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Autor: [s.n.]
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Sects and new religious groups boom

The religious landscape in Switzerland is changing constantly, with traditional churches losing ground to new spiritual movements.

While globalisation is a factor in the change, the economic crisis may also be playing a role as people look for a system of beliefs to help them deal with the problems they face.

And whereas many people in Switzerland are apparently concerned about the rise of Islam, researchers are warning that the danger posed by new sects and cults is being ignored.

Sects experts estimate there are around 1,000 esoteric, Christian and new religious groups operating in Switzerland alongside the mainstream churches. Around 200 of these pose problems through their methods of recruitment and operation.

Globalisation enables beliefs to circulate freely, like consumer goods. The other reason for the diversity is that people now feel more free to choose the religion they want.

There are no statistics to back up the new trends as the last census was in 2000 and provided figures only on membership of the main religious groups in Switzerland. But the experts say that as the number of new spiritual groups grows, so does the demand for information - both from those concerned about a family member who has joined a sect and from those seeking to know more before committing themselves to a religious group.

Healing ministries are a big trend at the moment - both esoteric and Christian. People's need for help can be so great that they sometimes suspend their critical judgment. Their weakness can be exploited; people in a difficult situation are open to any religious message. It is young adults, those going through a midlife crisis and the elderly who are most vulnerable.

People underestimate the danger that sects and cults pose - partly because these groups currently have a lower profile in the media.

In the past Scientologists were aggressive in their tactics, handing out flyers and urging passers by to purchase books or undergo a personality test. Now they are 'very helpful'. For example on Bahnhofstrasse in Zurich they have got permission for a stand. They have a small tent and do massage. They are now 'friendly people'. But Scientology has not changed one little bit. It is still about taking money from people. Young people are not aware of the danger.

The last major drama in Switzerland involving a cult happened 15 years ago when 48 members of the Order of the Solar Temple were found dead at two locations in western Switzerland. The victims - most of whom had been shot dead - included several children.

from swissinfo

Young mum spurs teen sex debate

The case of Ramona, a 13 year old mother, has caused a sensation in Switzerland and led to much soul searching over whether children receive enough sex education.

However, teenage pregnancies still remain relatively rare in Switzerland, compared with Britain and the United States.

Ramona gave birth to a healthy baby boy and is now the youngest mother in Switzerland. The teenager apparently did not know she was pregnant until she was admitted to hospital with stomach pains. The father is also 13.

The Swiss teen pregnancy rate (for the ages of 15-19) is just 4.3 per 1,000 women, compared with 9.9 per 1,000 in neighbouring Germany. In Britain the rate stands at 26 per 1,000, with the US the highest in the western world at almost 42 per 1,000.

One of the reasons for the relative rarity of adolescent births is the fact that many Swiss teenagers act quickly if they fall pregnant. Around 70 per cent of teenagers have an abortion at a really early stage. The diagnosis is made early, often within the first six or 12 weeks - in Britain this is often much later.

Switzerland's population structure could also be a reason why teen pregnancies are uncommon. Girls of other ethnicities sometimes start puberty earlier than their Swiss counterparts, which in fertility terms gives them a higher chance of falling pregnant earlier.

Another reason is social behaviour. The average age at which Swiss youth lose their virginity is 17. This has remained stable over the past 20 years and is relatively late compared with other countries.

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