

Esotericism, Deviance, and Repression: An Introduction to the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA)

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the history and worldview of MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), founded in 1990 by Romanian esoteric yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru. In the first part, I summarize the history and doctrines of MISA, and mention the legal controversies that accompanied the movement's progress. Although the roots of the movement are in Siddha Yoga of Tamil Nadu and Tantric Shivaism of Kashmir, Bivolaru has in fact created a new and creative form of both theoretical and practical esotericism, with Indian roots as well as Western influences. In particular, I discuss these sexual techniques of MISA—based on male continence—that most attracted the attention of both scholars and critics. I also examine the presence of a sustained anti-masonic discourse inside of MISA, as well as its interest in the existence of extraterrestrial life, which is part of what some have called “conspirituality,” as a blend of conspiracy theories and esoteric spirituality. Finally, I suggest several themes for further research: the esotericism of MISA, the role and charisma of the leader, eclecticism, ritual, and eschatology, all also relevant for assessing the societal reactions to the movement.

KEYWORDS: Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, MISA, Siddha Yoga, Gregorian Bivolaru, Western Esotericism, Conspirituality.

On 26 February 2016, Gregorian Bivolaru, leader of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), was arrested in France following a request by the Romanian authorities. Media all around the world had a field day about “the sex guru,” or “the yoga guru who tried to bed 1,000 virgins”—the latter was the real headline of a Romanian TV channel on March 5, 2016 (Costache 2016). But who is Gregorian Bivolaru? And what is MISA?

Gregorian (“Grieg”) Bivolaru was born on 12 March 1952 in Tărtășești, in the Romanian region of Muntenia. His official biographers claim that he started

experiencing altered states of consciousness as a young boy. As a young man, Bivolaru developed an interest in Eastern spiritualities and yoga by reading texts by the well-known Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) and even corresponding with him (CESNUR 2014; Møldrup Thejls 2015). Not many books on yoga were available in Communist Romania, but Bivolaru somewhat managed to read texts from Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) (Yogananda 1946), Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887–1963) (Saraswati 1946), and Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886) (Isherwood 1965; French 1974).

In 1970, at age 18, Bivolaru started teaching yoga in Bucharest. Yoga was regarded with hostility by the Communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu (1918–1989), and Bivolaru ended up in a psychiatric hospital. When the regime fell in 1989, he was freed and started again teaching yoga. In 1990, he founded MISA. In the immediate post-Ceausescu years, the yoga taught by Bivolaru, which included a positive appreciation of sexuality as a way to the divine, appeared to many as a symbol of the new freedom. The success was spectacular. In a few years, there were in Romania forty ashrams of MISA, 750 full-time members, and a total membership of 37,000.

Eventually, from Romania the movement spread internationally, adding, one after the others, chapters in Austria, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Ireland, Bosnia, Slovenia, Norway, Cyprus, the United States, South Africa, Argentina, Uruguay, India, and Thailand. They all belong to ATMAN – The International Federation of Yoga and Meditation, which serves as the global umbrella organization for MISA.

Starting in 1990, the local Romanian media attacked Bivolaru, from 1993 on labeling him as “the sex guru” and publishing lurid stories about his alleged sexual escapades with many female followers. Police and judicial intervention followed, as discussed more in detail in Raffaella Di Marzio’s article in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*. It is true that, because of continuing harassment by the police, particularly—but not only—in Romania, MISA lost some members. It is however still very much active, and growing in several countries, with some 20,000 students and 1,000 full-time members. Each year MISA organizes in Romania two meetings in Herculane in May and in Costinești in August. Each has an average attendance of 5,000. Meetings are also organized in other countries.

What exactly does MISA teach? Its sources are many: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Western Esotericism, and Christianity. MISA does not suggest that its students, who in their majority have been raised as Christians, abandon Christianity to embrace an alternative religious worldview. In 1997, a survey by sociologist Carmen Mărcuș revealed that 62,5% of MISA students in Romania kept regarding themselves as “open” to the local Orthodox Church (Mărcuș 1997, 139). In 2009, Bivolaru founded within MISA the *Mișcarea Charismatică Teofanică* (Theophanic Charismatic Movement), aimed at promoting an opening up to the Divine according to each believer’s individual religious or spiritual beliefs, including the Christian ones.

MISA teaches a variety of paths and techniques, from the enneagram to alchemy to communication with angels, as part of an approach of “unity in diversity.” Each teaching is proposed apart from its historical and cultural context, in its essential “esoteric” core, which, according to MISA, is compatible with very different paths. It is, however, clear that the main source and inspiration of MISA is Siddha Yoga, a form of yoga often associated with Tantrism, and that we find in many ideas advanced by the movement echoes of the Kashmiri Tantric sage Abhinavagupta (ca. 950–1016). “Vira” and “Shakti” groups impart Tantric teachings respectively to men and women.

It is, of course, not true that Tantrism is only about sexuality. In fact, by reducing the complex Tantric worldview of the movement to the sole teachings about sexual relationships, media and opponents often offer a somewhat caricatural view of it. We should also remember that there is no scholarly consensus about the definition of Tantrism, with some claiming that “Tantrism” itself is an orientalist concept invented by Western scholars, while the Hindu and Buddhism traditions know only “Tantras,” i.e. books, traditions and techniques that are very different between each other and never formed a unified system. But even in a strict sense, and according to one among several competing definitions, Tantrism is about reaching enlightenments based on material or this-worldly realities, which are regarded as resources rather than obstacles. Sexuality is just one among these resources, but by no means the only one (White 2000).

Several authors, including Jeff Kripal (Kripal 2001), David Gordon White (White 2003; White 2009), and Hugh Urban (Urban 2003; Urban 2006), discussed the multiple interactions between Tantrism, or perhaps the different Tantras, and Western esotericism. In some contemporary New Age proposals,

Tantra becomes just a slogan, with very little in common with Indian teachings. Countless seminars offer something called “Tantra” as a way to enjoy a better sexual life. Others in the history of Western esotericism really traveled to the Indian subcontinent and learned about the Tantras there, although they then combined Eastern teachings with different Western traditions and their interpretations were somewhat idiosyncratic. Perhaps a simple mention of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) would be enough to allude to the complicated journey the Tantras undertook when they traveled West (Urban 2003b).

I would classify MISA as part of a galaxy of groups where Tantras are interpreted within the context of Western esotericism. Let me insist once again on the fact that MISA Tantric teachings have a variety of starting points—including works of art, whose worldview has been defined by Massimo Introvigne as “radical aesthetics” (Introvigne 2016)—rather than sexuality only, and a certain exaggerate focus on the sexual aspects is typical of the reconstructions of MISA activities proposed by the anti-cult movement, whose aim is obviously polemical rather than interpretive. However, MISA’s sexual techniques have attracted the attention of both scholars and critics and deserve at least a quick note.

There are several Tantric techniques based on sexual continence, which can be quickly defined as orgasm without ejaculation. Several movements within Western esotericism teach similar techniques (Hanegraaff and Kripal 2008; Bogdan and Lewis 2014). One example is the constellation of Gnostic churches and groups that trace their genealogy to the Colombian master Samael Aun Weor (1917–1977) (Zoccatelli 2013). Bivolaru’s main Tantric technique about sexuality is, in fact, continence. The Romanian master teaches that continence should not be confused with lack of desire or erotic pleasure. On the contrary, continence is strongly euphoric and regenerating. For men, in particular, continence offers the benefit of changing the sperm into energy, although something analogous is experienced also by women.

This happens, MISA teaches, in two steps. The first is transmutation and the second is sublimation. Transmutation of the semen into sexual energy is not enough to obtain the full benefits of continence. This is only the first step. The second step is sublimation, whereby sexual energy flows upwards through the chakras. There are various methods to achieve sublimation, but normally the sustained practice of Hatha Yoga postures is necessary. MISA also teaches that

results of this technique are not immediate. The awakening of the Kundalini, i.e. the mobilization of the primal energy located at the base of the spine, is reached approximately after one year of continuous practice of continence and yoga (Bivolaru 2011).

The couple transmutation-sublimation in MISA confirms that the practice of continence, and the teachings about sexuality in general, are not something separated from the general practice of yoga. Retention of the semen should be just a part of a complex of techniques including different yoga techniques and intellectual efforts aimed at mastering an esoteric doctrine.

Controversies about MISA often focus on the so called pornographic movies the movement is accused of having produced in Denmark and elsewhere. In fact, the movies were not produced at the initiative of MISA as an institution but by individual members. However, they seem to represent certain MISA teachings. Some of these movies have indeed been included in the selections offered by pornographic portals. However, they do not appear to be “typical” pornographic movies. They include solemn statements about Tantric or other sexual magical teachings, followed by practical examples. These examples do include women and men in various stages of nudity and sexual practices, and it is understandable that they have incensed certain critics. On the other hand, the main proposal of these movies do not appear to be commercial and, as commercial products, they would probably not even be very successful. We may rather regard them as an idiosyncratic illustration of MISA’s teachings and techniques. There have been also accusations that MISA has organized prostitution rings in various countries. These accusations have not been proved and in fact even in the Romanian court cases, biased as they might have been against MISA, Bivolaru and other leaders have finally been judged as not guilty with respect to these specific charges.

Although, as mentioned earlier, Bivolaru uses several elements derived from a wide variety of Eastern and Western esoteric teachings, he does not believe that everything that goes under the name of esotericism is positive. In particular, there is a sustained anti-masonic discourse inside of MISA, and books by Bivolaru consistently expose Freemasonry and other organizations such as the Illuminati as the source of the Western World’s contemporary decadence and many evils. As the very covers of some MISA books show, traditional religious Roman Catholic and Orthodox criticism of Freemasonry remains a source, together with contemporary testimonies of hostile ex-Freemasons and what critics call

“conspiracy theories.” As it is stated in a MISA website: “Freemasons consider Gregorian Bivolaru as a JAN VAN HELSING of Romania, who disturbs them more and more with his public disclosures of ‘terrifying’ secrets that only the top of Freemasons knows” (Yogi Blogger 2012). Freemasonry is portrayed as a satanic and evil group of powerful people who try to control the whole earth and use diverse sinister methods to keep the rest of humanity in oblivion.

MISA is also interested in the existence of extraterrestrial life. Just as Freemasons supposedly have contact with malefic extraterrestrials, MISA is in touch with benevolent extraterrestrials, working together with the Supreme Galactic Council. Bivolaru suggested in a lecture in 2013 that benevolent extraterrestrials could have intervened to shatter into pieces a huge meteorite before it collapsed over the Russian town of Chelyabinsk, an incident which would have had catastrophic effects for the whole Planet Earth. In fact, the benevolence of the extraterrestrials may have been related to the practice of the “supreme and efficient method,” a special collective meditation that was initiated at the annual retreat in Herculane, in 2010 (Matei 2013).

It is quite easy to imagine that anti-Masonism and theories about the aliens normally do not make spiritual or esoteric movements particularly popular. However, the fact that a large part of Romanian anti-cultism focuses on MISA is also connected with unsolved problems in post-Communist Romanian society about what degree of deviance from a traditional, Eastern Orthodox, and morally conservative public image of the country and the culture may be tolerated.

In one of the few scholarly articles on MISA, Sara Møldrup Thejls refers to the discussions between scholars—particularly Asbjørn Dyrendal, Egil Aspren, Charlotte Ward, and David Voas—on both conspiracy culture and esoteric discourse (Aspren and Dyrendal 2015), in which the point of departure is the term “conspirituality,” (Ward and Voas 2011) the combination of conspiracy theories and New Age spirituality as a new paradoxical phenomenon. In her discussion, Møldrup Thejls argues that “conspiracy theory is inherent esoteric in its epistemology,” so that it is not surprising to find it in esoteric movements (Møldrup Thejls 2015, 72).

Summing up, and concluding, I would like to suggest four main themes in the esotericism of MISA, all deserving further study.

The first is the role and charisma of the leader, which makes MISA similar to new religious movements. Although Bivolaru is presented as a scholar who has studied many different traditions, he also appears to some as a quasi-messianic figure, to whom certain students attribute very special abilities and a unique role in human history. If his legal problems will limit his freedom of movement, it remains to be seen how the perception of his charisma would evolve, and what role would be played by other respected yoga teachers in the movement such as Nicolae Catrina and Mihai Stoian.

The second theme is eclecticism. As mentioned earlier, we can consider MISA one of several neo-Tantric or Western Tantric movements. However, Tantrism is interpreted, to paraphrase the subtitle of a famous book by Wouter Hanegraaff, in the mirror of Western esotericism (Hanegraaff 1996). How this may happen, and how Tantrism is transformed by this Western gaze, is a central question for studying the movement.

The third theme is ritual. We can ask the question to what extent the practices of MISA may be read as rituals, and in the affirmative what is a ritual in this particular tradition and what role it performs. A sub-question in this field is whether practices in the tradition of sexual magic such as continence are also, in their own way, readable as rituals.

The fourth theme is eschatology, and the view of a cosmic battle between good and evil, involving inter alia Freemasonry, the Illuminati, and both good and bad extraterrestrials. We can ask whether this battle is final and whether “conspirituality” is affirmed and constructed by MISA within a millennialist context.

What I have proposed here is a very preliminary approach to MISA. It is a list of questions much more than a series of answers. If we regard MISA as an esoteric movement—or perhaps, according to Introvigne’s terminology, as a new magical movement (Introvigne 1990)—it is today one of the largest in the world for number of members. And a comparative approach would also be needed, for instance by comparing MISA to the movements originating from Samael Aun Weor or from Gilbert Bourdin (1923–1998), who founded Aumism and the Holy City of the Mandarom in France (Duval 2002; Zoccatelli 2004; Zoccatelli 2005; Palmer 2011). Both Weor and Bourdin integrated yoga and Tantras with Western esotericism, and both generated widespread criticism and controversies. Why some esoteric groups seem to particularly disturb contemporary society,

while others are more or less tolerated, is another theme to which the study of MISA may offer a significant contribution.

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