

## Argentine Scholar Says *Cult* Label Amplifies Religious Persecution

Miguel Werner  
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President, UPF Argentina



**Buenos Aires, Argentina** – Derogatory language used in legal contexts and in the media is amplifying persecution of religious communities around the world. Religious freedom researcher **Ms. María Vardé** addressed this issue in a speech, "Religious Freedom and Human Rights in Argentina," at the International Catholic Biblical Society (SOBICAIN) Alberione Hall in Buenos Aires on February 25, 2026.

The meeting, organized by the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD) and UPF-Argentina, along with SOBICAIN and the Alba Intercultural Dialogue Center, included a QandA session and comments from the audience.



Ms. Vardé is an anthropologist, a member of the Anthropological Sciences Institute, and a doctoral student at the University of Buenos Aires. Her research focusses on how language is applied at state level in relation to criminal cases involving religious communities. She studies judicial files and resolutions, mass media reports, public interviews and information, and institutional training materials. These sources often include the term "cult," a highly derogatory concept, now sometimes substituted with "coercive organization," with the same negative social and institutional connotations.

The scholar introduced three cases – affecting two Christian entities and a yoga group – with the details and ordeals suffered by their members and the respective institutions for ongoing cases against them in Argentine courts of law. This is amplified by the media "when state operators use this language and spread the interpretations derived from it."

Derogatory expressions often appear in the headlines, she said, with pictures of search warrants and detentions, but when "there is a dismissal, it is rarely covered," leaving the negative impact on the public.

"This not only ridicules the people comprising this group, but it also exposes them, ruins their reputation and strengthens the idea that they are guilty before trial," she explained. She clarified that she does not

deny that there could be crimes within religious groups, and not all conduct should be protected under the umbrella of religious freedom.

Yet there should be "rigorous evaluations based on the criminal code," following due judicial process. "Using vague language and interpretations can have the double effect of criminalizing legal practices and trivializing the gravity of trafficking," she claimed.



Ms. Vardé explained that the former president of the Argentinian Council for Religious Freedom, Mr. Juan Navarro Floria, explained over 20 years ago that, in a secular state, the law cannot regard "cult" as a technical concept. She stressed that specific conduct must be judged under relevant laws, without criminalizing beliefs.

"The law does not need a 'cult' category to pursue abuse: there are already criminal terms for specific conduct. What we need to do is apply the code to facts, not to bring a religious label to the criminal field," Ms. Vardé concluded. She then opened the floor to comments, questions and testimonies from the audience, which included representatives of various religious communities and civil society organizations.



Following her speech, **Father Rubén Dario Bergliafa** of SOBICAIN, **Mr. Miguel Werner**, president of UPF-Argentina, and **Ms. Andrea Fernández Bevans**, coordinator of IAPD Argentina, presented Ms. Vardé with a certificate of appreciation.