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Massimo Introvigne

Introduction: The Radical Aesthetics of a Romanian Esoteric Movement

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ABSTRACT: MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), founded by Romanian yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru, is often denounced in the media as a deviant movement because of its view of sexuality rooted in Westernized Tantric teachings. This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* explores the history, doctrines, and controversies of MISA, arguing that its teachings cannot be reduced to a doctrine of sexuality only and propose a “radical aesthetics” that also explains the reactions by both its religious and secular opponents.

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

This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is devoted to MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), founded by Romanian yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru. In the first article, PierLuigi Zoccatelli summarizes the development and doctrines of MISA. In the second, Raffaella Di Marzio presents the legal controversies that accompanied the movement’s history. In the third, I discuss the erotic movies directed by MISA student Carmen Enache and how they came to play a crucial role in controversies about the movement. In the fourth article, J. Gordon Melton places MISA’s approach to sexuality within the larger history of Western esotericism and alternative religious movements.

The articles support the conclusion that MISA is more than a new religious or esoteric movement perceived as deviant by anti-cultists and the media. I believe that it is a manifestation of what we would call radical aesthetics. To situate this category, some theoretical premises are in order. Postmodernist German philosopher Wolfgang Iser argued that “we are without doubt currently

experiencing an aesthetics boom. It extends from individual styling, urban design and the economy through to theory. More and more elements of reality are being aesthetically mantled, and reality as a whole is coming to count increasingly as an aesthetic construction to us” (Welsch 1997, 1).

Social scientists define as “aestheticization” the process where reality in all fields is socially constructed based (inter alia) on aesthetic taste, and aesthetics is redefined in ways that go well beyond the mere field of the arts (de la Fuente 2000, 235). It is now widely recognized that aestheticization was already noticed and theorized by German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) at the end of the 19th century. Based on Simmel, we can argue that a group’s aesthetics is not restricted to its idea of art, but determining what ideas it has about art is crucial to identify its aesthetics (de la Fuente 2008).

Influential American sociologist Randal Collins connected aestheticization with the theory of ritual interaction first proposed by Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). He argued that our aesthetics is largely driven by the experience of emotional energy we derive from successful rituals, a notion that Durkheim and Collins did not restrict to religion but extended to everyday life. Collins (and others) noticed that in the 1960s, daily rituals connected with politeness, class relations, gender relations, and everyday religion changed quite dramatically, determining a change of aesthetic paradigm. Collins called this the “Goffmanian revolution,” arguing that Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982) provided all the tools for interpreting it, although paradoxically he largely failed to notice it while it was happening (Collins 2004, 371).

For sociologists in the Goffman tradition, sexuality is not defined by evolutionary biology only. In a large part, it is socially constructed. It also creates the most important daily interaction rituals. A new aesthetics of sexuality largely defined the aesthetics revolution of the 1960s, and ended up extending its influence to many fields. I would argue that those engaged in redefining the aesthetics of sexuality in the 1960s and beyond found their sources in three traditions outside of the religious and cultural mainstream. The first was Eastern spirituality, particularly from India. The second was modern Western Esotericism, with its rich traditions of sacred sexuality and sexual magic, of which Pascal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875) and the OTO are just two among many examples (see Hanegraaff and Kripal 2008).

Modernist art as a third source should not be overlooked. It included a reservoir of subversive sexual images. It is quite significant that psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), who was instrumental in defining the new aesthetics, became the owner of *L'origine du monde* (now at Musée d'Orsay, Paris), painted by Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) in 1866 and featuring a close-up view of the genitals of a naked woman (Lloyd 2016). Drawing on Eastern spiritualities, Western esotericism, and modernist art, the revolution of the 1960s built a radical aesthetics, where the boundaries between art, religion, everyday life, and sexuality started to collapse.

This revolution generated reactionary counter-movements, led by two strange bedfellows, both with a vested interest in maintaining the boundaries. Mainstream churches saw the writing on the wall and perceived, as social historians such as Callum Brown and Hugh McLeod would later note, that the new aesthetics and sexuality would call their role into question and eventually reduce church membership and attendance (Brown 2003; McLeod 2010). Defenders of secularism, including Marxists, resented that everyday life, culture, art, and sexuality were not socially constructed in purely secular terms but increasingly invested with spiritual (although “alternative” and unorthodox) meanings.

MISA's worldview may be defined as radical aesthetics, based on the very sources of the aesthetics revolution of the 1960s: Eastern spiritualities (particularly Tantrism), Western esotericism, and a certain tradition in modernist art (interpreted selectively). MISA's new aesthetic was derived from multiple sources. There is, however, little doubt that a tantric form of yoga, mainly derived from Siddha Yoga of Tamil Nadu and Tantric Shivaism of Kashmir is at the center of the movement's spiritual proposal.

Tantrism is based on the correspondence between divine macrocosm and human microcosm. To channel the divine energy into the earthly plane, it uses a variety of techniques. Quite irrespectively from the philological question whether MISA's reinterpretation of Tantra is faithful to its Indian sources, what is important here is that Tantra is used as a tool for collapsing the boundaries between religion, art, and daily life. Microcosmic realities are regarded as a resource rather than as an obstacle for spirituality. These realities include sexuality and the human body, but also the visual arts, music, dance, geometrical forms, colors, certain foods, and dreams.

Faithful to its Tantric roots, MISA promotes what it calls “objective” art as yet another way of channeling divine energies through microcosmic material elements such as forms and colors. MISA also promotes music, dance and theater. According to Mihai Stoian, one of MISA’s leading yoga teachers, art is a direct method to awaken the soul (Stoian n.d.). True art comes from awareness and generates transformation by expressing general laws. Stoian teaches that art works through resonance, i.e. transmission of vibrations from the source to the receiver. For resonance to work, there is, however, a condition: a certain resemblance between the source and the receiver. Symmetrical figures are particularly easy to “resemble.” Artists connected with MISA such as Ines Honfi often produce yantras, i.e. Tantric diagrams with certain proportions and colors (see her Web site at www.ineshonfi.com). They believe we resonate easily with these works of art and our mind slowly takes the shape of yantra in meditation.

Subjective art for MISA is an expression of the ego and communicates an unimportant “point of view,” no more interesting than a CV or passport. Objective art comes from divine consciousness. The higher the level of consciousness, the better the art. Subjective art is horizontal. Objective art is vertical and becomes a form of initiation. But initiated art can be produced only by initiated artists and audiences also need to be educated to be receptive to initiation. MISA indicates that art is a part of the yoga teaching, because without art we would remain “people who know” rather than becoming “people who are” (Stoian n.d.).

Technique is important but consciousness is more important. Stoian explains that the Russian painter and esoteric teacher Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) was probably less technically gifted than other artists, yet his work generate high resonance because of his high level of consciousness. Stoian adds that people genuinely in love, whose level of consciousness is high, may become “temporary artists” quite independently from their technical skills. Professional artists need yoga training too. MISA claims that, if an artist is not evolving, he or she will not keep the same level of consciousness and, after a first success, the next works will become repetitious or not of the same level. Stoian gives the example of the less successful sequels of Michael Flatley’s famous dance show *Lord of the Dance* (Stoian n.d.).

MISA’s radical aesthetics also includes a practical aspect. MISA leading teacher Nicolae Catrina developed a “Yoga of Beauty” as a path to enlightenment

through the contemplation of beauty. All genuine (objective) art can serve as the starting point for the Yoga of Beauty, whether it is explicitly “esoteric” or not. Catrina, whom I interviewed in October 2016, also emphasized the importance of collective contemplation of art. When a group of initiates contemplate a work of art in a state of unison, each individual aesthetic experience is mirrored in the consciousness of all the others, generating a new field of global energy.

Those who participated in MISA camps report (based on multiple interviews from 2014 to 2017) the intense emotional experiences they derive from both the public rituals and the smaller daily rituals they learn to perform in their daily life. It is a new gaze on life, which by no means is limited to sexuality but certainly includes a relationship with the body and nudity some may regard as subversive. What for some is a problem derives, again, from undefined boundaries. We can look at certain images on MISA’s Web sites and ask whether they are artistic performances, spiritual rituals, or celebrations of the human body. From MISA’s point of view, they are all these three things together, as there is no separation between daily life, art, and spirituality.

MISA’s radical aesthetics extend to the erotic field. As discussed in one of the articles included in this issue, director Carmen Enache, a member of MISA, produced several erotic movies. Some of them found their way to adult portals, while others, including the more recent *Continuamente amando*, cannot be regarded as pornographic in any sensible meaning of the word. Enache, whom I interviewed repeatedly in 2017, insists, however, that even her early, sexually explicit productions were part of sacred eroticism and “objective art.” Unlike common adult movies, they taught Tantric practices such as continence, i.e. orgasm without emission of semen, and other forms of sexual magic, including some centered on the ritual use of urine.

Members of MISA have also created a project including theater, photography, and a Web site called Extasia (www.artextasia.com). This has also been presented at international erotic festivals and salons but, when one reads all the material, it becomes clear that the center of the project is a very explicit denunciation of the separation of body and spirit, and of eroticism and spirituality, as a dramatic “wound” that needs to be healed, allowing women to get in touch again with their “inner goddess.”

Critics call MISA’s erotic productions simply pornographic and obscene. Obviously, the difference is not always easy to tell, but MISA insists that objective

criteria exist. While legitimate erotic art celebrates the beauty of the body and sexuality, “obscene art” shows the disgusting and the revolting. In some articles, MISA suggest that there is a connection between obscene or lower forms of art and concepts promoted by the Illuminati and Freemasonry, which the movement regards as sinister groups working today against spirituality (“Incredibil, profund revoltător, dar adevărat: Iată care este ‘arta’ abjectă pe care o promovează francmasonii!” n.d.)

We hope to correct with this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* two deformed views often repeated in the media. The first is that MISA as a movement produces erotic artifacts, including photographs and movies. These are, more precisely, initiatives of students (some of them, admittedly, prominent in the movement), who express MISA’s worldview in different individual ways. The second is that sexuality is the main subject of MISA’s courses. In fact, courses on sexuality represent a very small percentage of MISA’s total activities, teachings, and publications. MISA’s complete curriculum includes 2,100 courses, of which less than 100 refer to sexuality. Even the Tantra curriculum includes 600 courses, of which some 70 refer to sexuality, intimacy, or couple relationships.

Its radical aesthetics is a key for understanding reactions against MISA, culminating in the repeated incarcerations of its founder. One of the main arguments of counter-movements against “cults” has always been that “cults” are sexually deviant. MISA’s celebration of body, eroticism, nudity, and sexuality is rhetorically separated from its tantric roots and context, and used as an allegedly typical example of “cultic sexual abuse.”

MISA’s doctrines about sexuality, however, are only part of the story. Its radical aesthetics and transgression of the boundaries between religion and daily life (included, but not limited to, sexuality), generated a reaction by those interested in reaffirming these boundaries. In Romania, one component was the very conservative local Orthodox Church. Another leading role in counter-movements against MISA was, however, played by the Communist Party, which reacted very early against Bivolaru, and its post-1989 relics in Romania, secular media, and secular international movements hostile to “cults.” For them, collapsing the boundaries between religion, culture, daily life, and sexuality was a sin not against the Christian view of religion and morality but against secularism.

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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 Asprem, Charlotte Ward, and David Voas—on both conspiracy culture and esoteric discourse (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015), in which the point of departure is the term “conspiratoriness,” (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 “conspiratoriality” 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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MISA, the Anti-Cult Movement and the Courts: The Legal Repression of an Esoteric Movement

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents the legal controversies that accompanied the history of MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), the legal cases regarding its founder, Gregorian Bivolaru, and their repercussions for the MISA movement as a whole. From Communist to post-Communist Romania, Bivolaru was repeatedly arrested and convicted and his teachings, on yoga and sexuality, often created suspicions of immorality and abuse. He was granted political asylum in Sweden in 2006, but arrested again in France upon a request by Romanian authorities in 2016, and extradited to Romania. The article raises the question of how an anti-esoteric prejudice may have influenced MISA legal cases and their outcome. In this respect, the paper examines three possible explanations of the extreme anti-MISA feelings prevailing among sectors of the Romanian police and media, related respectively to the Romanian context, the campaigns against “cults,” and esotericism.

KEYWORDS: Anti-cult Movement, Anti-esotericism, Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, MISA, Gregorian Bivolaru, Freemasonry, Mediabolization.

Introduction

On December 7, 2012, the main Italian wire agency ANSA reported that a dangerous Romanian group was being investigated by the police for “violent sex, esotericism, and yoga” (ANSA 2012). Several Italian daily newspapers reprinted the news without comments (e.g. *La Nazione* 2012) and without asking themselves whether “violent sex” (whatever it might be), “esotericism” and “yoga” were indeed crimes worthy of a police investigation.

The incident may appear as trivial, but is not unimportant. It confirms both that groups labeled as “cults” are discussed in the media in a cavalier way, without any serious effort of fact-checking, and that “esotericism,” at least for some reporters,

is a word as bad as “cult,” and conjures the image of something mysterious and sinister, perhaps indeed associated with “violent sex.” Human Rights Without Frontiers International, in a report about the MISA case, named this process of victimization by the media “mediabolization” (Human Rights Without Frontiers International 2013).

The interest of the MISA case, in this respect, lies in the fact that it is not an isolated incident. Other groups labeled as “cults” experienced similar legal problems, particularly when their discourses and practices involved the delicate sphere of sexuality. The early legal saga of the Children of God, which later changed their name into The Family, included incidents in several different countries and is well-known to scholars of new religious movements (Lewis and Melton 1994).

Bivolaru and the Communist Regime

Gregorian Bivolaru, the founder of MISA, faced legal problems since his early career as a yoga teacher. During the Stalinist and immediate post-Stalinist decades, from the late 1940s to the 1960s, all yoga practice was banned in Romania. In the 1970s, it became possible to open yoga centres, although they were closely supervised by the Securitate (the political police). However, as it is typical of non-democratic governments, there were sudden and largely unpredictable changes. Yoga was regarded alternatively as an inoffensive physical exercise or something dangerous for the regime. Bivolaru was also suspected, wrongly, of being the Romanian leader of Transcendental Meditation (see Andreescu 2013a).

In 1984, he was arrested and accused by the regime of possessing and spreading pornographic materials, practicing a job without the proper license, and escaping from prison. He was subsequently released but was taken again to the Securitate offices for criminal investigation in 1986. Finally, in 1989, he was confined in the psychiatric hospital of Poiana Mare. Post-communist Romania allows those sentenced by the Ceausescu regime to obtain from the courts a declaration that their convictions were of a political nature. Bivolaru applied for such a declaration in 2010 and obtained it in 2011 (see Andreescu 2013a; 2013b).

Anti-cult Campaigns against MISA and the 2004 Raid

After the establishment of MISA, almost immediately, the Romanian media attacked Bivolaru as part of their campaigns against “cults.” Opposition to “cults” by media and the intelligence services in Romania survived Communism. Additionally, the old personnel of Ceausescu’s years often maintained its positions. In a detailed study of the cases against MISA, Romanian scholar Gabriel Andreescu noted that the prosecutor who had sent Bivolaru to the psychiatric hospital in 1989, Vasile Manea Drăgulin, became the General Prosecutor of Romania after the fall of communism, and remained in this position between 1993 and 1996 (Andreescu 2016b).

MISA was particularly targeted because of its attitude towards sexuality, and Bivolaru was referred to as “the sex guru” in the media. Throughout Romania, MISA yoga sessions were interrupted, yoga practitioners were interrogated by the police, and some were fired from their jobs. Andreescu’s meticulous survey of archival documents evidences that Romanian intelligence kept MISA under surveillance since 1997, claiming it was a threat to national security (Andreescu 2005; 2007; 2008; 2013a; 2013b; 2016).

Official and media hostility to MISA culminated in the raids of March 18, 2004, nicknamed by the Romanian police “Operation Christ.” Gendarmes and military of the special forces, masked and armed with machine guns and Makarov pistols, accompanied by prosecutors and TV cameramen, smashed the doors and entered 16 MISA ashrams throughout Romania simultaneously at 7 a.m. The main TV channels echoed the official press release, announcing that “today at 7:00 a.m., police conducted the largest operation against drugs and human trafficking in the history of post-Revolution Romania.” Drugs, by the way, had nothing to do with the MISA case. No drugs were found, nor were charges for drug trafficking filed (Andreescu 2013a; 2013b; 2016).

Susan Palmer and Stuart Wright in their book *Storming Zion* discuss raids against groups labeled as “cults” in various countries (Palmer and Wright 2016). What happened in 2004 in the MISA case in Romania corresponds to the general pattern noted by Palmer and Wright. Raids were invariably carried out by a disproportionate number of heavily armed police and military in the early hours of the morning, not so much because the “cults” were regarded as dangerous but for the benefit of the invited reporters and cameramen. Most raids had meager results

in terms of collecting evidence against the “cults,” but that was not their main purpose. Raids are best interpreted as a sort of baroque theater, serving a purpose similar to public executions in other centuries. With their display of special forces and machine guns, all paraded in front of the cameras, the authorities mounted a sideshow with a pedagogical purpose. Powerful forces hostile to “cults,” including the Orthodox Church, were reassured, and those attracted to alternative spiritualities were intimidated by a powerful public statement that “cults” would not be tolerated and would be punished.

As usual in similar cases, the 2004 raid did not find much of significance for prosecuting MISA. In fact, attempts at prosecuting MISA students in subsequent years invariably failed. With one exception: among those taken to the police for interrogation in 2004 was 17-year old M.D. Submitted to prolonged interrogations (and, later, also to a forced gynecological examination) the young girl ended up admitting that Bivolaru had sex with her. Once released from the custody of the police, M.D. immediately recanted and claimed in several interviews with the media that her “confession” had been extorted under duress. It is also important to note that the legal age of consent for sexual relationships in Romania is 15. The law, however, incriminates teachers who have sex with their students. Prosecutors constructed the relation between M.D. and Bivolaru as one between student and teacher, although both denied that this was the case (Andreescu 2013b; Andreescu 2016).

Bivolaru was arrested, at first for illegal crossing of the border (even if he was not under any interdiction of crossing the border), and charged with seven different crimes, including human trafficking (based on the charge that members of MISA worked for the movement without an adequate salary), trafficking of minors, and sexual relationships with different minors, including M.D.

The legal aftermath of the 2004 raid took place in seven different jurisdictions: Romania, Sweden, France, Italy, Uruguay, Finland, and the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Post-2004 Developments

In Romania, the prosecutor’s case against Bivolaru with respect of the alleged sexual improprieties quickly collapsed, and he was found not guilty both in first

degree and on appeal. The prosecutor, however, appealed to the Supreme Court, which on June 14, 2013 reversed the first and second degree verdicts with respect only to the alleged sexual relationship with M.D. For this offense, Bivolaru received an unusually heavy six-year jail sentence (Andreescu 2016; Introvigne 2017).

Bivolaru, however, was not in Romania in 2013. Freed from jail while awaiting trial, in 2005 he had decided to flee his native country and escape to Sweden, where he was arrested again following a request from the Romanian authorities. However, the Swedish Supreme Court in December 2005 rejected a Romanian request from extradition and ordered the immediate release of Bivolaru, believing that his prosecution was politically motivated. In 2006, Bivolaru obtained the status of political refugee in Sweden.

In 2016 Bivolaru was arrested while he was traveling in France, a country not particularly friendly to “cults,” after Romania had obtained his inclusion in the list of Europol’s most wanted fugitives. On Europol’s Web site Bivolaru was described by Romanian authorities as guilty of “sexual exploitation of minors and child pornography,” while in fact he was sentenced in 2013 only for the alleged sexual relationship with M.D. A legal battle for extradition followed, and French authorities decided in first degree and appeal that Bivolaru should be extradited to Romania, notwithstanding his status of political refugee in Sweden. On July 22, 2016 Bivolaru was extradited to Romania because the French judges believed that a sexual relationship between a minor student and a teacher, even if it allegedly happened more than twelve years before their decision, was a particularly serious crime, which caused such a widespread social outcry that legal technicalities might be disregarded.

When the French judges rendered their decision, nobody knew that Emmanuel Macron would become president of France. By the same logic, his wife Brigitte, the current French first lady, should be prosecuted as well, since she started her relationship with the future president when he was 15 and she was his high school teacher.

In addition to serving his 2013 sentence, Bivolaru was investigated in his home country for his escape from Romania in 2005. In turn, Bivolaru applied for a revision of the Supreme Court decision of 2013 in the M.D. case, based on the fact that the Court initially agreed to hear him in Sweden through rogatory commission, then issued its decision without waiting for Sweden to allow him to

be interrogated (Introvigne 2017). Bivolaru's application was rejected in 2017, and his lawyers have brought the case before the Constitutional Court of Romania, where it is pending at the date of this writing.

The Romanian police also kept feeding information, both directly and through the international network of anti-cult movements (Besier and Seiwert 2012), to authorities in other countries where MISA is active. Italy, for example, thanks to the lobbying of anti-cult movements, established in 2006 a curious police branch, the Anti-Cult Squad (Squadra Anti-Sette, SAS) which achieved very limited results (see Introvigne 2016). However, at the dawn of 6 December 2012, SAS raided MISA, while media promoted a very violent campaign. The police broke into the private houses of 25 Italian citizens and foreign residents in Italy, some of them students of MISA, while others were just relatives and friends. Hundreds of documents were seized, including yoga courses materials, computers, cell phones, videos, and personal journals. The decree authorizing the seizure mentioned possible crimes of criminal conspiracy, prostitution, pornography, enslavement, and sexual violence. Until now, no evidence of these crimes has emerged, although 18 persons are still being investigated (Introvigne 2017).

The international anti-cult network has tried to attack MISA-related organizations in several other countries, including Finland and Uruguay. In Uruguay, MISA has been targeted by SEAS (Servicio de Estudios y Asesoramiento en Sectas y Nuevos Movimientos Religiosos), a Catholic anti-cult organization, which has tried to involve the authorities and to interfere with the good relationship existing between the local MISA sister organization, directed by the Romanian yoga teacher Octav Fercheluc, and local universities. Psychologist Alvaro Díaz Farías emerged as the most vocal anti-MISA activist and also tried to interfere with the shooting in Argentina of a movie by MISA-affiliated director Carmen Enache (Farías 2015).

Finally, MISA students who believed they had been abused during the 2004 raid took their case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. Before their case was decided, ECHR had already rendered a decision favorable to a student of MISA, Dana Ruxandra Atudorei, who at the age of 19 had been forcibly interned in a psychiatric asylum because of her participation in the movement's activities. On September 16, 2014, in the case *Atudorei v. Romania*, ECHR decided that her human rights had been violated

(ECHR 2014). This was a prelude to the landmark ECHR decision *Amarandei and Others v. Romania* of 26 April 2016, where 26 members of MISA who had been mistreated in the 2004 raid obtained € 291,000 in damages from the Romanian government (ECHR 2016). Finally, on February 28, 2017, in the decision *Bivolaru vs. Romania*, ECHR ordered Romania to pay Bivolaru Euro 6,980 for having been illegally detained in 2004 (ECHR 2017).

These decisions are very important, since they stated that the raid was based on insufficient evidence and that the excessive use of physical and psychological violence had violated the complainants' human rights and dignity. The 2016 decision implicitly called into question the whole system of spectacular raids against the "cults," the more so because it came after a verdict rendered on 11 February 2015 by the Court of Cluj, exonerating 21 MISA members, including Bivolaru, from charges of human trafficking. The Court of Cluj described the 2004 raid as "barbaric" and identified its true aim: "to close this yoga school by discouraging its members to exercise their freedom of conscience" (Andreescu 2016; Introvigne 2017).

On October 5, 2016, however, with Bivolaru in jail after the extradition, the Court of Appeal of Cluj quashed the 2015 verdict and ordered his retrial for human trafficking. Trying him for crimes different from those for which he was extradited from France is, however, not coherent with international provisions governing extradition. Romanian authorities have asked France to expand its original 2016 order for extradition, and France has so far answered by requesting additional documents. In the meantime, Romania sent a strong signal to any future judge of the human trafficking case by prosecuting the judge who acquitted Bivolaru, Ariana Lăcrămioara Ilieș, before the Supreme Council of the Judiciary, for alleged negligence in the case (documents in the collection of the author).

Other religious and spiritual groups follow with concern the accusations of human trafficking, as they revolve around work performed on behalf of a spiritual institution allegedly without an adequate salary, an accusation that would be easy to direct against many religious communities.

Both the Court of Cluj, i.e. a Romanian court, and the European Court of Human Rights argued that the Romanian police and prosecutors went to extraordinary and unusual lengths to try to wipe MISA out of existence, violating the freedom of conscience, the freedom of religion, and the human rights of the

yoga students in the process. Applying principles of Romanian law, and perhaps also because of international criticism based on human rights concerns, Romanian authorities conditionally released Bivolaru from jail in September 2017, considering his age and the fact that he had already served a third of his sentence. He moved again to Sweden, where at the time of this writing he is fighting a new request for preventive arrest, this time coming from Finland, which started investigating the alleged abuse of a Finnish student by Bivolaru (which reportedly occurred outside of Finland) after two sensationalist documentaries against MISA were aired by the TV network MOT in 2009 and 2013. Clearly, MISA has opponents whose fury against Bivolaru continues unabated.

The Romanian Context

How can we explain this obstinacy? Of course, a first explanation could be that Bivolaru is in fact a sexual pervert, and that MISA, under the guise of spirituality and esotericism, traffics in human beings, including minors, who are sexually exploited by the leaders, and photographed and filmed in various stages of nudity. However, decades of police and judicial investigations of MISA in various countries, and thousands of pages filled by prosecutors, produced only one final decision against a MISA member, the one finding the leader, Bivolaru, guilty of one single crime, the presumed sexual relationship with M.D. Even in this case, however, a detailed investigation undertaken by the Swedish Supreme Court, during the proceedings that granted Bivolaru the status of a political refugee, concluded that the charges were trumped up and the decision against MISA's founder was grossly unfair. Clearly, further explanations are needed.

I would suggest three possible explanations of the extreme anti-MISA feelings prevailing among sectors of the Romanian police and media, related respectively to the Romanian context, the campaigns against “cults,” and esotericism.

There are two elements peculiar to the Romanian context worth mentioning. The first is the role of the Orthodox Church and the alliance between that Church and parts of the Romanian political and administrative establishment. Raids and prosecutions, such as the one against Bivolaru, are “show trials” ritually celebrating this alliance and warning that only a modicum degree of deviation from the moral and cultural standards agreed upon by the Church and a non-neutral State would be tolerated. The expression “show trials” is of course

reminiscent of the trial of the Stalinist period. The second element to be considered in the Romanian context is, in fact, post-Communism and the presence of persons who were still there in the Ceausescu years in the judiciary, the police, and the media. The role of the media is very important. They are part and parcel of a system that fixes quite strict symbolic boundaries, which should not be transgressed. Transgression has as its consequence immediate punishment, in the shape of media campaigns, raids, and incarceration.

The second explanation concerns the campaigns against the “cults.” In 2016 Eugene V. Gallagher edited a volume, *The Cult Wars*, where he concluded that these wars were slowly becoming a thing of the past (Gallagher 2016). In the 21st century, Islamic radicalism is regarded as a more serious threat than “cults” and myths about brainwashing and mind control have been largely debunked by academic scholars. Gallagher’s thesis, however, should be qualified geographically. In the United States, the cult wars both started and finished earlier. They continued in Western Europe when they had become marginal in the U.S. While in countries like Italy or France certainly they did not disappear, they somewhat lost momentum and financial resources, that the governments were now devoting to combating Islamic extremism rather than “cults.” However, just as it appeared in Western Europe some years after the United States, anti-cultism became fashionable only recently in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Romania is different from Italy or France in this respect. There are no relevant organized anti-cult movements. Yet, the anti-cult ideology is spread directly by segments of the State and by the Orthodox Church.

Finally, MISA is not any “cult.” It is an esoteric movement. Wouter Hanegraaff, in his 2012 book *Esotericism and the Academy*, proposed a history of cultural movements that marginalized esotericism, from Protestantism to the Enlightenment to contemporary progressive culture that regards esotericism as reactionary and often connected with right-wing political movements (Hanegraaff 2012). The attack on MISA shows a combination of different elements. Romanian society is undergoing a difficult process of modernization, complicated by a demographic, economic, and social crisis. The saga of MISA confirms that it has not completely come to terms with its Communist past. There are, of course, competing projects for governing this transition. The Orthodox Church believes to be able to maintain its traditional role through an alliance with the State. In turn, the State mediates between different notions of rationality, science, and

progress, and different forces. Few of them seem to welcome the ambitious project of MISA, a very visible group that does not accept to remain marginal and offers remedies to the Romanian crisis based on an esoteric vision of knowledge, the body, and sexuality, and the ancient wisdom of tantric yoga.

It is interesting, considering the subject of this paper, to conclude by reporting an emic explanation circulating within MISA about what is going on. Many members of MISA believe that Bivolaru has offended not only anti-cultists and the Orthodox Church, but also certain branches of Romanian and international Freemasonry, due to his sustained campaign against Freemasonry as the dark side of esotericism and spirituality. In his books, Bivolaru consistently exposes Freemasonry as the source of the Western World's contemporary decadence and a number of evils (Bivolaru 1996). Students of MISA are currently preparing a documentary noting the importance of Jacques de Molay (1243–1314), the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar, for the main Masonic organizations. De Molay was burned at stake on March 18, 1314. The raid against the MISA centers in Romania, which was the beginning of the whole international judicial prosecution, nicknamed “Operation Christ” (in itself an unusual name in a Christian country), took place on March 18, 2004 (Stoian 2013). The extradition hearing of Bivolaru in France took place on March 18, 2016, in a court located in the same Île de la Cité in Paris where de Molay was burned at stake on March 18, 1314. In both cases, students of MISA claim, the police and judicial activities were slightly delayed at the last minute, as if somebody was interested in having them exactly on March 18 (see Introvigne 2017). Sometimes, such coincidences are significant. Sometimes, obviously, they are just coincidences. But the whole story adds further spice to an intricate web of relationships between the law, the anti-cult movements, and esotericism, which is perhaps unique in the recent history of anti-esoteric controversies.

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Sex, Erotic Art, and the Repression of Alternative Movements: The Strange Case of an Esoteric Movie Director

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ABSTRACT: Students of MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, produced in the early 2000s several adult movies, some of them featuring female urination, which offered ammunition to critics calling for police action against what they considered a “pornographic cult.” Carmen Enache, under the pseudonym Bella Maestrina, directed most of these movies. After the 2004 police raid against MISA in Romania, the production of these movies ceased, although Enache still organized erotic theatrical shows and in the following decade started directing a new kind of movies under the pseudonym Aghora Vidya. The movies and shows do not appear to have generated significant income, nor did MISA use them as a recruitment tool. Based on interviews with Enache and others involved in the movies, the article concludes that presenting a Tantric approach to sexuality to consumers of pornography was not a purely utilitarian enterprise, and those MISA students who participated in it also had specifically esoteric motivations.

KEYWORDS: Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, MISA, Gregorian Bivolaru, Tantra, Siddha Yoga, Carmen Enache, Pornography Studies, Sacred Eroticism.

A Sensational Affair

Ecstasy Water, a 2003 feature movie categorized as “adult” and featuring “pee games” (female urination), gathered more than 280,000 Internet views in the last few years according to the specialized Web site xvideos.com. This was not unusual: in July 2017, the largest world pornographic portal, youporn.com, was offering more than 1,700 movies featuring women caught in the act of urinating, evidencing that a large audience existed for such films.

More unusual about *Ecstasy Water* (which was pirated and distributed illegally) was the fact that the director and some actors belonged to an esoteric

movement and claimed that the movie's aim was to spread esoteric teachings. MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA) founded by Romanian yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru, teaches a tantric form of yoga, mainly derived from Siddha Yoga of Tamil Nadu. Although reducing MISA's teachings to a collection of recipes about sexuality would be wrong, there is little doubt that the activities of some MISA members (commonly called "students" in the movement) in the field of adult movies and erotic shows attracted considerable negative attention, and became a main argument for anti-cultists claiming that authorities should take action against the Romanian group.

The article discusses the categories introduced by the growing academic literature of "porn studies," and applies them to the career of Carmen Enache, a MISA student who directed several erotic movies based on Bivolaru's teachings, including *Ecstasy Water*. In its final part, the article asks the question why exactly some MISA students got involved in movies and shows that offered easy ammunitions to the movement's critics.

Porn and the Academy

In 1989, with her seminal book *Hard Core*, Linda Williams inaugurated a school of academic studies on pornographic and erotic movies (Williams 1989). Although often maligned and criticized, "porn studies" have matured into an established branch of popular culture studies, with hundreds of courses taught each year in universities throughout the world (see Williams 2004a).

In 1993, I introduced the distinction between religious ("counter-cult") and secular ("anti-cult") militant critics of new religious and esoteric movements (Introvigne 1993), now widely used. Similarly, a "counter-porn" movement (my terminology) opposed pornography for moral and religious reasons, and an "anti-porn" movement, dominated by feminists, because it was offensive to women. Representative of the second approach was feminist Robin Morgan, who launched the slogan "Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice" (Morgan 1980, 139).

Anti-cultists labeled those scholars who studied new religious movements (NRMs) with a value-free approach as "cult apologists." The anti-porn movement similarly labeled porn studies scholars as "apologists" for pornography. In fact, just as scholars of NRMs never denied that some religious groups commit crimes,

porn studies scholars such as Williams (a feminist herself) never denied that pornography *does* have certain harmful effects (see Williams 1989; Williams 2004).

The majority of adult Americans, men *and* women, watch at least occasionally porn movies: “porn doesn’t have a demography—it goes across all demographics” (Rich 2001, 52). Porn studies scholars argue that pornographic materials have become “fully recognizable fixtures of popular culture” (Williams 2004b, 1) and should be studied as a “cultural form” (Williams 2004b, 5) in its history, content, and evolution into a cluster of different subgenres

Williams and others also demonstrated that more than one third of pornography consumers are women, a situation that had already developed in the late 1980s, (Williams 1989, 164–165). Women have also increasingly emerged as successful directors of porn movies (Williams 2004b, 2), thus making obsolete the claim that porn is merely a “male gaze” on women.

According to Williams, porn conceptualizes sex as a *problem* that should be solved (Williams 1989, 228). However, even when porn movies are directed by women, sex is presented there as a problem *for the woman*, who should learn how to enjoy it. The limit of porn is that sex is never a problem *for the man*. Men are always performing and enjoying (Williams 1989, 153–183). In his early, widely usual manual *The Film Maker’s Guide to Pornography*, Stephen Ziplow simply stated that “if you don’t have the come shots [i.e. scenes depicting ejaculation], you don’t have a porno picture” (Ziplow 1977, 34).

Williams and other porn studies scholars noted that the “solution” for the “problem” of female pleasure offered by porn was somewhat primitive: “more more more,” both in quantity and variety of intercourses (William 1989, 239; Gerli 2004, 201), according to the line who made famous porn star Marylin Chambers (1952–2009), although it was her one-time colleague Andrea True (1943–2011) who made it into a hit song. Porn studies in the Williams tradition reject distinctions between a “good” eroticism and a “bad” pornography (Williams 1989, 6). They consider the notion of pornography as socially constructed and continually renegotiated, as what was once “obscene” (confined *out of the scene*) gradually becomes “on/scene” (i.e. the subject matter of legitimate representation) (Williams 1989, 332).

Quite apart from anti-porn crusaders, the mainstream of porn studies is criticized by those who follow the analysis of pornography by French postmodernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007). For Baudrillard, pornography is a “travesty of sex,” a capitalist-consumerist serialized “representation of a representation,” unable to reflect the real sexuality or to say anything significant about it (Baudrillard 1997, 146). Williams and other porn studies scholars answered that Baudrillard and others fail to recognize the differences between thousands of adult movies, which are very different from each other (Melendez 2004). Williams, however, admitted that the limit of pornography has largely been the incapacity to include “journeys to the male other” and to problematize “masculine desire and pleasure” (Williams 1989, 279).

The Story of Carmen Enache

As told to me in interviews in April 2017, the story of Carmen Enache (b. 1956) started in Communist Romania. She was trained as a theatre actress and a ballet dancer, and organized shows with puppets. In the last years of the regime, while pornography became widespread around young people, Enache and others also dared experimenting in theatres with eroticism and nudity. Almost concomitantly with the fall of the Romanian Communist regime, Enache joined MISA.

Enache has no formal education as a movie director. Noting the prevalence of porn in post-Communist Eastern Europe, she reports that she decided to “play the game” and offer “an alternative to pornography” by entering herself the world of adult movies. She claims that in the first “experimental” movies, “the esoteric content was limited to observing, recording, and studying the different states of consciousness during a sexual act and an orgasm.” By the early 2000s, Enache, under the pseudonym of “Bella Maestrina,” was ready to produce movies with titles such as *The Secrets of Seduction* and *My Hot Secrets*.

Both Enache and MISA insist that the movies were her private venture with some friends, an MISA as a movement was never involved. Several friends who were also MISA members collaborated with Enache, including one of the movement’s leaders, Mihai Stoian, who starred in some of the movies under the pseudonym of Paul Diamond (and also accepted to be interviewed for this article).

It is also clear that the movies embody the ideas of Enache's spiritual master, i.e. Bivolaru. "I must say, Enache stated about *Ecstasy Water II*, that the script enticed me a lot. It was written after the ideas of a Tantric master whose life principles I embrace. It was a challenge for me when he said: 'You don't think that Tantric teachings about sexual continence and pee games have extraordinary results? Well, you don't have to believe me. Just verify and experiment them yourself, and we'll talk later'" (*The Making of Ecstasy Water II* 2003).

Enache was among those prosecuted after the 2004 raid against MISA. She was accused inter alia of showing in her movies clips featuring MISA members realized during the movement's summer camps, including in the "Miss Shakti" events, and not intended for public distribution. Romanian police and courts, as Bivolaru's legal history shows and the European Court of Human Rights confirmed more than once, are extremely prejudiced against MISA (European Court of Human Rights 2014; European Court of Human Rights 2016; European Court of Human Rights 2017). However, Enache was finally acquitted of all charges.

After 2004, movies directed by Enache started appearing in dozens of movies sale and rental businesses and adult Internet portals, sometimes including clips Enache claimed (and the movies' original distributor confirmed: see Nicola 2008, which includes audio recordings of conversations with the distributor) were not part of the original versions but came from additional material offered to the distributor by third parties not connected with MISA. According to Stoian, this was part of the material seized by the Romanian police in the 2004 raid, the implication being that somewhat it illegally found its way from the police archives to companies distributing adult movies. While somebody's motivation might have been to discredit MISA, the illegal reproduction of films in breach of copyright for purely economic motives is common in the world of adult movies.

Interesting as the story of the (largely illegal) distribution of Enache's early movies may be, a content analysis is more important for our purposes. I would focus on the most popular films of her first period, *Ecstasy Water I* and *II*, both of 2003. Their abundant showing of male and female private parts, scenes of fellatio, and women kissing and caressing each other, seem to place the movies firmly in the most classic adult category. There were, however, peculiarities, and "ecstasy water," a word commonly indicating urine and "pee games," was expanded as a larger concept.

“I discovered, the main character of *Ecstasy Water* states, that some secret groups of ancient India cured many diseases, regained youth, and obtained psychic powers by using urine. The Tantric priestesses taught men to preserve their erotic energy and not to waste it through ejaculation.” This statement announces the key themes of both *Ecstasy Water I* and *Ecstasy Water II*. While porn movie manuals insisted that without showing ejaculation “you don’t have a porno picture” (Ziplow 1977, 34), the *Ecstasy Water* movies claim that “continence,” i.e. sex *without ejaculation*, is the key to ecstasy and enlightenment, a core teaching of MISA.

In the tradition of the Tantric *Damar Tantra*, the movies insist on the magic power of assimilating (through anointing or drinking) urine (*Damar Tantra* n.d.) and other bodily fluids (including tears). “Sacred water” is also connected with astrology, and the main male character drinks the urine of twelve women, each with a different astrological sign. Enache claims that in fact each actress was born under the appropriate zodiacal sign, and that the movie was, from that point of view, “realistic.”

According to MISA’s reading of *Damar Tantra*, continence, the practice of yoga, and a vegetarian diet amplify the quality of urine and other bodily fluids. By drinking one’s own urine, Enache explains, you amplify your own qualities, but by drinking somebody else’s urine, you assimilate his or her qualities. The result is “growth of one’s specific zodiac” and transfiguration.

To explain how “sacred water” works, Enache gives the example of the Ganges River, whose water is filthy yet does not contaminate the devotees who bath in it. Ganges’ water, Enache explains, is “continuously transfigured” by the prayers of priests and ascetics, just as the sacred waters in the body of the initiates are transfigured by yoga and continence.

Enache’s early movies, notwithstanding titles designed to appeal to specific segments of the adult market, such as *Exaltation of Pee* or *To Pee or Not to Pee for Ecstasy*, exhibited three unique features. First although there were male characters, there were no ejaculations, either simulated or real. Second, male characters were rarely mere “stallions” and they had their own sexual problems to solve. Third, perhaps to the annoyance of the average porn viewer, between one and another sexual number, rather than the tenuous narrative usual in adult movies, lengthy esoteric explanations were included.

Enache 2.0: From Continuamente Amando to Las Caras de la Diosa

After the police raid of 2004, Enache's production of movies with adult content slowed down and ceased, while MISA's opponents and tabloid media shifted their rhetoric from calling the group a "paramilitary organization" to labeling it "the cult of porno yoga." MISA, however, continued to teach among other things "sacred eroticism," and theatrical and other erotic shows never really ceased.

In 2011, while teaching yoga in Argentina, Enache started experimenting with a new kind of movies that, while dealing with eroticism, were not technically adult movies. Although local anti-cultists tried to prevent the shooting of the movie, this finally led to *Continuamente Amando*, which premiered in 2015.

Enache (who now signed Aghora Vidya) transformed a screenplay by a former pupil, a horror story about two sisters, into something completely different. Guided by the journal of her missing sister, Almira (played by Argentinian model and MISA student Maria Noelia Falco), whose own relationship with a stage magician (played by Noelia's real-life lover, in fact a stage magician) is in crisis, discovers a mysterious community where both she and, later, her lover, are initiated into the mysteries of sexual continence and ecstasy.

The community where Almira is initiated exists outside space and time. Its atemporality is symbolically represented by retro cars and clothing from the 1950s, and it disappears at the end of the movie. In parallel with this subtle world, another action is taking place on the physical plane, where the spiritual community is attacked by the mass media and a group having as spokeswoman an anti-cult lady (played by professional actress Noemí Frenkel), as it happened to MISA and other esoteric movements targeted by anti-cultists.

Compared with early movies by Enache, *Continuamente Amando* is different. Even the main anti-cult opponent of MISA in Latin America, Uruguayan psychologist Álvaro Farías Díaz, called it "not pornographic," although (not surprisingly) he found there "strange ideas difficult to understand" (Farías Díaz 2015). In 2017, Enache went on with erotic-romantic movies in the same vein, including *Hope St No. 6*, where a man seeks death and meets it in the shape of a beautiful woman, who gives him back his taste for life.

Las Caras de la Diosa (2017), starring again Maria Noelia Falco, is an important movie, where Enache, so to speak, settles her score with pornography. Gino and Luz are famous actors in the adult movie industry. They meet at a crossroad of their life and career. Although they fall in love deeply, they face a painful fact: their sexual habits acquired in the industry have seriously crippled their capacity to build a proper love relationship. The dramatic confusion they live in causes failure after failure both on the set and in their personal emotional lives.

Looking for a solution, the desperate Gino sets out on a journey of self-discovery that culminates with an unexpected mystical experience: he is initiated by a “tantric woman” in the art of “sacred love” and “divine eroticism.” This new perspective brings both the solution to Gino and Luz’s relationship problems and a transformation in his career.

For all their criticism of pornography, on the other hand, Enache and her friends continue to participate in what she herself calls “self-styled erotic festivals, which are in fact pornographic festivals,” where she proposes shows like Extasia, a thirty-minute introduction to sacred love and continence through erotic dances, and Baroque 2017, a new erotic show and workshop.

Playing the Game: A Conclusion

In a way, Enache is still “playing the game,” of seeking consumers of pornography and “taboo breakers,” and giving them something that speaks their language, yet is at the same time different. Why does she do this? She, and some of her friends from MISA, are aware that their movies and shows are a main weapon for the anti-cult opponents of the movement and those who want it banned as a “porno cult.”

The opponent’s argument is that Enache (or, they would say, MISA) made significant money with the movies. Enache denies it: she claims, and can show some good evidence, that most of her movies of the first period were “stolen” and distributed illegally, and a small legal distribution generated very little money, if any. As for the movies of the second period, they are made available for free in public presentations and will gradually be offered for free on the Internet too (although, in an initial launching period, viewers are requested to pay).

Concerning the motivations for the movies, a second possibility is that they were and are a recruitment tool for MISA. They are not. Enache claims (again, believably) that, although many, who at the erotic festivals and elsewhere got in touch with MISA, moved from their usual diet of porn to reading books on Tantrism, and asked for further information about continence or sacred sexuality, to the best of her knowledge none of them ever became a member of MISA. And the movies do not mention MISA, nor do they include references to its Web sites.

Enache proclaims that her aim is to share her own “marvelous experience” of sacred sexuality—“when you really experience it, you cannot keep it for yourself”—, go “to the very center of the porn world,” and offer to the millions who watch pornography what she sees as a radical alternative to porn. This answer may be very much sincere, but is only part of the story.

My own tentative answer to the question “why they do it” is that, without excluding secondary reasons, the main reason motivating members of MISA to produce and disseminate erotic movies and shows is, in fact, *esoteric*. They believe that current pornography and “obscene art” may be spread by dark forces, including certain brands of deviated Freemasonry and the Illuminati, and generate a cloud of negative energy dangerous for Planet Earth and its inhabitants (see “Incredibil, profund revoltător, dar adevărat: Iată care este ‘arta’ abjectă pe care o promovează francmasonii!” n.d.). Countering this negativity, the positive energy generated by sacred sexuality, continence, and “sacred water” transforms the world and may usher in a millenarian transmutation of the whole Planet.

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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 began 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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Research Notes

“Cruel Killing, Brutal Killing, Kill the Beast”: Investigating the 2014 McDonald’s “Cult Murder” in Zhaoyuan

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In 2017, CESNUR’s managing director, Massimo Introvigne, was invited to participate in a dialogue in China’s Henan province in June, followed by a conference in Hong Kong in September, involving Chinese law enforcement officers, leaders of China’s official “anti-xie jiao” association, Chinese academics, and some Western scholars. The dialogue was about the notion of xie jiao (an expression difficult to translate, and not exactly equivalent to the English “cult”) and one particular group classified in China as xie jiao, the Church of Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning. That Church is controversial, even beyond China, in particular for having being accused of perpetrating a horrific crime in 2014 in a McDonald’s diner in Zhaoyuan, where a female client was mercilessly beaten to death. Introvigne had access to a number of documents about the murder, and heard the opinions of both Chinese officers and scholars hostile to the Church of Almighty God, and of members of the same Church who escaped to South Korea and the U.S. This resulted in the first scholarly investigation of the McDonald’s murder, whose preliminary conclusions are presented in these research notes.

ABSTRACT: On May 28, 2014, what became known as the stereotypical “cult murder” in China was perpetrated in Zhaoyuan. Six “missionaries” entered a McDonald’s diner for preaching and ended up killing a customer who had refused to give them her phone number. Chinese authorities attributed the crime to the Church of Almighty God (Eastern Lightning), against which a campaign of repression was already going on. A study of the available documents about the case, including documents published by Chinese official sources, supports a different conclusion. The assassins were members of a small movement that used the name “Almighty God” to designate its two female leaders but was not part of, nor connected with, the Church of Almighty God. The article discusses how a small religious movement went from the deification of its leaders to violence and murder.

KEYWORDS: McDonald’s Murders in Zhaoyuan, Church of Almighty God, Eastern Lightning, Xie Jiao, New Religious Movements in China.

Introduction

On May 28, 2014, one of the most horrific murders in the story of new religious movements was perpetrated in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan, in the Chinese province of Shandong. Six "missionaries" entered the diner preaching their religion and asked clients to leave their phone numbers for further contacts. Wu Shuoyan (1977-2014), a sales assistant working in a nearby clothing store, refused to give her number. She was declared an "evil spirit" and beaten to death with a mop handle (Dunn 2015b, 204).

At the time of the murder, the Chinese government was engaged in a campaign for eradicating the Church of Almighty God, or Eastern Lightning, a new religious movement born in China in 1991, whose "priest" is Zhao Weishan (b. 1951), which teaches that Jesus Christ has returned to Earth as the Almighty God. Although the movement never mentions her name nor any bibliographic details, and cautions that any information supplied by outside sources may be wrong, most scholars believe it identifies the incarnated Almighty God with a Chinese woman, Yang Xiangbin (b. 1973: Dunn 2015a, 2015b). For a number of reasons, together with Falun Gong, the Church of Almighty God came to incarnate for the Chinese authorities the quintessential *xie jiao* (邪教) (Dunn 2015b, 21–23), an expression often translated as "evil cult," but which was used in China since the mid-Ming period with the meaning of "heterodox teachings" or "criminal religious sect" (ter Haar 1992).

Chinese police and media quickly attributed the murder to the Church of Almighty God, and this accusation is still routinely repeated by international media. As evidence for the accusation, Chinese media mentioned that, one day after the murder, the police claimed to have found material of the Church of Almighty God in the home of the main defendant, Zhang Lidong (1959–2015) (Chen 2014), including the book *The Scroll Opened by the Lamb* (Phoenix Satellite TV 2014). After another two days, an interview with Zhang Lidong was aired by CCTV, China's state television. He stated that he was jobless and that he had killed Wu because she was an "evil spirit" (邪灵). Asked what his religion was, Zhang answered: "Almighty God" (全能神) (CCTV 2014).

The Church of Almighty God insists that its literature was probably planted in Zhang's home by the police itself, but the question does not appear to be crucial. Although statistics are impossible, due to Chinese repression that compels the

Church to operate clandestinely, scholars and the government itself agree that members are in the hundreds of thousands, and that millions of pieces of literature have been distributed, some of them even left “in public locations such as train stations for passers-by to discover” (Dunn 2015b, 151). Possession of this literature, thus, hardly indicates that somebody is a member of the Church.

There are four Chinese terms the McDonald assassins used for “evil spirit”: 邪灵 (evil spirit), 恶灵 (wicked spirit), 恶魔 (demon), and 魔鬼 (devil). They apparently used them as synonymous, or at least, from their interviews and declarations at trial it is unclear whether they made a difference between different categories of “evil spirits.” By contrast, the term 恶灵 (wicked spirit), which the group used often, never appears in the vast literature of the Church of Almighty God, where there are very specific rules for discerning the presence of 邪灵 (evil spirits). Certainly, identifying at first sight, and based on the simple refusal to give to the group her telephone number, Wu Shuoyan as an “evil spirit” (or “wicked spirit”) who needed to be killed, was something completely alien from the theology and practice of the Church of Almighty God.

The group responsible for the McDonald’s murder went to trial on August 21, 2014, before the Intermediate People’s Court of Yantai, in the Shandong province. The Chinese media connected with the government reported quite extensively the statements and confessions by the defendants. From there, a story emerged that supported the conclusion by Australian scholar Emily Dunn, that none of those who entered the McDonald’s and were responsible for the crime was, at the time of the murder, a member of the Church of Almighty God (Dunn 2015b, 204). They were part of a different group, which never had more than thirty members but whose interest lies precisely in its connection with the crime. Although Dunn (2015a) believes that the assassins, although no longer associated with the Church of Almighty God at the time of the murder, had been once part of it, my conclusions are different, and I am not persuaded that they were ever members of that church.

The Story of a Micro-Movement

The most relevant characters within the group were the Zhang family from Shijiazhuang, in the province of Hebei, and Lü Yingchun, a young woman who was born in Yantai City, Shandong, on March 8, 1975. Zhang Lidong was born

on October 8, 1959 in Shijiazhuang. He married Chen Xiujuan, and the couple had three children: two daughters, Zhang Fan (1984–2015), born on October 24, 1984, and Zhang Hang, born on March 1, 1996, and a son, Zhang Duo, born on September 12, 2001 (Wang 2014).

Although she later quarreled with her husband, who had in the meantime acquired a lover, Zhang Qiaolian, Chen Xiujuan had a relevant part in the genesis of the group's religious interests. She was a member of the Three Redemption Christ, or Mentuhui (门徒会), the "Association of Disciples," a new religious movement founded by Ji Sanbao (1940–1997) in Shanxi in 1989. Ji, who had been a preacher for the Pentecostal Sabbatarian denomination known as the True Jesus Church, presented himself as "God's stand-in" (*shen de tishen*, 神的替身) and the center of the Third Redemption (Dunn 2015a, 35–39).

Lü Yingchun stated at trial:

I grew up knowing that I was 'God Himself.' In 1998, I read the word 'firstborn son' in a book concerning 'Almighty God.' I was convinced that I was the 'firstborn son' myself. (...) Finally, I discovered that I was 'God Himself.' (*The Beijing News* 2014)

"Firstborn son" is a title used in the New Testament for Jesus Christ (see *Hebrews* 1:6; *Revelation* 1:5). The book mentioned may or may not have emanated from the Church of Almighty God, but certainly in that Church there is no God living today on Earth other than the only one they identify as such. Starting in the early 2000s, Lü Yingchun led a study group in Zhaoyuan. She also spread her messianic claims via the Internet.

Zhang Fan also confessed that in 2007, she "picked up a copy of the book of 'Almighty God' at our doorstep" and found it persuasive (*The Beijing News* 2014). In an interview, she said that the book was called *God's Hidden Work* (神隐秘的做功). It is possibly a pirated or imitated version of *The Hidden Work Done by God* (神隐秘的作工) published by the Church of Almighty God, unless she simply misquoted the title. She did develop an interest in the Church of Almighty God, but never managed to contact the organization. "I never had contact with the Church of Almighty God because they were very secretive and I could not find them," she later stated (Phoenix Satellite TV 2014).

Zhang Fan's conversion came when she started following Lü Yingchun on the Internet, and found her answers to those criticizing her "terrific" (*The Beijing News* 2014). She then traveled to Zhaoyuan to hear Lü preaching. Enthusiastic

about Lü, in the summer of 2009, she converted her mother Chen Xiujuan and, through her, her whole family, including her father Zhang Lidong, her sister Zhang Hang, and her 8-year old brother Zhang Duo. Eventually, the whole Zhang family moved to Zhaoyuan, where they rented a two-story building. One story hosted the family textile business and the other the religious gatherings.

Before moving to Zhaoyuan, and after she was admitted in 2002 as a student to the Beijing Broadcasting Institute (renamed in 2004 the Communication University of China), where she would graduate in 2008, Zhang Fan read a book called *The Seven Thunders Sound* (七雷发声). In Zhaoyuan, she found out that the book, that possibly Lü Yingchun had also read, had been written by a couple from Baotou, Inner Mongolia: Li Youwang and Fan Bin. At that time, Li and Fan were in prison. Zhang Fan borrowed 50,000 RMB from her mother and send them to Baotou so that, upon their release from jail, Li and Fan could move to Zhaoyuan and stay with the Zhang family. Li and Fan “were addressed as ‘the two witnesses’ [from *Revelation* 11:3–12] and Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan were called ‘the firstborn sons’” by a group that at that time consisted of 20–30 believers (Xiao and Zhang 2014). Fan Longfeng also became part of the group’s inner circle, and in 2010 Lü Yingchun started living together with Zhang Fan.

Some believe that the reference to the “seven thunders” in the apocalyptic visions of *Revelation* 10:1–7 may indicate a connection with the Church of Almighty God, but the latter is obviously not the only group with an interest in the Christian Apocalypse and its symbols, and neither the book nor the authors are mentioned in any of the numerous Church bibliographies and Web sites. It seems safer to conclude that they operated yet another independent group.

In 2011, however, Zhang Fan pronounced Li Youwang an “evil spirit” (邪灵), and he and his wife left the group in Zhaoyuan and moved to Dongyin, Shandong. Fan Longfeng was also identified as an “evil spirit” (邪灵) and expelled from the group (Xiao and Zhang 2014). With the Li and Fan couple out of the picture, Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan were free to reveal gradually that they were both the Two Witnesses of the Book of Revelation and God, although a full disclosure to their small group might have come only in May 2014.

In the end, as is the case in other Chinese new religions, the core belief of the group was the messianic role of the duo Lü Yingchun – Zhang Fan. The frequent references to the *Book of Revelation* implied that apocalyptic times were coming,

with a final confrontation between good and evil, but those who would accept the divine role of the two young women, “two fleshy bodies sharing a same soul” (*The Beijing News* 2014), would be saved. That we live the last days, Lü Yingchun explained, was confirmed by the fact that today easily “people would become ‘Satan’s’ minions unwittingly when they did not understand the situation and would not stand on the side of God. Once that happened, we would be under even greater attack by the ‘devil’ (魔鬼) during the battle between two spirits” (*The Beijing News* 2014).

The messianic role of the duo was exclusive, and this is important to distinguish, and indeed oppose, the belief of the group in Zhang and Lü as a dual “Almighty God” to the doctrine of the Church of Almighty God. At trial, Lü Yingchun clearly explained:

The state labeled Zhao Weishan’s fake ‘Church of Almighty God’ as a *xiè jiao*, and we label them as ‘evil spirits’ (邪灵). Only Zhang Fan and I, the ‘firstborn sons,’ could represent the real ‘Church of Almighty God.’ Zhang Fan and I are the unique spokeswomen for the real ‘Almighty God.’ The government has been cracking down on the Almighty God that Zhao Weishan believes in, not the ‘Almighty God’ we mention. They are fake ‘Almighty God,’ while we are the real ‘Almighty God.’ (*The Beijing News* 2014)

Zhang Fan added:

Up till now, only my father, my younger brother, my younger sister, Lü Yingchun, Zhang Qiaolian and I are adherents of the real ‘Almighty God.’ In 2010, I was the ‘firstborn son’ of ‘Almighty God.’ I became ‘God Himself’ because I obtained the authority from the Heaven to kill evil spirits (邪灵) this May. Speaking of ‘God Himself,’ that is to say, I am God in substance. Lü Yingchun is also God in substance. (*The Beijing News* 2014)

Some Christian critics of the Church of Almighty God believe that it was in the defendants’ interest to downplay any relations with the banned organization of Zhao Weishan during the trial, given the Chinese courts’ hostility to that Church. However, had they adopted a conscious defensive strategy (which they probably didn’t), defendants could rather have claimed that they were not totally responsible of their deeds, since they had been manipulated by the “evil” Church of Almighty God, and that would perhaps have served them better in trying to escape the death penalty for their most serious crime, homicide.

Rather than a branch of one of China’s largest new religions, the group was a micro-movement, which never had more than thirty members and was reduced to six in the end. Originally, Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan led the group as

“shepherds.” In the final days of the group, however, Zhang Fan testified that “in the Almighty God organization, Lü Yingchun and I have the highest positions. We are ‘God Himself.’ My father, younger sister and brother, and Zhang Qiaolian are all the ‘chief priests’” (*The Beijing News* 2014).

Two elements are worth noting. The first is that no qualification was needed for the priesthood, except the belief in Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan as the Almighty God. Even a 13-year old boy such as Zhang Duo was considered a priest. The second is that, contrary to the traditional Chinese family structure, in the Zhang family, who was at the same time a micro-new religious movement, there was no patriarchal authority or hierarchy determined by age. The father, Zhang Lidong, was supposed to obey the daughter, Zhang Fan, without questioning her orders. The divine claims completely subverted the traditional order.

The Eve of the Crime: The Sad Story of a Dog

Around May 20, 2014, the two “Gods” identified Chen Xiujuan, Zhang Fan’s mother, as yet another “evil spirit” and expelled her from the group and from the family home. Then, they told Zhang Lidong, Zhang Fan’s father, that his marriage with Chen Xiujuan had ended and he could “call his ex-lover Zhang Qiaolian over so that they could live together.” Now, “they were husband and wife instead [of Chen Xiujuan]. Lü gave them a new spiritual name each. [Zhang Lidong] was called Adam and Zhang Qiaolian, Eve” (*The Beijing News* 2014). Zhang Qiaolian, who was previously not particularly religious, declared her faith in Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan as the Almighty God, and was accepted as a member of the group.

Identifying, denouncing, and expelling “evil spirits” had become increasingly important for the group. The latter practice has a tradition in Chinese religion, but Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan assumed the authority to designate members of their group as “evil spirits.” They were not simply told to leave: apparently, there were rituals characterized by increasing violence.

A particularly disturbing episode was the banning from the Zhang family house, and from the group, of Zhang Fan’s mother, Chen Xiujuan. Although some could cynically conclude that the move was motivated by the desire to

reward Zhang Fan's father, Zhang Lidong, a loyal supporter of the two "Gods," by allowing him to live with his lover, Zhang Qiaolian, rather than with his wife, the expulsion of Chen Xiujuan was enacted as a cosmic drama.

In the previous days, Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan announced that they would be "leaving Earth soon" and return to Heaven. As this expectation grew, so did Zhang Fan's persuasion that her mother "was the 'king of the wicked spirits' (恶灵之王). The 'evil spirit' (邪灵) was carrying out its work on us. I would kill my mother when I met her. I was furious after having found out that my mother was an 'evil spirit' (邪灵), and wished upon her a horrible death." Although Zhang Fan did not resort to actual physical violence against her mother, there was a fair amount of symbolic violence. "Words like 'Cruel killing, brutal killing, kill the beasts' were written on the wall in my house. I wrote those words," Zhang Fan recalled (*The Beijing News* 2014). Although they also referred to her mother's alleged practice of slaughtering animals, writing them on the walls was an omen of the violence to come.

Actual violence first targeted the family pet dog, called Luyi, which was identified as "the substitute of Chen Xiujuan" exactly one day before the murder in the McDonald's. Zhang Fan stated:

Over talking, Lü Yingchun noticed that the dog was grinning towards her, which made her think that it was displaying its power and attack. She identified the figure of Chen Xiujuan in the eyes of the dog, which was raised by Chen Xiujuan but was now becoming the tool of the 'demon' (恶魔), the substitute of Chen Xiujuan. [...] Lü Yingchun pointed to the dog and shouted, 'Chen Xiujuan, I've identified you!' [...]. In front of the 'demon' (恶魔), we are supposed to dump it or kill it immediately. (Xiao and Zhang 2014)

The episode concerning the dog may seem trivial, but Zhang Lidong devoted to it a significant percentage of his statement during the one-day trial, where he was confronted with the very real possibility of being sentenced to death:

Zhang Fan found Luyi under the coffee table and took it outside by its tail. She threw the dog onto the floor of the stairway outside the door, and Luyi could not run after that, but crawled instead. Zhang Fan beat the dog with a mop and broke it. The dog stopped moving after a while of beating, but Zhang Fan said, 'Its tail is still moving.' I stepped forward and stomped the dog on its head. It bled profusely after a while of stomping, and I guessed that it was dead. I then dragged it by its tail and threw it into the trash bin outside the building. (*The Beijing News* 2014)

Zhang Fan felt that the brutal killing of the dog was an event of religious significance, the confirmation of her divine status:

On the 26th in particular, on the evening in which the dog was killed, I was even more certain that I and Lü were ‘God Himself.’ From that evening onwards, I received even greater authority from Heaven and felt especially excited. I had felt that I was God once when I was ten years old, but that was only a thought that flashed in my head for a moment, and I forgot about it after that. (*The Beijing News* 2014)

The McDonald’s Murder

It is indeed impressive how, twenty-four hours in advance, the killing of the dog anticipated the killing of the unfortunate salesgirl, Wu Shuoyan. While Zhang Lidong described the goriest details of the murder, it is worth quoting here the account of Lü Yingchun during her confession at trial, since it throws a special light on the spiritual significance of the crime as perceived by the group:

Zhang Hang asked that lady for her phone number, but she refused to give it to her. When I became conscious of it, I found out that we had been attacked and sucked by a ‘wicked spirit’ (恶灵), which caused us to be weak and helpless. The two of us identified her as that ‘wicked spirit’ (恶灵), and cursed her with words. Not only did she not listen, her attack got even stronger. We saw the air on her body spiraling her back and tummy. Her tummy bloated, and our spirits sensed that her suction was growing stronger, and so was her attack. My body grew increasingly weaker. In the course of the battle, I saw Zhang Fan falling little by little, as if there was a ‘wicked spirit’ (恶灵) tugging her downwards. She screamed with all her might but no sound came out of her mouth. I could only hear a very weak scream. I went to drag her up and she shouted at [her younger sister] Zhang Hang, saying, ‘Why did you not believe? Why didn’t you move?’ I saw Zhang Fan stomping on that woman’s head and shoulders after that, and I did the same on her waist and buttocks. During the attack against us by the ‘demon’ (恶魔), Zhang Fan and I became gradually aware that the woman must die, otherwise it [the demon] would devour everybody. I thus told Zhang Lidong and the rest to beat her up until she stopped breathing. Otherwise, as long as she has breath, the strength of the ‘demon’s’ (恶魔) attack on us would not weaken one bit, even if her body was weak and she could not move. I told the people who came to stop us, ‘Whoever interferes will die.’ The clash between the woman and us was a battle between two spirits, ‘God’ and ‘devil’ (魔鬼). The others could not see it and neither could they understand it. The police could not understand it as well. (*The Beijing News* 2014)

A significant detail, in the case of the McDonald’s murder, was that the victim, Wu Shuoyan, was not an opponent of the group. They did not know her until they entered the McDonald’s. Her refusal to supply her phone number was, however, perceived as an evil deed of cosmic significance, an unpardonable sin against God

himself, and the sign that the final battle between “God” and “the demons” had begun.

In the aftermath of the McDonald’s murder, which was captured both by surveillance cameras and by amateur videos secretly shot by other customers, the Chinese public opinion felt morally provoked and shocked by the fact that nobody in the diner reacted and prevented the murder (see e.g. the comments by “Nancy” 2014). The assassins had no weapons; with the exception of Zhang Lidong, four were women and one a child—and they could have been overcome by the other clients. Perhaps, they were paralyzed by the extraordinary and sinister performance they were watching.

The whole group, including Zhang Lidong, his daughters Zhang Fan and Zhang Hang, his son Zhang Duo, his lover Zhang Qiaolian, and Lü Yingchun, had entered the McDonald’s in Zhaoyuan on May 28, 2014. Except the 13-year old Zhang Duo, all were arrested, jailed, and tried by the Intermediate People’s Court of Yantai on August 21, 2014. On October 11, 2014, Zhang Lidong and Zhang Fan were sentenced to death. Lü Yingchun was sentenced to life in prison. Zhang Hang was sentenced to ten years of jail and Zhang Qiaolian to seven years. On February 2, 2015, Zhang Lidong and Zhang Fan were executed.

An apparently inexplicable performance was enacted at the Intermediate People’s Court in Yantai on August 21, 2014, and in the jails where the defendants were interviewed. Apart from Zhang Hang, Zhang Fan’s younger sister, who declared herself not very religious and with mixed feelings about the whole story (*The Beijing News* 2014), all the other defendants expressed no remorse, and did nothing to avoid the harshest penalties. This is particularly surprising for Zhang Lidong, a man in his prime who had been well-off, although he declared himself unemployed, or in full service of his “Gods,” by the time of the murder (CCTV 2014).

One explanation may be that Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan had already announced that they would soon leave Earth and return to Heaven, and that this was part of their divine plan. Execution was simply a way to leave this planet, and we can even speculate that Lü would have preferred to share the death penalty with Zhang Fan rather than be sentenced to a life in jail. After all, they were “two fleshy bodies sharing a same soul.” Zhang Lidong, whose body language in addition to words during the interviews seemed typical of a true believer (see CCTV 2014), might simply have wished to join his divine daughter in Heaven.

Conclusion

It is clear that the Chinese government used the McDonald’s incident to intensify its action against the Church of Almighty God, even if the Church was not responsible of the homicide and the Lü Yingchun - Zhang Fan group was not part of its organization.

The Church of Almighty God answered by accusing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of having manipulated some “psychopaths” to commit the murder and used it as a justification for its cracking down of the Church (and, at the same time, of several Christian house churches): “the CCP is the killer and the real sinner” (Eastern Lighting 2015).

Some human rights activists also made similar comments. One of them, Xin Shuyan, commented: “After the murder case in Zhaoyuan, Shandong Province, the CCP used the incident to conduct a comprehensive repression on the Church of Almighty God. It was reported that at least 1,500 innocent members of the Church were arrested. The CCP’s campaign-like practice of law enforcement was really a destruction of the rule of law. Why did they carry out the campaign to suppress the ‘cult’? There must be ulterior motives. The CCP’s intention was simply to conceal the social crisis and to divert public opinion. Thus, they laid blame on the religious groups” (Xin 2014; for similar comments see Guo 2014). While CCP’s motivations may be interpreted in different ways, it is clear that it did exploit the murder to justify its campaign against the Church of Almighty God.

In June 2017, the latter leaked to a certain number of scholars a document allegedly transcribing the content of a teleconference of June 16, 2014, where officers of the Chinese Central Office for the Prevention and Handling of Cults (also referred as the Central 610 Office) discussed the Church of Almighty God. They recommended to “firmly grasp the typical case of ‘May 28 McDonald’s Murder’ in one hand to expose the reactionary nature, deceptive tricks and serious threats of the cult,” and “vigorously promote foreign projects” of propaganda. Considering that, as of August 19, 2017, I counted some 20,000 media pages in different languages connecting the Church of Almighty God, or Eastern Lightning, with the McDonald’s murder, this propaganda has been fairly successful. We can only hope that serious efforts by scholars to understand what

exactly happened in Zhaoyuan in 2014 would lead to a sober assessment of what remains a terrible tragedy.

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