

Proposed Law in France Could Lead To Persecution of Christians

The regulation provides fines and jail time for “mental manipulation” and laying on of hands for healing

A proposed law in France that is under review by Parliament has evangelical pastors worried they could be fined thousands of francs and even jailed for simple acts of evangelism and ministry, including the laying on of hands.

Fears of cult activity began to swell in France after the 1995 mass cult suicide of a sect in the Swiss Alps, in which the son of a famous French designer died. The bill being considered, if passed into law, could make the evangelizing of youth, including distribution of tracts, punishable by a fine of 50,000 francs (\$6,711). The law includes several other provisions for fines and imprisonment for various offenses.

“We have a growing outreach to youth, and the government really doesn’t like when young people start getting radically saved, having radical personality changes,” said Robert Baxter, an American and pastor of Assemblée Chrétienne du Bon Berger (Christian Assembly of the Good Shepherd), in Saint-Denis, near Paris.

“My law does not control the practices of the churches,” countered Catherine Picard, the member of French Parliament’s National Assembly who authored the proposed law. “If a it a group of citizens, a political group, a pseudo-religious group obliges someone under pressure to do something, it is

condemned," she said. "But it isn't only cults. There can be other groups. We cannot define a cult because even the religions don't exist by law."

Laying on of hands for healing is considered "an illegal exercise of medicine," Picard said, and is punishable under the proposed law.

Picard is confident that her bill will become law in France by June. The bill unanimously passed in the National Assembly, as it did first in the Senate.

A bill of this nature is supported by 70 percent of the French people, who are perturbed with recent cult activity, Picard says. Church leaders say that statement is an exaggeration and that cult activity in France is minimal at best.

The proposed bill also criminalizes "mental manipulation" with a sentence of three years in prison and a fine of 300,000 francs (\$40,268). Mental manipulation is determined if a leader's "object or effect is to create or exploit the psychological or physical dependence of persons" or to use pressure "to drive one, against one's will or not, to an act or to an abstention which is seriously damaging."

The penalty increases to five years in prison and a fine of 500,000 francs (\$67,114) when the victim is young, elderly, sick, handicapped or pregnant.

Some French pastors are concerned that the proposed law's vague text will enable opponents of the evangelical church to legally persecute Christians. The law would make France "the country with the strongest anti-religious laws in the Western

world," Baxter said.

Defining a cult is difficult, admits both Picard and a spokesperson for the French Ministry of Justice. However, in 1995 the government issued a report on cults and listed them by name. Two

that made the list are led by friends of Baxter's.

"What is scary for us, as pastors, is that any conviction of the Holy Spirit in someone's heart can be seen as mental manipulation," said Marc Le Brun, pastor of Christ Lumière des Nations (Christ Light of the Nations; CLN), in Eragny.

CLN and Bon Berger are not recognized by the French Protestant Federation because they do not belong to a federation of churches. As religious associations, these churches can hold services, but they do not have the official church status given by the Interior Ministry to Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist religions. Baxter said that status is not a protection, but it makes it easier for churches when dealing with the government.

One reason most Pentecostal groups have been suspected by the state as being something other than Protestant is because they've never been recognized by the Protestant Federation, Baxter said. Le Brun doesn't believe the government wants to persecute the church.

"France has [less than 1 percent] born-again Christians," he said. "There is a state of mind in France which is against God. The people don't know what the church is. They just make laws to try to protect people."

“I think the devil is using that law to make it difficult for the church. I don’t think, in general, that the French government is against the church. I believe we are in a free country, but it’s a spiritual war.”

Baxter said that if the law passes, a high-profile legal fight over freedom of religion by a well-balanced, Spirit-filled church might do the body of Christ in France good because it would draw international attention that would bring lasting changes.

“Do I want to be the guy to do it? Absolutely not,” Baxter quipped. “I wouldn’t wish that on anybody.”

—Michèle White in France