a threat to religious freedom.

3.1 The challenge of constitutionalised religion for the state

The constitutionalising of religion brings its own challenges. It is an attempt to regulate what many people believe is a spiritual, conceptual reality grounded in eternity with concrete political and legal measures. Religions based on realities outside the physical world are to be regulated by laws, measures and proof founded in the physical world. This situation poses a challenge to the state for the following reasons:

- How can the state prove that religious commands are inconsistent with legal requirements, given that religion defies scientific proof (Leiter 2008:15, 25)?
- Religion and its practices must be assessed against an abstract definition of religiosity. In the absence of a legal definition of religion no concrete criteria can be used in determining if a religion is a religion or if a religion's expressions are indeed religious.

[2] These reports include the French reports *(Assemblée Nationale* 1996 and 1999); the Belgian report *(Chambre des Répresentants de Belgique* 1997); large parts of the Canton of Geneva report *(Audit sur les dérives sectaires* 1997) and of the same reports on brainwashing *(Commission pénale sur les dérives sectaires* 1999); the deliberations of the French Prime Minister's "Observatory of Sects" *(Observatoire Interministériel sur les Sectes* 1998); and of its successor, the Mission to Fight Against Sects (MILS 2000).

- The state lacks jurisdiction to interfere in the internal matters of religion and can therefore not modify religious doctrines. Nor can it alter the dynamics and nature of religion (Engel 2011) and lacks a basis on which to make religious judgements (Richards, Svendsen and Bless 2010:69).
- The authority of the state is limited to civil life whilst the authority of religion and its belief system is unlimited and encompasses not only earthly, but also eternal life.
- Any action from the state to prevent believers from a specific course of action will provoke religious resistance (Engel 2011).
- The right to freedom of religion grants a protected sphere to individuals and organizations that may not be inclined to reward the protection by being tolerant themselves with competing religions or with the state itself, particularly when it comes to cults and sects (Rosenfeld 2009:2475, Richardson 2004).
- The government's ability to craft regulations to balance competing human rights is handicapped by the fact that it is context driven and requires a flexible application to the particular facts.
- Top-down regulations seldom motivate compliance by regulated individuals and groups, especially those for whom religious persuasion is compelled by conscience (Richards, Svendsen and Bless 2010:69).

3.2 The threat to religions of constitutionalised religion

Two important results follow constitutionalised freedom of religion, believers are legally obliged to accept a plurality of eternities and government may not side openly with one religion (Engel 2011:8). Constitutionalised religion can be viewed as a threat to religion in general but even more so by NRMs that show a higher level of commitment to the belief system for the following reasons:

- Religious goods are transcendental and confirmation is taken from a higher power.
- The correctness of religion is not based on what can be scientifically proven, given that an essential principle of religion is the belief in the unseen.
- The crux of religion is salvation – in whatever form. For true believers, worldly goods and laws have no priority if they violate religious commands.
- Religious believers are ambivalent about constitutionalised guarantees of freedom of religion, because these imply a secular system that takes priority over religion.
- A religious individual is more interested in morality. In fact, adherence to legal measures that will jeopardise following commands implies disobedience to moral duties and will result in transcendental sanctions.

- Believers do not view liberties afforded by the constitution in the same light as supporters of democracies. Liberty, for the true believer, is the removal of all obstacles in order to live out his/her religion.
- For the true believer, however, human dignity is defined indirectly as the individual's relationship with the transcendent, and not directly by the achievement of self-selected human aims and goals.
- Religion emphasises duty rather than rights, duties towards God and one another (Phillips 2007:115-117).

The right to religious freedom can even be utilised negatively by some religions to serve as a conversation stopper when the practices and expression of religion are questioned (Rorty 1994), to cause divisiveness in politics (Breyer 2006:122, 124), and to involve the legislator in fighting their actual competitors in the free marketplace of religions.

3.3 Solution

It stands to reason that a legal approach to maintaining religious freedom is only applicable in the prosecution of criminal activities performed by religions; this approach is unable to protect individuals against undue coercion within religion. The manifestation of religion is an internal aspect based on a belief system founded in eternity and difficult to measure in concrete terms. The state does not have the authority to prescribe or to interfere since such interference is viewed as a violation of this right.

Important pointers can be taken from Europe, which has dealt with the issue intensively. The following guidelines in dealing with alternative religions were proposed to European countries by the Council of Europe (COE 1992):

1. The solution of the problem of sects and NRMs that are accused of alleged coercion does not lie in legislation but in research and dialogue with these groups in order to obtain an understanding of their functioning and dynamics."
   It is clear from the above discussion on the dynamics of religion and in particular NRMs that a dim view is taken of a secular and political system prescribing the conditions of freedom of religion. Not only does it portray a secular system less important than the religious commands, but it is also viewed as a system to limit or restrict freedom of religion. An absolute freedom is envisaged and in any society this view spells danger. Freedom must also not be limited by governmental interference and therefore a solution must first be obtained through sound information about these groups. This must occur in consultation with these groups. A religious platform rather than a political or legal platform should be used.

2. Information gained through research and dialogue must be made available to the public in order to create a greater awareness about NRMs and the differences they portray compared to other religions.
3. Greater vigilance through school education is necessary, especially for young people.
4. A Religious Freedom Centre – preferably by independent non-governmental organizations where alleged violations of religious freedom can be reported and investigated must be in place. The role of this centre is not only to investigate alleged harmful practices in the case of some religious groups, but also the careful investigation of these allegations by professionals in consultation with the particular group and other affected roleplayers with the aim of obtaining solutions.

Another possibility to address conflicts within religions that is better than government regulations is voluntary codes of conduct. Self-regulation in general is more prompt, flexible, and effective than government regulation, and can bring to bear the accumulated judgment and experience of all stakeholders on an issue that is particularly difficult for the government to define with bright line rules (Richards, Svendsen and Bless 2010:71).

Another important measure is that NRMs must be included in the religious scenery of South Africa. The South African Council for Religious Rights and Freedoms provides an ideal platform not only to include NRMs in South Africa, but also to facilitate critical debate.

4. Conclusion

In this article the focus has shifted to the confines of religious groups and has pointed out the fact that coercion within some NRMs also occurs. South Africa lacks an organisation that could create awareness of NRMs. Religious leaders as persons of authority, sometimes bestowed with godly sanctioning, should be reminded that their positions of authority should not be abused to prey on vulnerable followers and, in the process, inflict harm on them and their loved ones.

Governments can neither prescribe doctrine nor alter beliefs and cannot judge whether the practices of a religion are indeed religious, as this will violate religious freedom. They can also not interfere in the internal matters of religious groups. Thus the solution in addressing this issue is through another means, as was suggested above, with the main emphasis on the fact that religions must take responsibility and ensure that their practices do not bring harm to their followers or their loved ones.

The South African Charter for Religious Rights and Freedoms not only provides an ideal platform to engage in a fruitful interaction with other alternative/NRMs, but also plays a vital role in guarding the fundamentals of religious freedom. It can also assist

in educating and informing the public about the diversity of religion and serve as an instrument in addressing alleged abuse in and misunderstanding of NRMs.

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