

The Religious Background of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute

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ABSTRACT: The Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA) is often portrayed as a unique and unprecedented phenomenon because of its integration of sacred eroticism into a religious worldview. This article argues that this is not the case. This integration has precedents in Taoism, Tantrism, and Western Esotericism. Several Western esoteric schools were influenced by Eastern traditions of sacred eroticism, but they also developed their own distinctive paths. While MISA primary reference for Tantrism is Tamil Nadu's Siddha Yoga, placing the Romanian movement within a larger tradition helps both studying its doctrines and practices and avoiding frequent misunderstandings.

KEYWORDS: Sacred Eroticism, Sexual Magic, Tantrism, Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, MISA, Sexuality and Western Esotericism.

Introduction

The Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA) is a new spiritual movement established some 27 years ago in Romania, which subsequently found a niche in a post-Ceaușescu society that has been exploring ways to balance modern secularity, with its demands for religious freedom, and its acknowledgement of the country's historical tradition deeply rooted in Eastern Orthodoxy. Even as MISA attracted an initial following, it found itself facing scrutiny from the Romanian press, which was aware of its founder Gregorian Bivolaru (b. 1952), who had clashed with the government of Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918–1989) through the 1980s over his attraction to yoga. His refusal to conform to government regulations against yoga had eventually landed him in a

mental hospital, from which he was only freed after the Romanian Revolution (Andreescu 2016).

Once freed from confinement, Bivolaru immediately resumed his religious quest to spread the practices of yoga. It was not just any yoga, but a form of Tantric yoga of the so called left-hand path. That is to say, not only was he instructing people in what is in common parlance understood to be yoga—the body positions (asanas) of hatha yoga often presented as a form of healthful exercise—but also the more esoteric practices of Tantra, including sexuality as a central theme in spiritual awakening. Esoteric Tantra yoga teaches a system that integrates sex into the individual believer’s regular spiritual routines.

Although techniques dealing with sexuality were by no mean the only teaching of MISA, the intrusion of sex to a place of central importance in the individual’s spiritual evolution, which quickly found a hearing among a new generation positively responding to modern sexual liberation, was enough to rouse suspicion from the majority Christian community that had traditionally seen any expansion of the role of sex as a challenge to spirituality and viewed the control of sexual impulses as essential to the religious life. Even the irreligious have had little knowledge of the older religious traditions that informed the members of MISA, and otherwise champions of religious freedom were at a loss to understand how a sexually oriented philosophy could be wedded to a spiritual quest, and a group that seemed to give such a positive appreciation to sexuality could be considered a religion.

As yoga has been introduced to the West through the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of exponents have represented yoga as a practice with immense health benefits for practitioners, which simultaneously draws on Hindu philosophy with potentials for mental calmness and control and eventual spiritual enlightenment. Integral to the teachings is a moral code based in a set of conditions to be cultivated (termed *niyamas*) and five to be avoided (*yamas*). Prospective yogis are taught the values of controlling one’s sexual impulses and, if married, remaining loyal to one’s partner, and if unmarried remaining chaste. Many of the renowned teachers of yoga have been *sannyasin* who have taken a vow of worldly renunciation, which includes refraining from sex as a key component.

While this more “orthodox” and popular form of yoga has been introduced as the mainline tradition, along with it, India has also been home to a centuries-old

second tradition of yoga, which discarded the renunciations of the *sannyasin* and suggested that, instead of renouncing the world, the realities of human life, including sex, should be encountered and integrated into the spiritual quest. The basic idea of assigning sex a more active and positive role in spiritual development has also had its exponents in other traditions, most notably Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Taoism, and Western Esotericism. These traditions, like Hindu Tantrism, have enjoyed a revival as the Western world experienced a transformation in its sexual mores through the twentieth century (Pond 2003; Goodrick-Clarke 2008; Versluis 2008; Hanegraaff 2013).

Taoism

Taoism has a long tradition of what has been termed sexual alchemy. The teachings grew from the Taoist search for immortality, which parallels that in Western alchemy, and introduced practitioners to a variety of endeavors, including the preparation of compounds that they hoped would initially prolong life and eventually do away with death. More than one Chinese emperor would die from consuming such alchemical concoctions. But, quite apart from the attempt to find the silver bullet that would provide a quick alternative to death, the Taoists developed a rather detailed and sophisticated worldview that informed the alchemical quest in China. That perspective began with the positing of *qi*, the universal life force, which was undergirded by a belief in *jing*, which might be thought of as the body's life energy. When a high level of *jing* was maintained, life continued, and when all of an individual's *jing* was lost, the body died.

Taoist alchemists, mostly male, suggested that the major way that *jing* was expended was in sex, and that preserving *jing* could be accomplished by refraining from ejaculation. Thus, wishing to avoid having to adopt a celibate existence, the alchemists soon discovered ways of engaging in sexual activity that avoided reaching ejaculation, what would today would be termed "male continence." Once a man became proficient in suppressing ejaculation, he could engage in frequent sexual encounters. While ejaculation expended one's life energy, it was also believed that sexual activity with a woman created *qi*, which could, with proper practice, be transformed and used for personal replenishment of the practitioner's *jing* (Wile 1992; Cohn 1993).

The earliest texts documenting the knowledge of and practice of sexual alchemy come from the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE) but suggest an even earlier origin. Our knowledge of pre-Han Dynasty Chinese is extremely limited, due to the attempts of China's fabled first emperor to unite the many smaller Chinese kingdoms. His efforts included the destruction of most of the land's written materials. The copies he retained were destroyed as his dynasty fell apart. Most of what we know of pre-Han China has come from texts recovered from tombs that survived the short-lived Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE).

While enjoying some degree of popularity through the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), sexual alchemy would be discouraged as Confucianism, with its emphases on the family and avoidance of any public discussion of sexuality, assumed a dominant role in Chinese society. Westerners in China during the Ming and Qing Dynasties remained largely unaware of Taoist alchemical practices until the twentieth century, and they would not be introduced to Western audiences until the 1970s.

The main instrument for introducing Taoist Alchemy into the modern West has been Mantak Chia (b. 1944), a Thai teacher of Chinese lineage. Though raised in a Chinese community, he would himself not encounter Esoteric Taoism until he moved to Hong Kong to attend college. There, in the 1960s, he met one master of alchemy and subsequently was led to other teachers. After more than a decade of study, he assumed the mantle of a teacher in his own right and established the original Healing Tao Center in his homeland. In 1979, he moved to New York and introduced his teachings to the West. Though not the first to expose the West to Taoist sexual alchemy (Chang 1977, Wong 1982), Chia proved by far the most influential through the last generation. As the work grew, he trained a number of instructors, a few of whom have themselves become independent master teachers.

In 1984, Chia released his main book on sexual alchemy, *Taoist Secrets of Love: Cultivating Male Sexual Energy*, co-authored with his main American student Michael Winn, a modern presentation of the ancient Chinese wisdom (Chia and Winn 1984). It found an immediate response and would go through four editions in two years as well as being reprinted in Europe. A French edition was released in 1991. He followed it with several additional texts expanding on the teachings, including one especially for women, *Healing Love through the Tao: Cultivating Female Sexual Energy*, released in 1986 (Chia 1986).

Western Esotericism

Seemingly more important to the evolution of MISA's teachings on sacred sexuality has been Western Esotericism (see Hanegraaff and Kripal 2008). Esotericism has formed a tradition in Western religion since the advent of ancient Gnosticism, and at various times and places became an important dissenting voice affecting the trajectory of the larger religious community. It underwent a remarkable revival in the seventeenth-century through the Freemasonry movement, while finding key exponents in the likes of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) and Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). The latter opened a new discussion of sexuality in the spiritual life, though in a relatively tame manner, in his book *Conjugal Love*, originally issued in Latin in 1768 and published in English after his death, in 1790 (Swedenborg 1790), with a first American edition in 1796 where “conjugal” was spelled “conjugal,” a choice maintained in subsequent English-language editions (Swedenborg 1796). Though maintaining support for the primary teachings in the Western Christian tradition of celibacy before marriage, and faithfulness in a monogamous marriage, Swedenborg offered new perspectives on sexuality by asserting the possibility of a continuing sexual drive in the afterlife and the opportunity in Heaven for couples to strive for such conjunction that the two may become one.

While delighting in the possible continuation of relationships begun in this life, he also opened the possibility of a new partner in the afterlife for those mismatched on Earth. Swedenborg's discussion of sexuality was not as important for the particular opinions it espoused so much as was his initial questioning of traditional biblical assumptions, if seemingly rather minor ones. His pioneering effort would bear fruit later in the Spiritualist movement.

Through the first half off the nineteenth century, Freemasonry, the Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem, and the magnetic healing movement initiated by Mesmer would spread through the English-speaking world. From its beginning in 1848 in Western New York, Spiritualism would find its first great champion in Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910). Davis became involved in the magnetist movement after it became known that he could easily be placed in a magnetic trance (i.e., hypnotized). In the trance state, he soon encountered the late Emanuel Swedenborg, who promised to instruct him from the afterlife. As the Spiritualist movement spread, Davis became one of its

early mediums, and what would in the next century become known as a channel, delivering messages from knowledgeable spirit entities. In his descriptions of the afterlife, Davis integrated many of Swedenborg's views of the heavenly life into his own expanded perspective.

Davis had married in 1848, just as the Spiritualist movement was beginning. His first wife Catherine De Wolf (1806–1853) passed away in 1853, and he subsequently married a divorcee, Mary Fenn Robinson Love (1824–1886), a Spiritualist and feminist activist. By this time, Davis had absorbed Swedenborg's speculations on sexuality, which he expanded into his concept of "soul mates," the designation of one's perfect romantic partner. The freethinking Davis asserted that a marriage relationship is only valid if made between true soul mates. Thus, those trapped in unions with incompatible partners have both the right and duty to divorce. And when real soul mates discover each other, they and they alone have the right to determine whether their partnership will be temporal or continue into the afterlife (Davis 1851; 1856; 1885).

Eventually, Davis would claim his rights by denying his earlier assertion that his second wife was his soul mate, and in 1884, sought a divorce from her to marry Della Elizabeth Markham (1839–1928), whom he had come to know as his true soul mate. Davis defended his action at length in his autobiography, *Beyond the Valley* (Davis 1885), but nevertheless the divorce greatly harmed his reputation at the time. Following his marriage to Markham, many Spiritualists complained that Davis' motivations were less than spiritual, but by then, his idea of soul mates had been thoroughly integrated into the American esoteric community, while its implied criticism of traditional marriage structures had taken hold in the vigorous and overlapping movements for women's liberation and for sexual freedom (Sears 1977; Stoehr 1979).

Simultaneously with the emergence of Spiritualism, traditional marriage found another critic from within a much more orthodox religious tradition. During the 1832–33 school year, John Humphrey Noyes (1811–1886), a seminarian training for the Congregational ministry at Yale Theological Seminary, became caught up in the active debate over Christian perfectionism being spread within the Congregationalist community by evangelist Charles G. Finney (1792–1875). In a series of personal realizations from his Bible study, Noyes became convinced that Christ had already returned to Earth and that as a result humanity was now living in a new age. He concluded that, unless believers were truly free of sin, then

Christianity was not true. True Christians must be perfect and free of sin. On February 20, 1834, he announced to the seminary community that he had attained perfection and was free of sin. His assertion instantly brought him into conflict with both his fellow students and his professors. He was soon expelled from the seminary, and his fellow Congregationalists revoked his recently granted license to preach. Former colleagues stood offended by Noyes' rejection of any continuing obligation to adhere to traditional moral standards and his decision to accept moral guidance from mere intuition.

As the first converts to his new ways of thinking gathered around him, Noyes began to work out the behavioral and social implications of his basic insights. Integral to his ruminations were the events following his 1838 marriage to Harriet Holton (1808–1895). Through the early 1840s, Holton bore five children, only one of which survived. In the wake of the fetal deaths, he and Harriet separated, and he began focusing his attention on the issues of sexuality, the state of marriage, and the problems experienced by he and his wife relative to pregnancy after the still births of the majority of their offspring.

Among the end products of his intensive reconsideration of his dilemma, Noyes rediscovered male continence and the techniques for making it a functional reality (the Asian texts on the practice being unavailable to him). He initially concluded that sex had a social function in bringing pleasure to the participants, quite apart from its reproductive function. If a couple did not desire a child, they did not have to give up sexual activity, and the male partner simply had, by an act of will, to control his ejaculation. Noyes found that he could do so with but a little effort, and after some instruction, his male disciples could also master the practice. By adopting male continence, he and his associates could escape the consequences of unwanted pregnancies (Noyes 1866).

With this basic problem solved, Noyes moved to integrate male continence as a practice in his reorganized community of fellow perfectionists that was founded at Oneida, New York, in 1848. As an experiment in utopian living, the community adopted what came to be called “complex marriage,” which assumed that all the males were married to all the females. They organized and regulated sexual activity within the community so that the members rotated their sexual contacts with each other in a system arranged by the older females. As a result, the community thrived for a generation, and the number of unplanned pregnancies was kept to an absolute minimum. Oneida in its 33 years of existence solved many

of the problems inherent in communal living in the Western world, and is deserving of all of the scrutiny it has received, not only for its development of complex marriage and institutionalizing male countenance, but of the complex of practices growing from Noyes' pursuit of perfection (Noyes 1970; Foster 1991; Wayland-Smith 2016). Such a pursuit is far beyond the scope and purpose of this paper.

The Oneida Community was among the most successful of the nineteenth century utopian communal experiments in America, but for the purposes of this paper it was important in communicating knowledge of the practice of male continence to a generation of people looking for a viable birth control method, at a time in which printing publications on the practice of sex was regarded as a criminal offense in most of the Western world, while the pioneers of sex education were seeking viable means of birth control. Following the publication of Noyes' *Male Continence* in 1866, the practice would find its way into a variety of movements that had little relationship to Oneida, including the woman's rights movement, the free love movement, and Spiritualism and the related esoteric movements.

Picking up on the discussions of male-female relations in the Spiritualist community was Pascal Beverley Randolph (1825–1875), who had become a well-known medium and writer in the Spiritualist press. Randolph, the son of a white man and a woman he described as a princess from the African island of Madagascar, found a home among the Spiritualists, though even there he felt the need, on repeated occasions, to deny any African ancestors. Randolph had aligned with the Spiritualist movement soon after its founding, and quickly emerged as a trance medium. A self-educated man, he had become aware of the mysterious Rosicrucian order, the myth of which had been published in the seventeenth century, though hopeful prospective members were never able to make contact with the anonymous German author/publisher of the original Rosicrucian books. After learning of the emerging European movement, he began to contribute articles to Spiritualist periodicals under the pseudonym "The Rosicrucian." Then, while residing in San Francisco, he founded in 1858 the *Fraternitas Rosae Crucis*, the first Rosicrucian organization in America. After the Civil War, he would begin to issue books laying out his system of sacred sex through the *Fraternitas*, and join in with the early efforts to make knowledge of sexuality in general and birth control in particular available to the public. His

efforts would lead to his arrest and trial in Boston in 1872, though at trial he was found innocent of the charges brought against him (Deveney 1996).

The trial aside, in the post-war years, Randolph had begun quietly to develop a complete system of esotericism that included sex as an integral element, and that had by the beginning of the 1870s become a system of sex magic, not entirely unlike that developed among the Chinese alchemists. Like the Chinese, Randolph saw his system as dealing with the problem of the individual's loss of energy over time and the quest for means of recovering and replenishing it.

Early in his Spiritualist career, Randolph began to present himself as a medium doctor who could assist "patients" in the restoring of health and vital energy. In his teachings on such matters, the magnetic fluid originally posited by Mesmer (and later rediscovered by a variety of people under a variety of names) always permeated the Spiritualists' assumptions. And the magnetic energy bore a close resemblance to the Chinese *qi*. To this common practice, Randolph added an emphasis on dealing with sexual problems, including the loss of vitality due to masturbation.

Randolph would reject masturbation, which he saw as a vitality destroying practice, and for a brief period welcomed the alternative provided by male continence. He soon abandoned Noyes' option, however, in large part as a correlate to his rejection of complex marriage (with its multiple sexual partners) as immoral. He supported traditional monogamous marriage and developed a sophisticated system of sexual activity that he saw fitting within the marriage relationship and that posited the sex act as simultaneously a means to gain pleasure, to revitalize the participants, and to provide a means for the evolution of the soul. Randolph would develop through the early 1870s the first of several systems of sex magic unique to the Western world. Following his death in 1875, his perspective would not only continue in the Rosicrucian organization he founded, but would directly inform the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, which in turn would be superseded by the still existing Church of Light.

In the meantime, Noyes' idea would enter the Women's Rights movement, where two activists, Ida Craddock (1857–1902) and Alice Stockham (1833–1912), would champion the practice. Craddock, after being denied entrance at the University of Pennsylvania in her earlier years, began a religious pilgrimage that took her through Theosophy and Unitarianism, to the founding of her own Church of Yoga, which she relocated to Chicago in the 1880s. As the church's

priestess, she developed an auto-erotic relationship with an invisible spirit entity whom she called Soph. Through the 1890s, Craddock wrote and self-published a set of books primarily aimed at married couples and designed to supplement the "mystical" sexual counseling she offered at her Dearborn Street office. She integrated the practice of male continence into her many publications that appeared under titles such as *Heavenly Bridegrooms*, *Psychic Wedlock*, *Spiritual Joys*, *Letter to A Prospective Bride*, *Wedding Night*, and *Right Marital Living* (all republished in Chappell 2010, and available online at www.idacraddock.com). Craddock was frequently in conflict with the authorities, her most notable case being in 1899 following the distribution of *Right Marital Living*, which led to her indictment in federal court. She pleaded guilty, but received a suspended sentence. When later convicted in New York and sentenced to five years, she committed suicide (Schmidt 2010).

Operating at almost the same time as Craddock, Alice Stockham, a pioneering female physician, also based in Chicago, in turn self-published her book, *Tokology: A Book for Every Woman*, in 1885 (Stockham 1885). She gave the book to many prostitutes in Chicago, with each volume carrying a piece of paper offering the new owner a free gynecological exam. In *Tokology*, Stockham developed Noyes' male continence practice by offering further consideration to female response, suggesting that women learn to control their orgasmic response in a way similar to that of their male partner. She named her expanded vision of male continence *karezza* (from the Italian word for caress, *caressa*). The discussion of *karezza* in Stockham's *Tokology* would later be published separately as *Karezza: Ethics of Marriage* (Stockham 1896), and reprinted a number of times through the twentieth century.

While authorities tried to suppress both Craddock's and Stockham's writings, copies circulated and found their way into the hands of a variety of esotericists and would become integral to the training within the emerging world of ceremonial magic. Sexual magic, one branch of ceremonial magic, appeared in Germany in the mid-1800s and over the next generation spread through a variety of informal contacts into the English-speaking world (King 1970; Howe 1972; Drury 2000). There, in the early twentieth century, it encountered one Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), a young practitioner of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, who struggled with what he saw as the rather inadequate system of magic it taught. He bolted from its confines and then rediscovered sex magic

during his own early magical experimentations. He would also publish an appreciative review of Craddock's *Heavenly Bridegrooms* in 1919 (Crowley 1919). His publishing some materials based on his initial sex magic experiences brought him into contact with the German-based Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO).

Crowley would join the OTO and eventually become its Outer Head. From his own practice, he would rewrite the OTO's material and in effect redesign its curriculum. He would write voluminously, though his writings on sex magic would initially remain available only to members of the OTO, and his system of Thelemic (from the Greek *thelema* or will) magic (often spelled magick) would come to dominate magical practice in the West. While Thelema offered a complete philosophical/theological system of belief and practice, for those who also wanted to experience a more familiar religious ritual he also founded the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, an esoteric church body that offered a variation on the traditional Roman Catholic mass, but utilized a ritual that integrated the Thelemic magical perspective, including its sexual elements.

Although the practices of the OTO required some attention to the practical problem of unwanted pregnancies resulting from implementing the most secret of its rituals, unlike both the Taoist alchemists and Randolph's magical system, the problems of energy depletion/replenishment and of birth control were pushed from the center of concern. Crowley had been a student of esotericism and magic and saw in its mastery as a means of self-development which came about as the practitioner subordinated himself/herself to what he called the True Will. For Crowley, one's early magical activity was directed toward the discovery of one's True Will. After becoming aware of the True Will, one's only legitimate course was to follow it. The basics of Thelema were laid out in a relatively short work channeled from the paranormal entity Aiwass, *Liber AL (The Book of the Law)*: Crowley 1983).

The OTO would remain the major group perpetuating a form of esotericism that sacralized sexuality as a significant component in its belief and practice, but other groups did appear, most notably the Secret Brotherhood of the Great Brotherhood of God (G.B.G.: Culling 1971), and the Universal Christian Gnostic Movement, which operated in South America, headed by Samael Aun Weor (1917–1977) and fragmented into numerous branches after his death. Like the OTO, these groups remained relatively small through the 1960s, but gained a measurable following when their materials became available and began to

be published in the 1970s (in the case of Weor's Gnostic Movement, materials were translated and published in English too). In the 1970s, most of Crowley's writings were discovered to have been deposited into a library in London, and having fallen into the public domain, were subsequently published and widely disseminated. Though still a relatively small movement, Thelema has emerged as a spiritual/religious system adopted by individuals numbering in the thousands (if not the hundreds of thousands) throughout the Western world.

Tantrism

Even as both Taoist alchemy and Western Esotericism have influenced the development of MISA, by far the most important influence has come from Indian Tantra. Tantra is a stream of Hindu belief and practice that emerged as one of several religious options in India over the centuries-long development of what today is called Hinduism. The major Indian religious communities evolved from numerous local religions that originally served India's various linguistic, ethnic, and national groups. Tantric practitioners trace their origins to the same ancient scriptures used by all Hindus and worship some of the same deities, most notably the main Saivite deities—Shiva and Shakti. As it evolved, Tantra also entered the Buddhist community and was passed to Tibet, where it integrated with Mahayana Buddhism to create the unique Vajrayana Buddhist tradition.

Tantra differs from the more well-known streams of Hindu thought and behavior, in that the latter pursue their ultimate goals of enlightenment through a denial of and withdrawal from the material and social world, making heroes of the *sannyasins*, or renunciates. Tantrics attempt to embrace and use the very things that most Hindu holy men avoid (most notably the five m's—wine, meat, fish, grain, and sexual intercourse—the Sanskrit word for each beginning with the letter “m”) and use them as tools in the quest for union with the Divine.

Over the centuries, the Tantrics developed numerous differences with the larger Hindu community in India, but given the widespread practice of vegetarianism and dominant sexual mores of Indian life, the tantric consumption of meat and integration of sex into their practice were the main sources of tension within the religious community (Frawley 1994; Feuerstein 1998; Kempton 2013). When the British moved into India, the sexual practices of the Tantrics became of interest, both for their contradiction to traditional Christian teachings

on sexuality, and hence a matter of official condemnation, and for their tantalizing reality for the younger members of the colonizing community, who were intrigued by the possibilities of expanding their sexual experiences.

Tantrics center their worship on Shakti, the female consort of the deity Shiva. Shakti is the divine energy, and the union of the relatively passive Shiva with his consort is pictured as the means of enlightenment. Appropriating the Divine Union, Tantrics understand individuals as possessing a subtle anatomy, built around seven psychic centers called *chakras*, which are aligned along the spinal column, from the base of the spine near the anus to the crown *chakra* at the top of the head. Also, at the base of the spine the divine energy, called *kundalini*, is pictured as lying dormant, coiled like a sleeping cobra. Through the practice of tantra, the *kundalini* is awakened, and travels up the spine. As it travels, it opens the *chakras* (each possessing distinct attributes and powers) and finally brings a level of enlightenment as it reaches the crown *chakra*.

Knowledge of Tantra, in its Hindu form, began to filter into the West early in the twentieth century beginning with the several books of Sir John George Woodroffe (1865–1936), who wrote under the pseudonym of Arthur Avalon. He not only began to inform the West of the Tantric teachings and to some extent their practices, especially kundalini yoga, he also attempted to defend them in the face of their Victorian critics. Rather than simply dismiss the Tantrics as immoral practitioners of a shallow sex-based religion, Woodroffe argued that they possessed a sophisticated faith worthy of intellectual attention, as it was neither irrational nor obscurantist (Avalon 1913; 1919; 1919; 1922a; 1922b).

While Woodroffe introduced the West to Tantra, he was limited by the rules of public discourse, and did not divulge the mechanics of Tantric practice, neither the training necessary before engaging in Tantric rituals, nor the actual details of the rituals themselves. One could not, for example, take his books and engage in Tantric practices. It was not until after World War II that books appeared that began to offer instructions in Tantric practice, and not until the 1960s before the first Tantric teachers begin to appear in the West. By this time, leaders of the esoteric sex magic community began to hypothesize that their practice had much in common with Tantra, a few even attempting to merge Thelema and Tantra into a new synthesis (Djurdjevic 2014).

The major move of Tantra to the West began with Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1923–2009), a Tantric yogi who in 1964 had founded the Bihar School of Yoga (for a detailed restatement of the renounced life, *sannyas*, see Bihar School of Yoga 1979) and began to invite Western students to learn the secrets of Tantra. Among those who found their way to Satyananda was the Australian Jonn Mumford, who would be ordained by Satyananda in 1972 (and thereafter known as Swami Anandakapila Saraswati) and would launch his career as a religious teachers with his first full text on tantric practice published in 1975 as *Sexual Occultism* (Mumford 1975). They would be followed by a number of additional materials expanding upon the original text such as *Ecstasy through Tantra* and *A Chakra & Kundalini Workbook* (Mumford 2002a; 2002b).

At about the same time that Mumford was finding his way to Swami Satyananda, a number of youthful Westerners were traveling to India to seek enlightenment, and some would encounter a young eclectic teacher known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931–1990), later to assume the name Osho. Broadly educated, Rajneesh attempted to merge his knowledge of India's religious teachings with some Western perspectives, most notably from the human potential movement. Mixed in with his multi-faceted teachings was a demand for a more open attitude toward sexuality by the modern world, with his adaptation of Tantric themes providing the foundation. His ashram in Pune, India, soon developed a reputation as a place where traditional rules governing sexual behavior were openly flaunted. Before the Indian government could move against it, Rajneesh moved to the United States at the beginning of the 1980s. Rajneeshpuram, as the new ashram located in rural Oregon was named, became the focus of continued controversy and Rajneesh was eventually forced to return to India.

Following Osho's death in 1990, several of his students emerged as teachers specializing in Tantra, and building on Osho's two main tantric texts: *Tantra: The Supreme Understanding* and *The Tantra Vision* (Rajneesh 1975; 1978–79). Most notable of these students is Ma Ananda Sarita, who launched her teachings career in 1990, and expanded her work from the United States to Europe in 1998 under the name Tantra Essence (Sarita 2001). She is but one of several dozen similar Tantra teachers who now lead their own groups focused on the Tantric tradition found across North America and Europe (see e.g. Muir and Muir 1983; Richardson 2003; Odier 2011; Dawson 2014).

MISA: A Modern Tantra School

I do not contend that the founder and the main leaders of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA) were aware of all the sources mentioned above. My purpose here has been more to demonstrate that MISA, rather than being a uniquely “deviant” phenomenon, is part of a tradition with a long history. In the literature of MISA, the most frequent references are to Siddha Yoga from Tamil Nadu, which seems to have been the main vehicle through which Bivolaru approached Tantrism. Both Bivolaru and the other main teachers in the movement appear to have a good command of the academic sources on Tantrism. In the Internet forums critical of MISA, run by anti-cultists and hostile ex-members, one finds often claims that some teachings and texts of the movement’s leaders are not original but have been derived, and in some cases even plagiarized, from academic books and articles on Tantra in various languages. This criticism, on the other hand, is also a grudging acknowledgment that MISA leaders are indeed familiar with the academic literature on Tantrism, including rare and obscure texts.

MISA, now only a quarter of century old, is a relatively new spiritual (or neo-spiritual) movement, attempting to live out a contemporary version of an ancient teaching. It does so in response to a variety of recent developments—most notably the sexual revolution, the New Age, and the international spread of religious ideas and perspectives through the Internet. Not the least of the influences with which MISA must contend is the sexualization of public space so visible in contemporary advertising, the cinema, and clothing. That being said, MISA can best be seen as embodying a well-recognized religious tendency to sacralize sex that has long been present in multiple older and well-established religions. As such, it will likely take its place among the variety of challengers to the traditional sexual mores still championed by those majority religions that maintain a strong hold on society.

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