

# **LABOR et EDUCATIO**

## **No. 7/2019**

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### **STUDIES**

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### **Sects in the Area of Education of Children and Youth: Situation Analysis and Indications for Preventive Measures**

### **Sekty w przestrzeni edukacji dzieci i młodzieży: analiza sytuacji i wskazania dla oddziaływań profilaktycznych**

Creating the right conditions for proper education of children and youth is an important element of society's concern for the young generation. Individual countries have been developing and optimizing their own education models for children and youth for years in order to spread knowledge and raise education and social competences. The basic premise and law brought by numerous regional and international institutions is the demand for equal access to education and training for all children.

Education can be understood in many ways. W. Okoń (2001) states that it includes "all processes and interactions aimed at changing people, especially children and young people – according to the ideals and educational goals prevailing in a given society". Education understood as "all effects on human individuals and groups, conducive to their development so that they become

aware and creative members of the social, cultural and national community to the full extent” (Kwieciński, 1991), and so that they are able to consciously pursue self-realization, as well as construct their own identity by undertaking tasks beyond personal ones, opposes sectarian indoctrination, which controversial cult groups try to impose on their adepts, including children and young people.

Staying in opposition to social standards, modern sects are contesting school education, approaching it with distrust and reluctance. It is not surprising that many modern sects ultimately discourage children and youths from acquiring education, especially higher education. Education and obtaining a degree develops numerous skills, teaches independent critical thought, individual decision making, independence, which from the perspective of the narrow interests of a sect, are not conducive to maintaining control over the “educated and critical mind”. Education understood as guiding others to higher levels of development faces numerous restrictions on the part of the sect. Former sect adepts often emphasize that their period of stay in the sect was associated with a limitation of their own activity, numerous prohibitions regarding self-fulfillment, and ultimately with the impossibility of personal development and the associated limitation of the possibility of achieving proper social competences and building a healthy identity and subjectivity.

Rejecting basic social norms by some sects results in the rejection of the right of children and young people to education. The schooling and educational situation is complicated, especially in the case of sects that reject social norms in principle. The issue of children’s education in the ranks of such groups is the most controversial in society.

In the activities of some new religious movements and sects, the right of children to education is vital social problem, which is particularly pointed out by school and psychologists, as well as teachers and authorities of various educational institutions.

The purpose of this paper is to indicate the threats arising from the activities of sects, and above all to present possible problem situations in the area of their impact on the process of education and upbringing of children and youth. As shown by numerous studies of the subject, modern new religious movements called sects or cult groups function on the margins of social life. By limiting or even preventing proper education for ideological reasons, they expose children and young people to social marginalization (Gajewski, 1999). Understanding

the specifics of the sect's functioning allows better understanding why these groups make it difficult for children and young people to access formal education, often replacing it with their own education, closely related to the sect's ideology.

### **Sects as groups of social contestations**

There are many definitions of a sect that describe the characteristics of their functioning to varying degrees (Dawson, 2017; Doktór, 1991). As sect researchers note, many of them are addressed primarily to young people. The consequence of this is that many young people pay for it with the loss or degradation of their personality, as well as the breakup with family, dropping out of their studies or abandoning their profession (Vernette, 1998). Longer stay in a sect is also associated with the possibility of activating mental disorders or mental illnesses due to indoctrination, experiencing various traumas. Many sects also use the mental weakness or personal liability of potential adepts (Gregg, 2019).

It should be noted that sects as a social phenomenon should be considered in the broad context of contemporary cultural and civilizational changes. To consider them only in a religious context would be a reduction. Their rapid growth in the recent years has been associated with numerous social factors, including democratization, religious pluralism, promoting civic freedom, media development, etc. (Sztumski, 1993).

Both the word sect and the term cult (often used interchangeably) or a new religious movement have pejorative undertones. They are being associated with groups characterized by a high degree of internal fanaticism, as well as by strong charismatic leadership, psychological manipulation, isolation of their followers from society, etc.

Etymologically, in its primary and basic meaning, the term "sect" refers to Latin. The words from which the term sect is derived are Latin *sequi* - meaning to follow someone or *secare*- to separate.

The conceptual blur of the term sect means that many contemporary authors use broader descriptions of this phenomenon. The old sociological definitions of a sect seem to be insufficient nowadays. The issue of sects was also noticed by psychologists and educators who encounter this problem in their daily practice.

Taking into account the most important contemporary perspectives of recognizing the phenomenon of controversial cult groups, also considering my own many years of experience working with their former adepts and their families as well as victims of their abuse, I propose the following definition of a sect: a sect is a group of people in which we can distinguish a specific structure (formal element), as well as a worldview constituting its hub (content element – religious or philosophical-religious), around which and for which this group gathers its members. Most often, a sect arises as a result of separation from the existing Church (from *secare* – to cut off) or revelation, gathering a group of believers around a selected individual (*sequi* – to follow someone). It can also be a synthesis of many philosophical and religious traditions. In the case of a destructive sect, we may observe the so-called sect syndrome in its members, which reflects the destructive influence of the group on an individual in the mental, physical and spiritual aspect. A destructive sect violates basic human rights by applying broadly understood psychomanipulation and becomes a pathological and criminal group (Gajewski, 2009, 2016).

As indicated earlier, the right to solid education of children and young people is endangered in various ways in controversial cults and sects. Many sects are more or less openly suspicious and critical of school education. By often rejecting norms and cultural models as well as the basic principles of social life, destructive sects attack the education system, devalue the role of modern science and create their own alternative educational systems for young children.

Sects meticulously seek to solicit the minds of young people. They try to take control over the children's and youth's thinking and behavior. Relentless criticism and rejection of traditional forms of education, including schools, is a good introduction and preparation of children and youth to reject the authority of the teacher and school, and ultimately to trust the sect's ideology completely.

Depending on the type of sect and the degree of its socialization, we recognize a different approach to the issue of education of children and youth. There are sects that strongly reject the possibility of educating their adepts in social institutions; there are also those that limit the time spent by a child at school to a minimum, in order to, on top of the official time of school, involve children in its own education that is „proper” from the perspective of the sect, in accordance with the guidelines of its leaders and coinciding with its

doctrine. This approach is not always beneficial for children who are often overloaded with extracurricular learning, and it sometimes happens that during additional classes within the group, the material taught at school is generally being undermined, and children develop and consolidate an extreme attitude of distrust and aversion to the teacher and school.

Many sects treat the school instrumentally. While rejecting school as a proper educational institution, it makes it a place of sectarian agitation.

### **School as a place of agitation for a sect**

It should be noted that for certain sect groups, the school is a perfect place for access to young people who are curious about the world. In this case, the school is treated instrumentally as a perfect place where you can attract potential future adepts. Recruitment offers are prepared and tailored to the type of school, the social profile of children and their parents. Many sects have made schools the main place of recruitment, others occasionally use them for access to children, teachers and parents.

The fact of cult groups and sects penetrating into schools is commented by Kuncewicz, Opolska, Wasiak (2000) emphasizing that the school as an environment for education and upbringing of children and youth is „a particularly attractive place for all groups who want to expand their ranks” and unfortunately the frequent financial problems often force educational institutions to make various attempts to improve their budgets. So they rent their premises to various companies or associations.

Sects manage to reach pupils on the school grounds under the guise of foundations or associations specially created for this purpose, which submit educational offers in the form of thematic classes and workshops. As I. Gołębiewska (2011) notes, without proper content control, it may turn out that the curriculum involves direct indoctrination.

Furthermore, daily contact with the child is enabled by the sect's running after-school clubs, canteens, school stores, organizing various theater workshops, relaxation classes, art courses, language groups, sports activities, etc. Sects often seek contact with children at school through teachers working there, who can share sectarian views with their pupils.

It is worth noting that students who belong to various sects and cult groups are excellent agitators for sects at school. Cult groups thoroughly prepare

children to be an effective live advertisement among their peers or a lure within the school community. This way, numerous close friendships become a credible and effective way of spreading the doctrine and a way of influencing potential recruits.

Sects eagerly organize extracurricular activities for children, e.g. yoga, meditation. Classes offered at school, however, have nothing to do with school education. Choosing a school as a place for classes is a perfect camouflage for many sects. The school's address, as well as the mere announcement that the classes take place at the school's premises is an important marketing procedure, i.e. it gives credibility to the class and the organizing entity – the sect. The activities offered are often branded by facade institutions, so that no one associates a given organization with a dangerous sect. They rent classrooms during non-school hours to offer extracurricular activities there. Often free of charge, which is significant motivation for many parents. Recruitment to a sect is not straightforward. The sects have time in this regard. Step by step, they tame children and their families, so that over time, once closer relationships are established, they can present sectarian ideologies, other courses, trips, workshops outside the school building.

It should also be noted that it also happens that the schools themselves may include sectarian and New Age content in their curriculum, which enter the public space in various ways and strengthen their position in culture and social thinking over the years. The impact of sects on society, the influence of esoteric and theosophical ideologies is evident in the curriculum of schools with esoteric provenance. Examples include Waldorf schools and other private schools organized by cult group adepts. It is not uncommon for public school education to have more of an ideology than actual concern for the child's well-being. As noted by A. Zwoliński, the educational ideology itself may contain the aspect of uncritical directing of juveniles towards all kinds of sectarian news and content (Zwoliński, 2005).

An example of a cult group entering the school grounds is the Hare Krishna Movement, also known as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. In order to attract new students and to tame children and youth with their own activity in one of Krakow's primary schools, this group managed a vegetarian canteen. This way, they had direct daily access to young people, virtually outside parental control. Furthermore, the Hare Krishna Movement organized relatively inexpensive and attractive trips for young people during winter and summer holidays (Nowakowski 2001).

In Poland, attempts have also been made to infiltrate the Complex of Schools of Economics in Leszno by the controversial Family sect. The group offered the school authorities to organize a theater play in English (Jakubowski, 1997). This proposal was received positively, raising an argument that it would be a good opportunity for young people to improve their English. This program involved around two hundred students. After the performance, the actors started conversations in English with students, inviting young people to keep in touch with them. As evidenced by the students' accounts, after the agitation, representatives of the Family sect contacted the youths several times via direct phone calls with selected persons.

The *Family sect* also recruited in one of the schools in Legionowo near Warsaw. The group's emissaries, under the guise of preventive classes on drug addiction and AIDS, cleverly made contact with elementary and high school pupils. Teachers and a the school educator also took part in the meeting. Eventually, the meeting took place in the mood of religious agitation. Finally, the controversy related to the classes and the Family group was reported to the Board of Education, which expressed concern over the whole matter. Furthermore, the case reached the Ministry of National Education, one of its representatives expressing concern about the case and the sect's connections with the Legionowo branch of the Society for Prevention of Drug Abuse. The city mayor also ordered his subordinates to cut any ties to the controversial Family group (Nowakowski, 2001).

### **Sects rejecting school education**

There are numerous and varied reasons for the leaders of controversial cults to reject education. As Andrzej Zwoliński (2005) rightly notes, already ancient thinkers have seen schools as a source of reason, necessary rationalism and skepticism, which can protect a young person from the attack of charlatans of divination and superstition. Cult leaders are often fear losing control over children's thinking. Undoubtedly, while undertaking the delicate process of raising and educating children, the school, including educators and teachers have a huge impact on shaping their way of thinking.

The schooling period is the time when the first frameworks of one's personality and identity are formed in children and young people. For young people, this period is a special time when, first of all, peers, then undoubtedly

adults, especially teachers, are an important reference for understanding themselves and their place in the world.

By limiting access to education for their own children, cult leaders separate them from their natural environment. By offering education in closed confessional groups, they can manipulate their minds easily. With no access to generally available knowledge, sect children cannot verify whether the information provided by their sectarian teachers is true or not. This way, upbringing and education often become a place of abuse of a young person.

This way, internal sectarian education becomes a perfect setting to shape the sectarian identity of subsequent blindly obedient adepts of the doctrine. Deprived of the possibility of rational thinking, compared to peers with access to school and university education, adolescent children are ultimately doomed to take low-paid jobs due to lack of education. Sects depend on poorly educated people; they are easier to manipulate and addicted to the sectarian community.

A notable case of contesting the obligation of formal education in Poland is associated with the typically Polish sect, Heaven from Majdan Kozłowiecki. Its leader argued that school is useless to children, attending it does not bring any benefits; moreover, teachers are often incompetent, and do not guarantee the transmission of healthy learning. According to cult leader B. Kacmajor, the sect's education was more important and beneficial for the youngest adepts inside the sect. Even the board of education was involved in the case. Cult leaders would convince the authorities and the public that compulsory schooling is relative, and that their senior adepts have sufficient pedagogical preparation to teach and educate children and young people at home, developing their various interests and abilities such as artistic painting and drawing. Only after an intervention by various people and institutions, and the threat of deprivation of parental rights and the placement of children in educational and care institutions, did the leaders allow their children (aged 8 to 14) to be educated (Keller, 2011; Kowalczyk, 2005; Jędrzyńska, 2002).

### **Sects organizing their own education**

Not all sects reject the obligation to educate children and young people. In many of them, rejection of public education is replaced by informal education, or teaching in schools and facilities organized by the sect. This applies to all levels of education, i.e. starting from elementary schools, through junior high



schools, high schools and universities, depending on the education system in a given country.

In place of the criticized, ridiculed or rejected traditional education, cult groups and sects eagerly offer their own original system of upbringing and education. Making free use of the legal provisions allowing the establishment of private and confessional schools, they organize their own education systems. To this end, they set up their own schools and universities. Many sects persistently strive for access to the group managing the given educational facilities, in hopes of gaining a real impact on the choice of curriculum and teaching methods. The participation of sects in the functioning of this type of school is not identical in every case. Moreover, with the help of screen institutions, sects undertake to finance some private schools, more or less openly trying to affect the curriculum. In many cases, when a sect has its own educational facility, it willingly flaunts it and announces recruitment to its educational centers.

There are many sects who boast of having their own educational centers, including universities where adepts as well as outsiders can study (Gajewski, 2016). In such cases, criticism, ridicule and rejection of traditional education serves to promote their own educational offer. Unfortunately, the proposed system of educating children and young people in sectarian schools usually merely imitates traditional education. Sectarian universities often do not have proper accreditation, the curriculum offered to pupils in schools does not meet the minimum conditions (in terms of teaching content and hours) that are required of a traditional school. The severity and discipline with which children are approached in alternative sectarian schools is also being criticized. Indoctrination is indicated as the basic model of upbringing and education.

An example of self-organized education are the initiatives of the controversial international cult of oriental origin, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. As the movement developed, it was decided to provide its own school education that would ensure that children and youth would combine secular knowledge with religious doctrine. The idea of schools and boarding schools assumed a kind of separation of children from parents. By the end of the seventies, several such schools were established, referred to as gurukula (Sanskrit: *guru* means „teacher” or „master”; *kula* means „extended family”). As it turned out, the teachers were not properly educated and competent to look after children. The major controversy with the way the school was run

and managed concerned complaints regarding physical and sexual abuse that occurred in these facilities. This gave way to a specific culture of abuse, with children as victims, without the possibility of strong self-defense. In 1988, as a result of numerous investigations into the matter, the leaders of the Hare Krishna movement publicly admitted that some of their children had been sexually abused and subjected to physical violence in their facilities. The youngest children were three years old. There is a testimony of a twelve-year-old pupil saying that some children prayed to God with the words „Krishna, take me from this hell”. M. Singer reports that in 2000 a lawsuit on child abuse began; Windle Turley, the prosecutor described the situation as „the most unimaginable abuse and mistreatment of young children we have ever seen”. The result was the bankruptcy and collapse of several Hare Krishna temples (Singer, Lifton, 2003).

Also in Poland, we learn from time to time about attempts by controversial cult groups to create their own private schools. In one of the Polish cities, followers of the Hindu guru ran a primary school, skillfully concealing important information about the school's and its owners' ideological assumptions. For some time, both parents and the teachers working there did not realize the owners' real intentions. The educational scam, however, came to light after a few years. Over time, more and more educational issues have arisen. Numerous abuses against the parents' right to raise children in a way they deem appropriate were observed. During trips to the so-called nature school, parents' contact with children was restricted or denied. The strange reactions of children after the relaxation classes offered to them aroused the most concerns. The worrying symptoms included strange drowsiness, and also some cases of fainting and losing contact with reality. The result of the investigation was the parents' transfer of their children in the middle of the school year to another school, where a special class was created for them. Several teachers also left the school, refusing to agree to brand the school's revealed ideology (Miller-Stefańska, 1999).

### **Towards prevention in the area of controversial cult groups**

The responsibility for the upbringing and education of children and youth, in accordance with their current development opportunities and needs, lies with the family, parents as well as the school, educators and teachers. The

Constitution of the Republic of Poland provides the main legal grounds for the education system, including that everyone has the right to education and that education is compulsory up to the age of 18. Moreover, public education is generally free, parents have the freedom to choose schools for their children other than public schools, citizens and institutions have the right to establish schools and colleges, public authorities provide citizens with universal and equal access to education.

Undoubtedly, education for children and youth in modern times constitutes their „basic form of activity” (Szymański 2013). It takes on an institutionalized and non-institutional nature, which means that „a large part of knowledge is still acquired by every human being in the course of their life, in the course of everyday social interactions, socialization, activities, not necessarily aimed at obtaining educational results”. By using special techniques of social influence and manipulation, sects appropriate the whole of human life, leaving their adepts no opportunity to decide about themselves.

By infiltrating the educational space, sects control children, young people and their families. In the context of said threats, it should be emphasized that good cooperation between educational institutions and the family is crucial for the proper upbringing of the young generation. Unfortunately, the school as an environment for education and upbringing of a young person is a very attractive area for self-promotion activities of sects that attempt to take over this social space in various ways. And although the problem of sects infiltrating educational centers, schools and universities does not seem to be a widespread issue today, the problem is still valid, and one cannot resign from monitoring the activity of controversial cult groups in this respect (Gajewski, 2015).

With great care and consistency, the controversial cults take over the place of the school and the university; they redefine reality while propagating their own ideology, and thus create a delusional world, presenting it as a perfect alternative and an antidote to all ills of the real world. Entangled in the sect's ideology, the child becomes the property of its charismatic leaders, and education often becomes an element of indoctrination within the sect. The scientific concepts, historical and social events are being redefined, so that they are in line with the sect's doctrine.

Prevention should include a family environment as well as educational institutions. Due to the highly hermetic nature of many cult groups, all preventive attempts often face resistance and opposition. Prevention against

sects should be addressed to three groups of recipients: children and adolescents, teachers and educators as well as parents and guardians. Providing children and youths with knowledge regarding the dangers of sects is the foundation of all preventive measures. Teachers and educators, too, need knowledge about the activities of sects and controversial religious and para-religious groups. They make up another important target group for preventive actions. Combined with their life experience and knowledge, they can effectively support children and young people. The next important group of recipients of preventive activities are parents and legal guardians of the young generation. It is the family environment that is the closest ecosystem that supports or hinders the development of children and young people. In the family, children find their first significant others, authority figures, reference points.

In a situation where a child comes into direct contact with a sect, whether in a family, peer or school context, professional help and support is needed from a psychologist, psychotherapist or just an expert in counteracting controversial sects. High-risk groups include children and adolescents growing up in families where one or both parents belong to a sect. A special case are all those events where the intervention of the police or other law enforcement and legal authorities is needed. These situations apply to all reported cases of abuse towards children and young people, committed by adult sect adepts, who were explaining their behavior by the group's internal principles. Such interventions usually involve isolation, sexual abuse, and psychological or physical violence.

Schools and other educational institutions should take special responsibility for the safety of children and prevent situations where sect emissaries propagate their religious ideas under the guise of pseudo-educational activities. An important role in this respect was played by the school educator and a group of teachers together with management staff. Thoroughly conducted monitoring and screening of any external entities offering specific extracurricular activities to the school is helpful in this regard. Moreover, establishing contact with existing information centers on sects in Poland may be very helpful in this respect. Such centers have an extensive database of information on the current possible threats posed by camouflaged sectarian entities. The school can use this type of information successfully.

## Summary

Are we helpless against the phenomenon of sects? Surely, well-organized diagnostics of the situation and social prevention in this area are needed. When working with the sects' victims, therapeutic and often medical-psychiatric support is also important (Barker, 1997; Gajewski, 2016; Hassan, 1997; Nowakowski, 1999). Various social and civic initiatives in this regard have been organized in Poland for years. In many schools, relevant educators implement youth awareness programs. Training sessions for teaching staff and parents are also organized. Therapeutic assistance is being offered. There are centers in Poland offering psychotherapy and psychological support for former sect members and their families. The basic principle in aid actions in terms of counteracting sects is to provide the public with reliable information about their actual functioning, hidden manipulation mechanisms, and possible abuses that they use in their activities. Publications, films, and meetings with former adepts of controversial cults are helpful in this regard.

**Abstract:** This paper addresses issues related to educational difficulties encountered by children and youth in controversial cult groups. The first section sets out the fundamental right of children and youth to school education. The next one characterizes the structure and presents the specifics of the functioning of cult groups and sects from the perspective of social sciences, with particular emphasis on the pedagogical and psychological perspective. The characteristic elements of mind manipulation were pointed out, as was the pathological scheme of controlling adepts of controversial sects. The primary part is the analysis of the relationship between sects and the formal and non-formal education system. The issues of infiltrating schools and universities by sects were also discussed, as well as the problem of partial or complete rejection of school education by cult groups. Attention was drawn to numerous controversies and threats arising from the fact that some modern sects created their own non-formal alternative education and schools. The Polish context has been particularly considered, referring to specific cases. Finally, the need and importance of undertaking diagnostic and preventive actions in counteracting the harmful effects of sects on young people was pointed out.

**Keywords:** education, school, sect, children and youth, prevention

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł podejmuje kwestie związane z utrudnieniami edukacyjnymi na jakie napotykać dzieci i młodzież w kontrowersyjnych grupach kultowych. W pierwszej części wskazano na podstawowe prawo dzieci i młodzieży do edukacji. W kolejnej scharakteryzowano i przedstawiono specyfikę sekty z perspektywy nauk społecznych z szczególnym uwzględnieniem perspektywy pedagogicznej i psychologicznej. Zasadniczą część stanowi analizę relacji sekt do systemu edukacji formalnej i pozaformalnej. Omówiono kwestie infiltracji szkół i Uniwersytetów przez sekty, problem odrzucenie edukacji szkolnej przez grupy kultowe, a także zwrócono uwagę na zagrożenia płynące z faktu tworzenia własnej alternatywnej edukacji, własnych szkół przez niektóre współczesne sekty. Na koniec wskazano na potrzebę i wagę podjęcia działań o charakterze diagnostycznym i profilaktycznym w zakresie przeciwdziałania szkodliwemu oddziaływaniu sekt na młodzież.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja, szkoła, sekta, grupa kultowa, dzieci, młodzież

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Date of the submission of article to the Editor: 18.07.2019

Date of acceptance of the article: 13.12.2019