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Introduction—Emperor Nero Redux: Fake News and Anti-Cult Movements

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ABSTRACT: Since the times of Roman Emperor Nero, tyrants willing to suppress religious minorities use a pincer consisting of violent persecution and fake news. These campaigns do not succeed because of brutality only. Religious and secular enemies of the persecuted minorities cooperate in spreading the fake news. What we can call “Nero’s formula” is still at work today, and this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is devoted to the theme of fake news used by totalitarian regimes, rival religionists, and secular anti-cultists to justify the discrimination and persecution of new religious movements.

KEYWORDS: Fake News, Anti-Cult Movements, Counter-Cult Movements, Religious Persecution, Nero (Roman Emperor).

I am a native of Rome, and my grandmother used to take me to see the grave of Emperor Nero (37–68), telling me how bad he was. Later, I learned that what tourists still visit as “Nero’s Grave” was in fact the grave of somebody else, but this was not important. The infamous memory of Nero stayed with me.

My grandmother was a pious Catholic, and told the story in a very simple way. Nero persecuted the Christians, for the good reason that he believed to be God himself, so Jesus Christ could only be an imposter. He killed several thousand Christians, men, women, and even children. They were thrown to the lions, crucified, or burned alive. The carnage appeared excessive even to some of Nero’s supporters. To justify it, he spread the false rumors that Christians celebrated orgies at night and ritually killed and ate children. But these accusations of imaginary crimes became less and less believable. So, he decided to accuse them of a *real* crime. Arsonists had burned the city of Rome in 64 CE.

Nero accused the Christians of being responsible of the fire. In fact, he had burned Rome himself.

Again, I am aware that some contemporary historians such as Princeton's Edward Champlin remind us that Nero's story mostly reached us through the Emperor's opponents, both Christian and non-Christian, and may include fabrications and exaggerations. However, Champlin admits that other eminent modern historians believe that the substance of the traditional story is true (Champlin 2003).

Nero is back, and this time he has got a computer, and Facebook and Twitter accounts. Probably several different accounts, and not under his own name. What we can call "Nero's formula" is at work against many persecuted religious minorities throughout the world today. The formula is old, but it still works. Persecute a religious group. Justify the persecution by inventing false stories about them, preferably involving sexual perversions and child abuse. If this is not enough, attribute to the persecuted group your own crimes. Then, persecute it even more. Insist that the persecution is needed by spreading more false rumors. And so on.

One can claim that we are no longer in Nero's times. And rightly so. Nero had at his disposal only rumors spread by his agents in the markets. Today, we have fake news. On January 11, 2017, Donald J. Trump held his first press conference as President-elect. He presented himself as victim of a massive "fake news" campaign. "It's all fake news. It's phony stuff. It didn't happen," he said, referring to Russian actions to favor his elections. And he told a CNN journalist, "Your organization is terrible... You are fake news" (Wojcik, Hogan and Juang 2017).

The genius was out of the bottle. "Fake news" became a household word overnight. In fact, Trump had used it during the campaign, but now he commanded planetary attention. Unfortunately for Trump, once unleashed, the genius could not be controlled. The President's opponents started accusing *him* both of spreading fake news and to have been elected thanks to fake news disseminated by his Russian friends.

Since Nero's times, fake news and religion have a very intimate relationship. The name "fake news," of course, did not exist, but the substance, minus Facebook and Twitter, did. All persecuted minorities and "heretics" throughout history were repressed through a generous use of Nero's formula, crashed

between the rock of the oppression and the hard place of the false rumors spread to justify their persecution.

As we started with the Roman Empire, we can as well switch to Latin, and quote one of the few verses of the Jewish Bible that became proverbial among the Romans, *Nihil sub sole novum* (*Ecclesiastes* 1:10), “there is nothing new under the sun,” or, in modern English, “history repeats itself.” From the Waldensians to the Mormons and beyond, all minorities were persecuted by applying Nero’s formula to them.

It is important to note that Nero was not alone, and alone he would not have succeeded. Christians had other enemies, who helped the Emperor spread the fake news. Here, again, *nihil sub sole novum*. Just like the early Christians, persecuted religious minorities usually have three enemies: totalitarian governments, religionists who perceive them as competitors, and those who do not deeply care about religion but see them as a social threat.

This is the case for “cults.” They may suffer under democratic governments too, but they are banned and persecuted by totalitarian regimes. And they have two different sets of enemies: “counter-cultists,” i.e. religionists who want to protect their own religion against dangerous competitors, and “anti-cultists,” who claim they do not care about theology but regard “cults” as “destructive” because they “brainwash” their “victims” (Kilbourne and Richardson 1986; Richardson 1978, 1993, 1996, 2014, 2015). I introduced myself the distinction between counter-cult and anti-cult movements, now widely used (Introvigne 1993, 1995).

Yet, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* both embraces the distinction between fake news about “cults” spread respectively by governments of dubious democratic credentials, religious competitors of the slandered movements, and secular anti-cultists, and notes that this business is more complicated than some may imagine.

In the first article, I discuss one of the most egregious purveyors of fake news in the world today, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). When it comes to “cults,” only Russia can be compared to China as a fake news factory, with its massive campaigns of rumors spread to justify its repression of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Church of Scientology.

CCP is, by its own definition, an atheist organization. However, campaigns such as the one against The Church of Almighty God, a Chinese new religious movement (to which issue 2:1 of *The Journal of CESNUR* was devoted) whose members are tortured and killed by the thousands (Human Rights Without Frontiers and *Bitter Winter* 2018), could not succeed without the support of Western anti-cultists, who relay CCP's fake news internationally, and Christian counter-cultists, both in China and abroad, happy to help the CCP hunt the heretics.

Ian Camacho, an independent scholar, in what should be saluted as a scholarly tour de force, dissects a fake news about the founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), who has been consistently, but falsely, accused of lying about his supposed academic degree in Engineering, including by scholars who should have known better. This would seem a typical *secular* criticism of Hubbard. Yet, it has been used by Russian anti-cultists associated with the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Center, who merely *claim* to be secular but are in fact part of an armed wing of the most reactionary faction of the Russian Orthodox Church (Human Rights Without Frontiers Correspondent in Russia 2012).

The same machinery is at work in Israel. Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Sharon Warshawski examine the Israeli law on hypnosis, and how it was passed based on the same fake news and prejudices normally mobilized against the "cults." In passing, they mention the Israeli Center for the Victims of Cults (ICVC), part of the same international network of anti-cultists, known as FECRIS, to which the falsely secular (but in fact Orthodox) Russian "anti-cultists" (but in fact *counter-cultists*) belong.

The article focuses on hypnosis, and the following comments on the ICVC are mine, not the authors'. The story of ICVC is complicated, and would deserve further study. However, from an article published in 2011 in *Yedioth Achronoth* (Mula 2011), which has been for many years the largest newspaper in Israel by sales, and from documents I collected during several trips to Israel, it seems that the ICVC is remarkably similar to the Russian anti-cult organization St. Irenaeus of Lyons Centre. The latter presents itself as secular, but is in fact tightly controlled by employees of the Russian Orthodox Church. The ICVC certainly recruited also secular Israelis, but it seems to have been established by ultra-Orthodox Jews, including businessman Rami Feller, who provided to ICVC most of its funds through an organization known as The Office for Charity (Mula 2011,

38). Both Feller and Rachel Lichtenshtein, the public voice for the ICVC, were associated with Yad L’Achim (Mula 2011, 38), an ultra-Orthodox group that, according to several yearly reports on religious freedom by the U.S. Department of State, was accused of “harassment, threats, and vandalism directed against [the] buildings, and other facilities” of “evangelical Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Reform and Conservative Jews” (U.S. Department of State 2001).

The same pattern seems to repeat itself in Russia and Israel. Religionists designate as “cults” and fabricate fake news against any religious competitor perceived as “heretic.” To mobilize the resources of the (allegedly) secular state against their enemies, they construct another level of fake news, centered on the false claim that they are secular anti-cultists concerned with the “danger of the cults,” while in fact most of them, or at least those who pull the strings in the movements, are religionists whose intent is to protect “orthodoxy,” punish the “heretics,” and harass the competition.

The Journal of CESNUR is multi-lingual and the last two articles of the issue, by Massimo Giusio, an attorney, and Raffaella Di Marzio, a scholar and religious liberty activist, are in Italian and devoted to how Italian anti-cultists try to do their share in spreading fake news about “cults.” One of the reasons why we do not publish an English version of the texts is that the article defaming Soka Gakkai discussed by Di Marzio supposedly is an Italian translation of an English original. However, when she asked to be supplied with that original, which would have been essential to prepare a meaningful English version of her article, the anti-cultists adamantly refused.

Some of the examples Giusio and Di Marzio offer verge on the ridiculous, and one may ask whether it is worth discussing them at all. However, as the authors note, ridiculous as they may be, fake news about “cults” have a certain audience in the Italian media, and the minuscule Italian anti-cult movement is part of the same international network to which its more dangerous Israeli and Russian counterparts belong.

Perhaps, one of the reasons anti-cultists prosper a little bit less in Italy than elsewhere may have to do with how well-known Nero’s story remains there. In the end, the fake news he had spread came back to haunt him. He was accused of crimes he did commit, and of others he probably didn’t. Rome’s Senate and army both rebelled against him. Rather than surrendering, and facing trial and possible

execution, Nero asked his secretary to kill him, crying out, *Qualis artifex pereo!* (“What an artist dies in me!”). A deep national memory tells Italians that fabricating fake news is indeed a dangerous art.

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Fake News! Chinese Mobilization of Resources Against The Church of Almighty God as a Global Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT: A growing philosophical and sociological literature examines the concept of “fake news,” its definition, and its rise to prominence during the campaign for the 2016 presidential elections in the United States. Religion has proved a fertile ground for fake news, spread not only by private actors but also by governments, which try to justify their repression of the groups they do not approve of. The Chinese government has emerged as a main purveyor of fake news, aimed at justifying the persecution of groups it labels as *xie jiao* (“heterodox teachings”). The article discusses the notion of “fake news” in general, and examines how the Chinese authorities, with the co-operation of certain Western media, engaged in a massive campaign of fake news in their attempt to discredit one of the groups they persecute as a *xie jiao*, The Church of Almighty God.

KEYWORDS: Church of Almighty God, *Xie Jiao*, Fake News, Fake News and Religion, Religious Liberty in China.

The Coming of “Fake News”

A meta-analysis conducted in 2017 identified some 7,000 scholarly studies on disinformation and misinformation (Chan, Jones, Jamieson and Albarracín 2017). Some 250 refer specifically to “fake news” and none is older than 2016, although the term “fake news” had been already introduced during World War I. “Fake news” became a household name after it was used by Donald Trump in his presidential campaign in 2016 (and in his first presidential press conference in 2017). It was also adopted by his opponents to denounce the maneuvers of Trump’s domestic and international (i.e. Russian) supporters (Jankowski 2018).

Being in its infancy, the social scientific study of fake news typically spends significant time in trying to determine what fake news is (Tandoc, Lim and Ling 2017). Farkas and Schou argue that it is a “floating signifier,” with no “real” meaning. It is mostly used, with polemical purposes, by the opponents respectively of (a) the mainline liberal media; (b) the Western conservative media and the Russian propaganda supporting them; and (c) the pervasive manipulation of consumers by digital capitalism (Farkas and Schou 2018).

Other scholars criticize these approaches as unilateral (e.g. Jankowski 2018, 251). Although increasingly controversial, the classical paradigm of communication theory suggests that news be studied based on the sequel production – message – reception (McQuail 2010). Reception can be studied empirically, assessing how much fake news determine our behavior (e.g., by Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, in a controversial study dismissing the impact of fake news on the American presidential elections of 2016 as minimal).

Philosophers are among the scholars most interested in fake news, and propose several definitions. Neil Levy argues that,

Fake news is the presentation of false claims that purport to be about the world in a format and with a content that resembles the format and content of legitimate media organisations (Levy 2017, 20).

Regina Rini believes that,

A fake news story is one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience (Rini 2017, E45).

Yet another philosopher, University of Berlin’s Axel Gelfert, proposes a simpler definition:

Fake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims *as news*, where the claims are misleading *by design* (Gelfert 2018, 108).

Figure 1 shows different kinds of fake news at work.

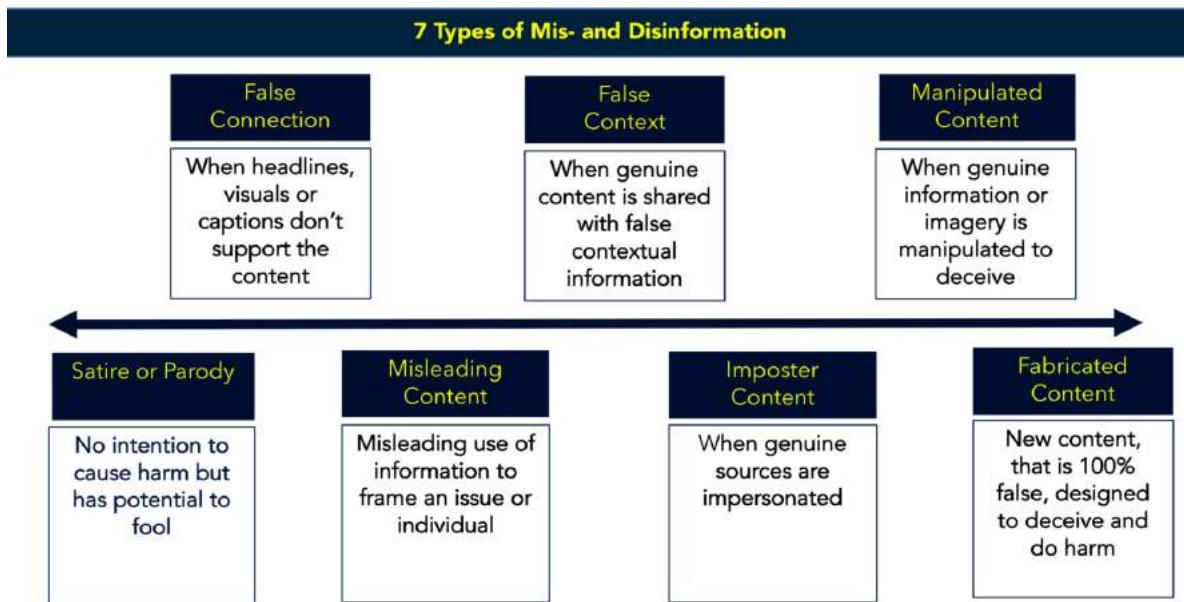


Figure 1. Different Kinds of Fake News. Source: Wardle (2017).

“Fake news” is not simply “false news.” It is false news deliberately circulated through sustained and reiterated campaigns, and presented in such a way that many would believe they are true. Contemporary fake news goes one step beyond traditional, Cold War-style disinformation because of its unprecedented capacity of mobilizing simultaneously a variety of media. “A core feature of contemporary fake news is that it is widely circulated online” (Bakir and McStay 2017, 154).

Gelfert argues that skilled producers of fake news exploit four pre-existing cognitive biases:

- *confirmation bias*: we accept new information if it confirms our beliefs and prejudices
- *repetition effect*: “if they continue to say it, it should be true”
- *priming*: use of words that trigger a non-conscious memory reaction, e.g., in our field, “cult”
- *affective arousal*: emotions lower our defenses, e.g. “they abuse children” (Gelfert 2018, 111–13).

Religion and Fake News

Well before the expression “fake news” became fashionable, scholars of religion had noticed how rumors were spread against “bad” religions and made credible by both their reiteration and their endorsement by “authoritative” sources. As early as 1960, David Brion Davis had studied how what we would today call “fake news” were used in the 19th century against Catholicism and other minority religions in America (Davis 1960). Jim Richardson noticed the same phenomenon in creating a widespread “cultphobia” during the “cult wars” and beyond (Kilbourne and Richardson 1986; Richardson 1978, 1979, 1993).

Traditionally, “fake news” about religions labeled as “heresies” or “cults” were spread by private “moral entrepreneurs”: secular anti-religious activists or “anti-cultists,” or rival religionists. In recent years, we have witnessed the spread of “fake news” about religious movements organized, in a much more systematic way, not by private but by public actors. Russia has emerged as a leading producer of fake news about both the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientology, whose persecution at home it tries to justify internationally.

Not unlike Russia, China has the problem of justifying internationally the persecution of several religions, particularly those it lists as *xie jiao* and denounces as “pseudo-religions” or “cults.” Being active in a *xie jiao* is a crime punished by Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code with a jail penalty of three to seven years “or more” (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Vienna n.d). *Xie jiao* (whose translation as “evil cults” is inaccurate) means “heterodox teachings.” Lists of *xie jiao* were compiled since the late Ming era (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 27–31; Palmer 2012). Definitions are vague and, for all practical purposes, a *xie jiao* is a group listed as such in the official list of *xie jiao* (Irons 2018).

The Church of Almighty God (CAG) is considered by CCP as a quintessential *xie jiao*. The CAG is a Christian new religious movement founded in China, in 1991. It teaches that Jesus returned to Earth and incarnated as Almighty God, a woman born in China, and now living in the U.S., who teaches the fullness of truth. Most of her utterances are collected in the book *The Word Appears in the Flesh* (Introvigne 2017a; Folk 2018). The CAG is led and shepherded by the person it recognizes as Almighty God. The CAG believes that, after the

manifestation of Almighty God, the Holy Spirit indicated that Zhao Weishan is the “priest,” the “man used by the Holy Spirit,” who cooperates with the incarnate Almighty God and is responsible for the administrative work of the church. Zhao Weishan also escaped to the U.S. and obtained refugee status there.

The CAG is perceived by the CCP as a fierce enemy. In fact, it denounces the persecution of Christians and identifies the CCP with the Red Dragon of the *Book of Revelation* (Dunn 2008). However, if one reads CAG literature, it is clear that the Red Dragon would fall by itself, and there is no appeal to a revolution (Introvigne 2017a).

The CAG has been listed as a *xie jiao* since 1995. CAG statistics claim that more than 300,000 CAG members have been arrested in China to date. Figures are difficult to confirm, but there are frequent references in CCP’s own literature to extensive anti-CAG campaigns. There is also believable evidence that many CAG members have been tortured, and some died while in custody in highly suspicious circumstances (CAP-LC and others 2018).

Fake News Against The Church of Almighty God

There is a whole *domestic* propaganda apparatus spreading false news against the *xie jiao*, particularly through the specialized police unit Office 610 and the Chinese Anti-*Xie-Jiao* Association (Chinese Anti-Cult Association, CACA), established in 2000, which has direct ties with the CCP (Irons 2018, 39–41). This propaganda, while perhaps effective, appears to repeat the schemes of traditional Soviet-style disinformation, and lacks the sophistication that is typical of the contemporary notion of fake news.

Although the same false news is spread in China and abroad, I will focus here on the international propaganda, which corresponds more clearly to the scholarly definition of fake news. A document leaked by the CAG to scholars dated June 16, 2014 (copy in my archives), allegedly transcribing the content of a teleconference of June 16, 2014, led by officers of the Central 610 Office, presents a credible anti-CAG disinformation plan by the CCP. The model suggested by this and other documents is as follows:

1. News are created by Office 610 and CACA.

2. English-language Chinese media launch them (not necessarily the *People's Daily*, which would be too obvious).

3. For whatever reason, *British* (rather than, say, American or French) correspondents in Beijing often pick up the fake news first. *Most* first Western reports can be traced back to two media outlets only, BBC and *The Telegraph*.

4. Since, these media are regarded as authoritative, rank high in Google, and are eminently quotable in Wikipedia, the fake news spread to thousands of international media (with occasional direct help by Chinese agencies in various countries).

Case no. 1: The McDonald's Murder

Not coincidentally but, if we believe the leaked document, pursuing a deliberate plan, the mother of all anti-CAG fake news is the murder of a woman in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014. That the murder occurred was unfortunately very much real. The fake news part is that it was perpetrated by the CAG.

I was among the Western experts of new religious movements and the CAG invited by CACA to two 2017 conferences in Zhengzhou and Hong Kong to discuss the notion of *xie jiao* and The Church of Almighty God. I went there with an open mind, as recognized by Chinese governmental media (*KKNews* 2017).

However, based on documents published by the same Chinese authorities, I concluded that the McDonald's murder was perpetrated by a *different* religious movement, with a similar name but not related to the CAG. It venerated a *different* living Almighty God, one God in two persons, its two female leaders Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan (1984–2015) (Introvigne 2017b). Other scholars who studied the documents share my conclusions (see Introvigne and Bromley 2017).

The statements by the assassins were indeed unequivocal. Lü Yingchun stated at trial,

Zhang Fan and I are the unique spokewomen 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' (*Beijing News* 2014).

Zhang Fan stated in an interview that, “I never had contacts with The Church of Almighty God” (Phoenix Satellite TV 2014).

A few days after the incident, however, Chinese media (this time including the *People's Daily*) attributed it to the CAG. BBC (with great fanfare: Gracie 2014) and later *The Telegraph* (Moore 2014) picked up the story though their correspondents in Beijing. According to a research I performed in November 2017, by then some 20,000 Western media had attributed the homicide to the CAG.

After the scholarly articles published in 2017, the matter should have been laid to rest. Periodically, however, the CCP tries to revive the dead horse of the McDonald's case. Zhang Fan had been executed in 2015 but Lü Yingchun was in jail, and so was Zhang Fan's younger sister, Zhang Hang, who had also been convicted for complicity in the murder. Zhang Hang had stated during the trial that she “did not believe very devoutly” (*Beijing News* 2014) and, as mentioned earlier, Lü Yingchun had vehemently denied any association with the CAG. Chinese media reported that they were successfully “re-educated” in jail, participated in competitions for the best criticism of *xie jiao*, and were rewarded with sentence reductions (*China News* 2017). To prove their “re-education,” the two women now declared that they had been initially corrupted by reading the CAG scriptures. However, despite the long permanence in jail, Zhang Hang still maintained that their faith was that God had returned to Earth in the dual person of her sister and Lü Yingchun (*Kaiwind Net* 2016), a belief obviously very different from the CAG. As late as 2018, while the persecution of the CAG intensified with a massive wave of arrests, the CCP was still trying to attribute the homicide to the CAG by quoting as reliable sources the BBC and other Western media (China Anti-Xie-Jiao Website 2018), conveniently forgetting that it had fed the fake news to them in the first place. It was an interesting case of “fake news about fake news,” showing once again that, after several years, the CCP still felt the need to refer to the McDonald's murder to justify the persecution.

Case No. 2: The Story of Guo Bin

Another item of anti-CAG fake news is that in 2013, in the Chinese province of Shanxi, CAG members gouged out the eyes of a six-year old boy. Holly Folk, one of the Western scholars invited to the anti-CAG conferences in 2017 in

China, studied the related documents and concluded that the crime was committed by the boy's aunt, the CAG had nothing to do with it, and accusations against the church were spread by Chinese anti-cultists only after the McDonald's homicide, *several months* after the police investigation had been closed (Folk 2017).

Folk shows that the false attribution of the crime to the CAG was first spread by two Chinese anti-cult Web Sites and the *Want China Times*, a now-defunct pro-CCP daily in Taiwan. Hong Kong journalist Brendon Hong was then the link who published the story and relayed it to Western media (Folk 2017, 100).

Case No. 3: Predicting the End of the World in 2012?

Widespread fake news accuse the CAG of having instigated riots in China based on the prediction of the end of the world in 2012. However, there is no end of the world (rather, its transformation) in CAG theology, and the disasters predicted in the Bible will *follow* the end of the earthly mission of Almighty God, who was alive and well in 2012 (Introvigne 2017a).

It is true that some CAG believers in China, like many other Chinese, developed an interest in the so-called Mayan prophecies predicting the end of the world in 2012, and some tried to use this theory as an evangelization tool. But they were rebuked by the leaders and many were expelled (Dunn 2015, 95). Zhao Weishan stated, "We do not preach the end of the world... The theory of the end of the world is wrong" (The Church of Almighty God 2012b).

Banners and a brochure were supplied by CACA and other Chinese sources to Western media and scholars "proving" that the CAG had announced the end of the world in 2012. The brochure (one photocopy of which is in the archives of CESNUR), however, in fact did not mention the end of the world at all, although its title was indeed *After 2012, The Last Ticket: Gain Salvation in the Catastrophes*. If it has not been fabricated, it is an example of the literature produced by *dissidents* who resisted the warnings of Zhao Weishan and, when identified, were promptly expelled.

Australian scholar Emily Dunn argued that the contested brochure might be authentic, since the same ark drawing also appeared on another brochure once diffused by the CAG (Dunn 2016, 219). The latter, however, *The Church of*

Almighty God—The Last Ark, did not mention 2012 at all—nor did it mention theories of the end of the world (The Church of Almighty God 2012a).

Case no. 4: “The CAG Pays Money for Conversions”

A fourth example of fake news, which unfortunately has played a role in leading to decisions where asylum has been denied to CAG refugees in Europe (see e.g. Home Office 2017), is that “a [CAG] member receives 20,000 yuan (\$3,237) for every new person they convert” and that in turn new members should pay “2,000 yuan (\$323) in membership fees” and spend extra money for buying CAG literature (Mintz 2014).

CAG members interviewed by the undersigned and other scholars vehemently deny that this is the case, and given the number of converts, even the richest religious organization in the world would have been quickly bankrupted by giving money awards for each new convert. They claim there is no membership fee for any church members. As for the literature, CAG rules mandate that, “Believers of The Church of Almighty God can enjoy all of the books of God’s words, spiritual books, and audio and video productions without charge” (The Church of Almighty God 2017).

Obviously, monetary contributions are needed in a large organization such as the CAG. The CAG’s *Principles*, however, leave a large individual latitude. “Some insist on making an offering of ten percent, while others contribute in different ways. As long as it is being offered willingly, God will gladly accept it. God’s house only specifies that those who have only believed in God for less than a year are temporarily exempt from providing any offerings, while poor people are not required to provide any offerings but can make offerings according to their faith. The church will not accept offerings that might lead to family disputes. Those making an offering of money must pray several times, and only after they are sure they are completely willing and are certain they will never have any regrets are they to be allowed to make their offerings” (The Church of Almighty God 2003).

The derogatory information was spread by the *Newsweek*-associated *International Business Times* in 2014 (Mintz 2014), in an article largely based (and quoting verbatim on this issue) a post-McDonald’s laundry list of accusations against the CAG published by the official newspaper of the Chinese regime, the *People’s Daily* (*People’s Daily* 2014).

Case no. 5: Evangelical Christian Leader Kidnapped by the CAG

While the CCP created *most* fake news against the CAG, others originated with Evangelical Christians, very much disturbed by the fact that the phenomenal growth of the CAG largely happened at their expenses. In this case, news traveled from Chinese Evangelicals to Evangelicals abroad, initially *without* the cooperation of CCP, which only recently realized that these incidents were of interest to Western scholars and added them to its laundry list of anti-CAG propaganda items.

Some Christian opponents of the CAG also claim that in 2002, it kidnapped 34 pastors and lay leaders of a large Christian House Church, the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF). When documents are studied, however, this story too appears to be largely unbelievable (Introvigne 2018).

The story is great material for Evangelical novels (which were in fact written: Flinchbaugh 2006; Shen and Bach 2017, the latter a novelized account co-authored by one of the self-proclaimed victims), but it is hard to believe that,

- (a) the CAG, hunted as it was by the Chinese police, was able to mount a large-scale kidnapping operation;
- (b) the CGF, which was also persecuted and operating underground at that time, did not verify who those who invited them to a Christian seminar were; and
- (c) while allegedly informed of what happened, the Chinese police did not arrest anybody.

It is possible that in fact the CGF leaders went to a training invited by members of the CAG, who did not immediately advertise the name of their church, which some may interpret as deception but can also be explained with the climate of persecution. Then, they reconstructed the event by using the familiar captivity narrative of having been “kidnapped by a cult,” while in fact no kidnapping in the normal and legal meaning of the word happened.

Case no. 6: The International Campaign of 2017

The leaked document suggests that Chinese propaganda should try to enlist Western *scholars* against the CAG, as it was done with some degree of success for Falun Gong. This was perhaps one reason for our invitations to China in 2017.

But it backfired spectacularly, generating an unprecedented amount of scholarly research *sympathetic* to the CAG. Three of the scholars invited to China signed affidavits or appeals to correct false information about the CAG.

This memorable failure of the attempt to recruit scholars to fight the CAG was perhaps not unrelated to a new massive campaign of fake news in the second half of 2017. The first conference against the CAG was organized in Henan between 23 and 27 June 2017. In the intentions of CCP, the Henan conference should have offered some international academic justification to the persecution, but this did not happen. However, the usual journalistic connections were still working. In early July 2017, nearly 600 CAG members were arrested in Zhejiang Province. The Chinese governmental media did not report it until July 25, 2017, when they claimed that only 18 members of the CAG had been arrested. On July 27, the Beijing correspondents of multiple foreign media, including the usual BBC and *Telegraph* (*BBC News* 2017; Connor 2017), reported the arrests, mentioning the usual stories about the crimes allegedly committed by the CAG. Some media mentioned the 2012 end of the world riots. I went through all English language reports of the crackdown published between July 27 and July 29, 2017, and noticed that *all* mentioned the McDonald's murder, attributing it to the CAG.

The chronology shows that, after the official Chinese news agency Xinhua had first reported the arrests (*Xinhua* 2017), the first subsequent coverage was by *Sixth Tone* (Lam 2017), a Web site which was described by *Foreign Policy* as “a media start-up under [Chinese Communist] party oversight that features a slick, attractive website and appealing headlines designed to entice Western readers” (Allen-Ebrahimian 2016). Next came the BBC and the *Telegraph*, the two usual suspects whose Beijing bureaus really seem to enjoy a special relationship with Chinese propaganda sources, followed by dozens of other media that largely relied on these earlier reports.

The second conference against the CAG was organized in Hong Kong on September 15–16, 2017. Again, it failed to produce international academic endorsement of the campaign against the CAG. I was among the Western participants, all of whom refused to sign a “final document” with “conclusions” from the conference. I do not claim that media campaigns against the CAG are directly correlated with the conferences. It is, however, not impossible that the fact that the expected academic support did not materialize was one of the factors

persuading the Chinese authorities to launch new campaigns against the CAG through their usual media connections. Another factor may have been that some scholars who had participated in the two seminars in China, including the undersigned, decided to sign appeals in favor of CAG asylum seekers in South Korea and elsewhere, denouncing the persecution in China, and spoke at international events supporting CAG refugees, including at the United Nations. On October 27, 2017, for example I appeared in an event organized in Seoul by several NGOs discussing the situation of CAG refugees in South Korea.

Two days later, on October 30, the Korean daily *Jeju Ilbo* published an attack against CAG refugees (*Jeju Ilbo* 2017). Some information came from Ou Myeng-Ok, the representative of a Korean pro-Chinese magazine, who organized anti-CAG street demonstrations in various Korean cities. Although only a handful of people participated in the demonstrations, they were covered by several Korean media, and the usual accusations were repeated. In the following month, the Hong Kong daily *Ta Kung Pao*, which is owned by the agency representing the Beijing government in Hong Kong, published 15 articles targeting the CAG (see e.g. *Ta Kung Pao* 2017). Some of their comments were republished by another Hong Kong daily newspaper owned by the same Chinese agency, *Wen Wei Po*, and (quite curiously) by the Taiwan state-owned *Central News Agency* (*Wen Wei Po* 2017; *Central News Agency* 2017). Again, together with criticism against CAG refugees in South Korea, the 2012 alleged doomsday predictions and the McDonald's murder were mentioned.

Conclusion: Fake News, A Blessing in Disguise?

Things are not in 2018 what they were in 2014 or early 2017. Increasingly, a fair coverage of the CAG is offered by scholarly journals and quality media, unavoidably landing in Wikipedia as well. In Italy, a court of law labeled attempts to attribute the McDonald's murder to the CAG as "fake news fabricated by the regime and aimed at discrediting the CAG" (Tribunale di Perugia 2018).

This may be a confirmation of a more optimistic comment offered by some scholars of fake news. It has been argued that "fake news [is] the best thing that's happened to journalism," as it generated a reaction and taught many to double-check their sources more critically (Beckett 2017). This is not always the case when media report about groups labeled as "cults." However, as far as The

Church of Almighty God is concerned, things have somewhat improved. A handful of scholars, human rights activists, and lawyers fighting the huge machinery of Chinese propaganda may look like David against Goliath, but Goliath is indeed losing ground, proving that fighting fake news is not impossible.

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Degrees of Truth: Engineering L. Ron Hubbard

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ABSTRACT: Religious scholars Hugh B. Urban, Kjersti Hellesøy, Dorthe Refslund Christensen and Stephen A. Kent have forwarded the popular narrative that L. Ron Hubbard's official biography is a hagiography. This consensus resulted partly from contrasting Hubbard's incomplete, poor academic records against his purported claims about graduating from George Washington University with a civil engineering degree and good grades. By not closely inspecting all source materials, however, these scholars have missed the discrepancy causes: transcription errors that evolved, ultimately resulting in misattribution of authorship. Only religious scholar J. Gordon Melton has correctly noted in his book *The Church of Scientology* that Hubbard made no such claims, although Melton provided no detailed explanation for the basis of his argument. Indeed, Hubbard directly addressed flunking and his poor grades in several places. This article not only expands on Melton's observation, but posits that the prevailing view in which Hubbard claimed to have a civil engineering degree and good grades has actually resulted from incomplete and biased research.

KEYWORDS: Dianetics, George Washington University, L. Ron Hubbard, Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard's Academic Degrees.

Introduction

The current mainstream narrative about L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986) is that he lied about having good grades and a civil engineering degree from George Washington University. Critics Jon Atack (Atack 1990, 59), George Malko (Malko 1970, 31), Russell Miller (Miller 1987, 57), Gerald “Gerry” Armstrong (Armstrong 2009a, 2009b), Lawrence Wright (Wright 2013, 352), Paulette Cooper and L. Ron Hubbard, Jr. (Cooper 1971, 160–63 and Bibliography) have contrasted Hubbard's incomplete and poor college transcript against various Scientology biographies in order to portray him as fraudulent. To their credit,

these critics have addressed discrepancies in the Church of Scientology's early promotional information about Hubbard. Where their criticism became dishonest, however, was in evaluating prior to having all of the data, rather than trying to seek and understand the discrepancy causes.

Meanwhile, the Church of Scientology's Public Relations Office attacked its critics' reputations through its *Freedom* magazine and various websites (Church of Scientology International 2011 and STAND League 2018) yet removed all references to Hubbard's graduation, good grades and a B.S. (Bachelor of Science) in Civil Engineering in its later biographies. Having provided no explanation for revising their founder's biography, however, the church seemingly agreed with its critics. In short, as they revised their founder's biography, the church largely employed similar tactics to its critics rather than having explained the discrepancies. As a result, religious scholars including Hugh B. Urban (Urban 2011, 32 and Urban 2015, 137–38), Kjersti Hellesøy (Hellesøy 2014, 257–58), Dorthe Refslund Christensen (Christensen 2005, 227) and Stephen A. Kent (Kent 2001, 95 and Kent and Lane 2008, 117) have accepted the critics' argument that Hubbard and the Church of Scientology intentionally lied about his grades, graduation and civil engineering degree. Only scholar J. Gordon Melton noted that the church erred—not Hubbard—albeit without providing any explanations for his claim (Melton 2000, 58 and 75). Indeed, much evidence shows that Hubbard openly discussed his poor grades and nonexistent college degree. In light of the number and variations of discrepancies regarding Hubbard's alleged civil engineering degree claims, it became evident that a thorough, exhaustive, and comprehensive review was needed to evaluate not only how these discrepancies originated, but who if anybody was doing the deceiving.

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the assistance of the History and Genealogy Department at the Los Angeles Public Library, the librarians at the George Washington University Special Collections Department, and the archivists at the National Archives and Records Administration. Margaret Lake of *ScientologyMyths.com*, Michael Snoeck at the website *WiseOldGoat.com*, Max Hauri of the *True Source Scientology Foundation* and Andreas Gross of the blog *Scientology: Original 1972* aided by providing hard-to-find original Scientology resources. Patricia Krenik, Lousie and Karen Williams, and Antony Phillips also assisted with providing the years of births and deaths for many lesser known figures. Personal thanks go to Randy Smith, Kay Christenson, Mary Blackford, Tristan Camacho and most of all Olga Fragoso for their tireless support and patience in reading, editing, listening, researching, suggesting and revising the numerous drafts of this paper. Finally, special thanks go to Professors J. Gordon Melton and Massimo Introvigne for having agreed to read and ultimately publish this paper at the highest professional level, and of course the peer reviewers for their useful comments.

The Current Narrative

Although such discrepancies at first might seem relatively insignificant to most historians, because Hubbard founded Dianetics and Scientology and had a large impact on millions of people, his critics have not only scrutinized his life and all purported claims, but also have used any discrepancies as evidence to discredit all of these subjects as being rife with deception. Malko justified why the civil engineering discrepancy remained central to the critics' arguments after having alleged Hubbard made these claims:

Hubbard's career at George Washington University is important because many of his researches and published conclusions have been supported by his claims to be not only a graduate engineer, but "a member of the first United States course in formal education in what is called today nuclear physics." The facts are that Hubbard never received a Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering. He flunked freshman physics, was placed on probation in September of 1931, and failed to return to the university after the 1931–32 academic year. In later years, in addition to the "C.E." which he allowed to appear after his name, he added a "Ph.D." (Malko 1970, 31).

As with many other critics, Malko drew his conclusion largely from the December 1959 Church of Scientology publication *A Brief Biography of L. Ron Hubbard*, which stated that Hubbard earned a "B.S. in Civil Engineering" from

George Washington University in 1934 (Eddy 1959, 4). Yet Hubbard dropped out in 1932, never having completed his civil engineering degree. Furthermore, as critics emphasize, most of his grades were below average (NARA 1932).

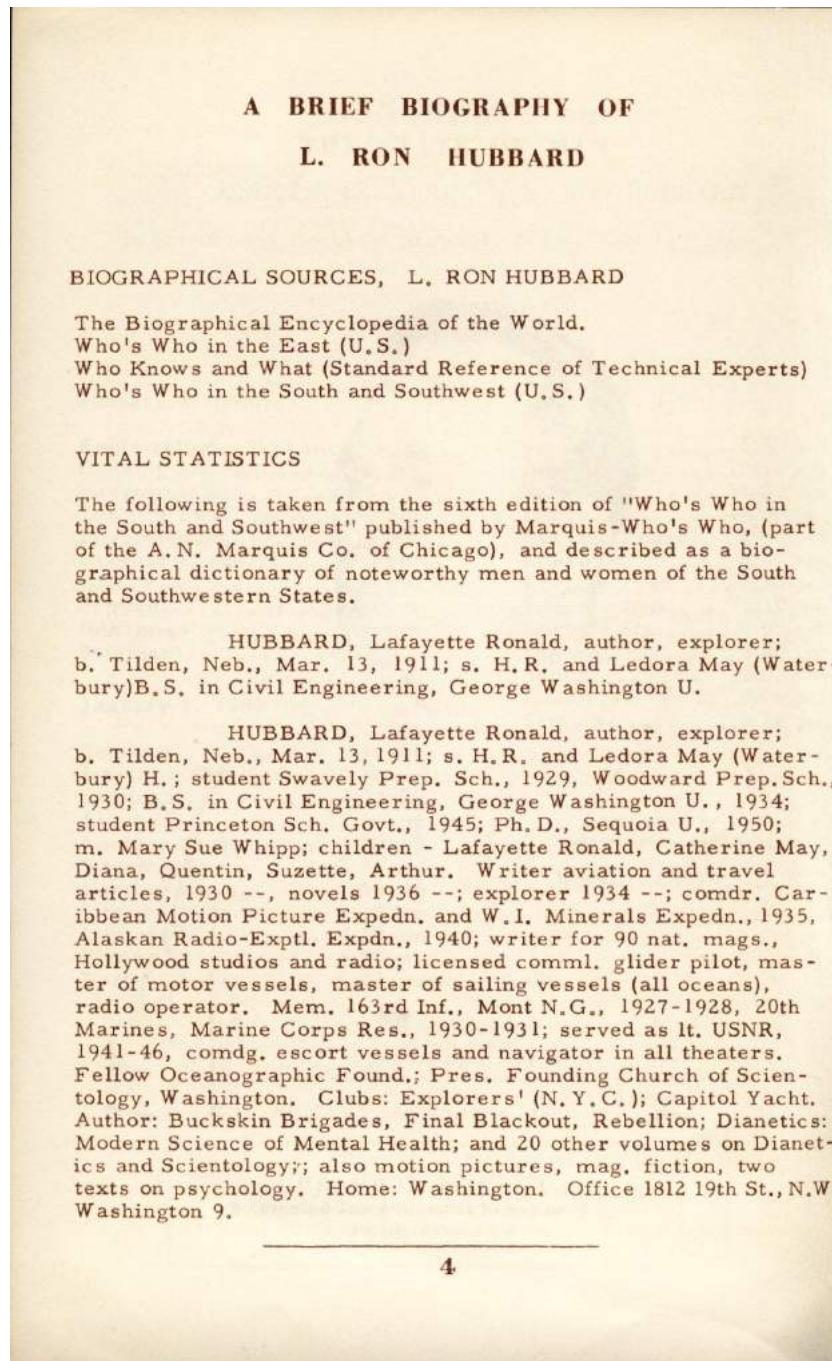


Figure 1. *A Brief Biography of L. Ron Hubbard* as published by the Church of Scientology in 1959.

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY Office of the Registrar Washington, D. C.									
Official Transcript of the Record of... Lafayette Donald Hubbard Address... 5058 P Street, N.W., Washington, D. C. Date of Admission... September, 1930. Dates of Attendance... 30-31, 32 31, 31-32. Graduated... XXXX With degree of... XXXX Present status... is entitled to a statement of honorable dismissal. Entrance credits: Sources... Woodward Preparatory School, Washington, D. C.									
College credits in The School of Engineering.									
Year	Catalogue Number	Descriptive Title				Semester Hours	GRADES		
							First Semester	Second Semester	Summer Session
30-31 English 1/2 Chemistry 5/4 Mech. Engg. 3/4 Math. 12 Physical Education German 1/2 Math. 19 Civil Engg. 23/26 Physics 13 Math. 19 Math. 20 Math. 12 English 115/116 Physics 12 Physics 14						G	C	B	
						8	D	D	
						8	B	C	
						(3)	P	-	
						2	C	A	
						(6)	T	T	
						(3)	-	P	
						4	-	-	B
						(3)	B	-	
						3	D	-	
					3	-	B		
					3	B	B		
					3	-	D		
					(2)	-	P		
		Total.....44							
Faculty action: <i>Placed on probation for deficiency in scholarship September, 1931.</i>									
<i>Not valid without Seal</i> Transcript issued to Lucius C. Dunn, Commander, U.S. Navy (Ret.) Date May 27, 1941. <i>Intelligence Officer, U.S. Navy Yard.</i> <i>S. Deane</i> <small>REGISTRAR</small>									
<i>This transcript is under no conditions to be released to the student.</i> <small>PSA-SM141</small>									

Figure 2. Courtesy of Elisabeth Kaplan, George Washington University Special Collections Department.

Ex-Scientologist Attack allowed the church to explain:

Scientology official [at the time] Vaughn Young says the idea that 'C.E.' stands for 'Civil Engineer' is mistaken. Apparently the initials represents [sic] a certificate awarded in the early days of Scientology (Atack 1990, 59).

Yet no Scientology documents supported Young's statement; while there were B. Scns. (Bachelors of Scientology) and D. Scns. (Doctors of Scientology), no C.E. appeared outside of the C.E.C.S.—the Committee of Examination, Certification and Services (Hubbard Communications Office 1955, 4 and Steves 1954, 1 & 8). Even if one considered that C.E. could have indicated other Scientology titles like "Course Examiner" or "Chief Executive," no other Scientologist had a "C.E." after their name in any church publications around this time except for Hubbard. The C.E. most definitely referred to Hubbard as a Civil Engineer. Thus, it would appear that both L. Ron Hubbard and the Church of Scientology lied about both his grades and college degree.

Not only have popular journalists and Scientology critics ended their investigations here, but most religious and historical scholars have based their conclusions on this same data. Urban grounded his hagiography theory around Hubbard's purported claims of having a degree:

Hubbard claimed that he had mastered the sciences, studying engineering [and] atomic physics at George Washington University [... but] had merely enrolled in one introductory course on molecular and nuclear physics at George Washington University, receiving a grade of F [...] Thus Hubbard's autobiography is perhaps best understood not as an accurate historical chronicle but rather as a kind of "hagiographic mythology"—that is, an idealized narrative composed self-consciously of mythic themes (Urban 2015, 137–38).

In an earlier analysis Urban even emphasized that "in mathematics [Hubbard] earned nothing higher than a D" after having interpreted his data through a critical lens:

[W]e accept the Hubbard story not as an accurate historical document but as an intentionally constructed 'hagiographic mythology' [...] Perhaps the one truly unique feature of Hubbard's biography is that *he was himself a prolific author of science fiction and fantasy tales and thus had an unusually creative hand in the elaboration of his own narrative* (Urban 2011, 32).

Urban's views directly influenced Hellesøy, who repeated his narrative:

Hugh Urban characterizes the official biography of Hubbard, as presented by the CoS, as a kind of hagiography, an idealized narrative built around mythic themes [...] Hubbard went to George Washington University for two years. According to the hagiographic account, Hubbard was an engineer [...] Critical investigation has demonstrated that he never even finished any of his degrees (Hellesøy 2014, 257–58).

Christensen then used these conclusions as both the title and subject of her essay: "Inventing L. Ron Hubbard: On the Construction and Maintenance of the

Hagiographic Mythology of Scientology's Founder" (Christensen 2005, 227). Meanwhile, Kent used Miller's claims regarding these discrepancies as the basis for diagnosing Hubbard with a narcissistic personality disorder (Kent and Lane 2008, 117). Despite popular and academic agreement that Hubbard claimed to have earned an undergraduate degree with good grades, virtually no evidence corroborated these conclusions.

The Scandal of Bibliographies

The index page to *A Brief Biography* revealed Elanore Eddy (1921–1994) as this issue's *Ability* editor—not Hubbard (Eddy 1959, 2). Nevertheless, Cooper stated that "his son [L. Ron Hubbard, Jr.] claims his father really wrote it [*A Brief Biography of L. Ron Hubbard*]" (Cooper 1971, 160). If L. Ron Hubbard Jr.'s claims were true, then it stands to reason that his father either wrote under the pseudonym Elanore Eddy or wrote it and placed the blame on her. If not, then Eddy either wrote it or copied the biography from outside sources. Regarding the pseudonym argument, a photo from the 20th Scientology A.C.C. (Advanced Clinical Congress) in Washington, D.C. showed that Elanore Eddy existed (*Ability* 1958, 10).



Standing, l to r: Miriam St. Georges, Tony Dunleavy, Mark Roberts, Ted Dunn, Andy Parlogean, Jack Horner, Oswald Swallow, Margaret Watson, Phyllis Fletcher.
Seated, l to r: Elda Ilger, Connie Godfrey, Elanore Eddy, John Roberts, Helen Sandfuchs, Melody Horner, Kay Miner, Max Clay.

Figure 3. Photo with Elanore Eddy as published by the Church of Scientology in 1958.

With the pseudonym possibility eliminated, what follows hereafter will examine the sources and therefore the basis of authorship claims regarding *A Brief Biography of L. Ron Hubbard*. The 1959 Church of Scientology biography of Hubbard cited four sources:

- The Biographical Encyclopedia of the World,
- Who's Who In The East (U.S.)
- Who Knows and What (Standard Reference of Technical Experts)
- Who's Who In the South and Southwest (U.S.).

Although this issue of *Ability* magazine provided no dates nor specifics regarding which editions of these books were used, it also stated: “[t]he following is taken from the sixth edition of ‘Who’s Who In the South and Southwest’” (Eddy 1959, 4). This would explain why the entry for L. Ron Hubbard in *Who’s Who in the South and Southwest* appeared virtually identical to *A Brief Biography of L. Ron Hubbard*. The Scientology biography virtually replicated the *Who’s Who* entry, with the exception of some cases where it used unabridged terms, for example “Engring.” turned into “Engineering,” presumably for improved readability (*Marquis Who’s Who* 1959, 395). The fault therefore did not lie entirely with Eddy, for she accurately transcribed Hubbard’s biography from *Who’s Who in the South and Southwest*. Rather, her error was in not fact-checking against the other three sources. Nevertheless, Cooper claimed that Hubbard directly lied about this information:

In his *Brief Biography*, he said he had graduated from Columbian University and in *Who’s Who in the Southwest* (they claim he supplied the data) (Cooper 1971, 162).

Cooper could not have used either source as the basis for this claim, primarily because neither *A Brief Biography* nor *Who’s Who in the South and Southwest* even mentioned Columbian University. In fact, no printed Scientology materials even referenced Columbian University, except for *A Report to Members of Parliament on Scientology*, which mentioned Columbian College:

L. R. Hubbard attended Swavely Prep. School, Manassas, Virginia, and Woodward Prep. School, Washington DC, USA and Columbia [sic] College, George Washington University, Washington DC in 1932. Attended Princeton University post-graduate (Public Relations Bureau 1969).

The World-Wide Public Relations Bureau published this document, however, not Hubbard. For that matter, it remains unclear from *when* she sourced her

information, as Columbian University was the name for George Washington University before 1904, while Columbian College actually resides within George Washington University, itself once called Columbian College (GW Libraries 2017). These facts have revealed Cooper's statement to be entirely unfounded. Interestingly, although Cooper's aside “they claim he supplied the data” further attempted to assign the entry's authorship to Hubbard and away from the publishers of *Marquis Who's Who*, when coupled with the fact that Eddy transcribed *Who's Who in the South and Southwest* almost verbatim, the question of authorship shifted from one of Hubbard or Eddy to that of Hubbard or the *Marquis Who's Who* editors.

In any case, *A Brief Biography of L. Ron Hubbard* must have cited *Who's Who* volumes before 1960 because the *Ability* issue in which it appeared had a 1959 copyright with an upcoming congress listed on 1 January 1960. As the sixth edition of *Who's Who in the South and Southwest* published in 1959, this would have also made it the last Who's Who published before *A Brief Biography*. As L. Ron Hubbard did not appear in earlier editions of *Who's Who in the South and Southwest*, and because The A. N. Marquis Company also held the rights to both *Who Knows—and What* and *Who's Who in the East*, the information in the earlier editions of one of these series almost certainly influenced the later editions of the other series, especially if used as a means of data verification.

The next earliest entries for L. Ron Hubbard appeared in both the 1949 and 1954 editions of *Who Knows—and What Among Authorities, Experts, and the Specially Informed*, which *Ability* magazine mistitled as “Who's Who and What (Standard Reference of Technical Experts).” Both books incorrectly showed Hubbard with a “BS '34 (George Washington U)” (Marquis 1949, 306 and Marquis 1954, 327–28). These two books also noted that his last academic achievement was “Student '45 (Sch Mil Govt, Princeton)” (Marquis 1949, 306 and Marquis 1954, 327–28). Although Cooper cited neither of these books, she further claimed that Hubbard also lied about his time at Princeton:

As for the Princeton School of Government that he says he attended, it was the Princeton School of *Military* Government, and he went there only three months in what was possibly a war service course (Cooper 1971, 163).

If Hubbard submitted the data as Cooper claimed, then he did not lie about this statement. Hubbard definitely completed additional Naval training from 1944–45 at the School of Military Government in Princeton University (Dyson 1979).

Furthermore, both the 1949 and 1954 editions of *Who Knows—and What Among Authorities, Experts, and the Specially Informed* by Marquis Who's Who clearly listed him as a “Student '45 (Sch Mil Govt, Princeton).”

What rendered Cooper’s claim all the more unfounded was that Hubbard explicitly explained that he studied military government at Princeton in a 29 October 1955 lecture:

During the latter part of the war, I got the notion that nobody knew what they were fighting about so I took the opportunity of taking some training in military government [...] And I went back to Princeton University and took a course in military government (Hubbard 1955c, 5).

Hubbard explained in another lecture on 7 July 1957 that he did not attend Columbian College:

I used to sit over in the engineering school and some of my pals in the Columbian College would come over and they’d say, “Oh, my God, I can’t pass this examination or write this paper.” And I’d take their textbook on psychology and write the paper for them. They’d do my mathematics! (Hubbard 1957c, 4).

While true that in an earlier 19 July 1954 lecture Hubbard mentioned Princeton University, he did not mention its school of military government: “I am talking to you now from material given to me by the professor of ethnology at Princeton University where I studied” (Hubbard 1954a, 6). Also, in a 15 September 1964 lecture he omitted the word military:

Now, you maybe think it isn’t a new technology, but I was taught at Princeton in their school of government and taught very well on a lot of these points (Hubbard 1964b, 16).

Neither of these two latter statements supported Cooper’s claim or contradicted Hubbard’s previous two statements, however, as all of their contexts involved what Hubbard had learned about military governance.

Cooper’s Bibliography of Sources Consulted page further revealed that she ignored the other books cited in *A Brief Biography*—let alone their prior editions—and several primary Scientology sources (Cooper 1971, Bibliography). Had Cooper reviewed the other cited book series, then she would have noticed discrepancies in the 1946 *The Biographical Encyclopedia of the World*, the only entry in any of the four series with a photo of Hubbard. This entry also contained significant departures from later entries, as it did not list his time at the Princeton School of Military Government in 1945, which occurred one year before publication. Although the entry still incorrectly showed Hubbard with

a degree in Civil Engineering from George Washington University, it better resembled his college transcript as it stated that he graduated in 1932, the year he left (Institute for Research in Biography 1946a, 946). This discrepancy in graduation years suggested that there were alterations that occurred in earlier series.

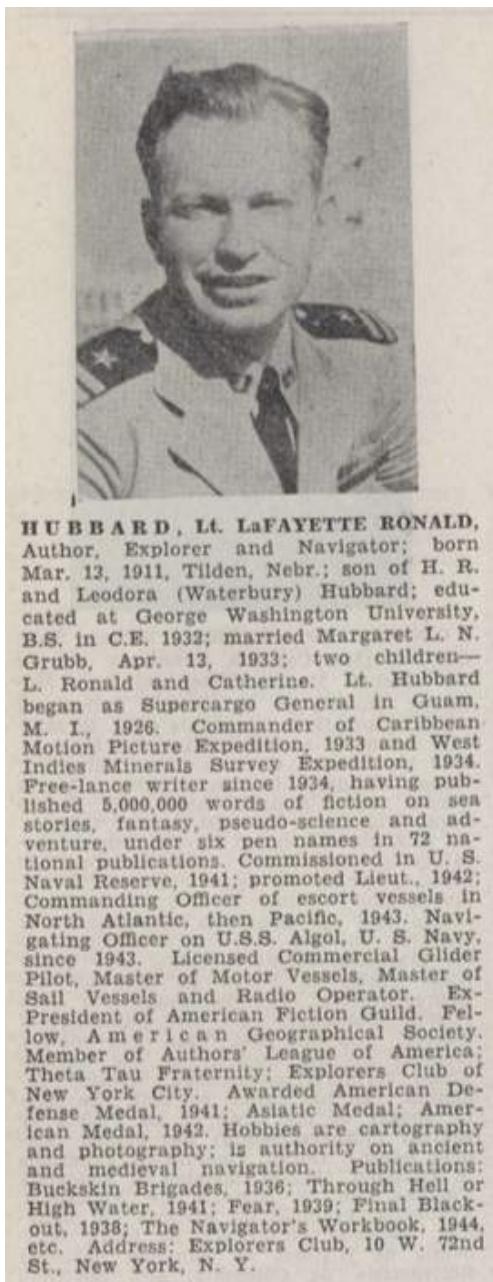


Figure 4. 1946 *The Biographical Encyclopedia of the World* entry for L. Ron Hubbard.

The *Who's Who in the East* series fully explained the errors. While the third edition only showed Hubbard's name, the reference page indicated a full entry in prior "Marquis biographical reference works" as per the asterisk by Hubbard's name (Marquis 1951b, 1223 and Marquis 1951c, 1203). Under the copyright page, however, the only prior "Marquis biographical reference" was volume two from 1948 (Marquis 1951a, Copyright Notice). That volume once again did not show Hubbard at the Princeton School of Military Government (Marquis 1948, 854). This omission would undermine some claims that Hubbard inflated his college achievements if "he supplied the data" to the Marquis publishers. The 1948 volume showed Hubbard with a B.S. in Civil Engineering from George Washington University in 1934, which would suggest that an error originated between the somewhat incorrect 1946 *Biographical Encyclopedia of the World* and the entirely incorrect 1948 *Who's Who in the East*. The 1944 first edition of *Who's Who in the East*, however, not only had the earliest published public biography of L. Ron Hubbard, but it was also the only version to show him having attended George Washington University from 1930–32 without having graduated (Biographical Press 1944a, 1150). If Hubbard did submit information to the publishers as his son and Cooper have claimed, then Hubbard did so correctly and honestly at the very outset, which directly disproved both of their contingent statements that he lied.



Figure 5. 1944 *Who's Who In the East* entry for L. Ron Hubbard.
Courtesy of Fred Marks at *Marquis Who's Who*.

Reconciling Differences

The discovery of the change in publishers after volume one has strongly supported the argument that the publishers caused the errors. Yet despite several *Marquis Who's Who* prefaces having stated that the editors sought out potential entrants and verified data by all means available, Cooper asserted that “they [Marquis Who's Who] claim he supplied the data.” To help resolve these conflicting statements, former *Marquis Who's Who* Managing Editor Alison Perruso clarified that the “information was all found publicly” and that “L. Ron Hubbard [...] did not voluntarily submit information to us” (Alison Perruso, e-mail message to author, 1 September 2015). Nevertheless, *Who's Who* publications sometimes sought out and requested information from potential subjects, such as with Hubbard’s military supervisor Herbert Keeney Fenn (1890–1951) (Booker 1942). To clarify whether Hubbard sent his biography upon request, Perruso further explained, “there is usually no submission from the individual themselves...as is the case here [with Hubbard]” (Alison Perruso, e-mail message to author, 19 August 2015). Therefore, Hubbard not only never submitted information to *Marquis Who's Who* but this revelation entirely disproved both Cooper’s and L. Ron Hubbard Jr.’s claims. In other words, the 1948 *Marquis Who's Who in the East* used outside information, including both the 1944 *Who's Who in the East* by Biographical Press, which correctly showed that Hubbard attended George Washington University from 1930–32 without a degree, and the 1946 *Biographical Encyclopedia of the World*, which incorrectly showed him having graduated with a civil engineering degree in 1932.

Although this new information and explanation covered all of A. N. Marquis’ publications—*Who's Who in the East*, *Who's Who in the South and Southwest*, and *Who Knows—and What Among Authorities, Experts, and the Specially Informed*—the “1932 B.S. in C.E.” in the 1946 *Biographical Encyclopedia of the World* by Institute for Research in Biography, Inc. required further explanation. Its preface stated, “the aid of leading authorities in many fields was obtained as well as the cooperation of responsible heads of government bureaus and departments” as well as “Intensive efforts were made to obtain the material directly from the subjects themselves” (Institute for Research in Biography

1946b, I & III). These statements indicated that the errors came from the government, other publishers or from Hubbard.

The correct data in the 1944 *Who's Who in the East*, however, cleared Hubbard. It stated that "every reasonable effort has been made to procure the requisite data from persons deemed eligible for inclusion" and that "[i]n every possible instance the facts were procured at first hand" (Biographical Press 1944b, VI–VII). If the correct information came directly from Hubbard in 1944, then the errors in 1946 resulted due to internal errors or outside sources. If not, the possibility of Hubbard or Scientologists having sent them incorrect information in 1945–46 would appear unlikely. After all, the Church of Scientology incorporated in December 1953 (State of New Jersey 1953). Dianeticists, who later became Scientologists, existed only after Hubbard published *Dianetics* in May 1950 (Kent 2001, 95). These events occurred several years after the 1946 *The Biographical Encyclopedia of the World* mistakes. Even if one made the case that *Dianetics* first appeared in 1948 as *The Original Thesis*, it had a relatively small circulation and did not receive a formal print until after the success of *Dianetics* in 1950, and the error occurred at least two years earlier (Hubbard 1951a, "Other Books By" Page).

Clearing the Err

Hubbard also addressed these biographical errors in an interview featured in *LOOK*, the second most popular magazine in 1950:

In his youth Hubbard traipsed around the world with his father, a lieutenant commander in the Navy, and ultimately wound up at George Washington University Engineering School. His biography in 'Who's Who in the East' [1948 edition] says that he got his bachelor's degree in civil engineering in 1934. His publishers, Hermitage House, Inc., identify him as a mathematician and theoretical philosopher. Hubbard himself finds this somewhat embarrassing, because, as he is quick to tell interviewers, 'I never took my degree.' He also deprecates the inaccuracy of his 'Who's Who' biography, which lists him as an 'explorer since 1934' (Maisel 1950, 82).

Hubbard also knew about at least one if not both of the entries in the *Who Knows—and What Among Authorities, Experts, and the Specially Informed* series since 1955, which he directly mentioned in the first *Ability* issue: "'Who Knows and What,' the companion book to 'Who's Who in America,' which gives

the professional experts of the country, and which you can find in any good library, lists me as an expert in psychology" (Hubbard 1955a, 10). Both the 1949 and 1954 editions of *Who Knows—and What Among Authorities, Experts, and the Specially Informed* described Hubbard as one with expertise on "Expedition organization and psychology" and "studies on prevention [of] psychic breakdown and handling of men under stress of expedition conditions. Author: Expedition Personnel; Fear; The Anatomy of Madness; Man Under Stress, and others; also articles in field [of psychology]" (Marquis 1949, 306 and Marquis Who's Who 1954, 327–28). Except for the fiction novel *Fear*, the other entries were indeed non-fiction articles about psychology. The 1954 edition of *Who Knows—and What* also omitted his 1953 honorary Sequoia University PhD, which, when coupled with his interview five years earlier, further undermined criticisms that he inflated his degrees. Furthermore, in one of his earliest lectures on 23 September 1950, Hubbard explained his lack of formal education and failure to graduate:

I had neglected to go to high school. The last formal school I had attended was Grant School in Oakland and my father said I had to go to university, so he sent me to a prep school in Virginia [Swavely] where I studied for about four months and took the New York Board of Regents and got into George Washington University. [...] They regretted it from there on because I never seemed to stay with the curriculum. When it came to studying to be an engineer [...] At last they said, "Well, after all, you're not going to practice engineering. We might as well pass you in a few of these courses." This was a great relief to me, since my father was bound and determined that the only measure of excellence was 'A.' My only measure of excellence was whether or not I learned anything about what I wanted to know (Hubbard 1950, 6).

In that same lecture, Hubbard even described flunking: "Now, old Professor [Thomas] Brown [1892–1962] was teaching, for the first time in the United States, atomic and molecular phenomena [...] And I took the course and of course flunked it" (Hubbard 1950, 7). Similarly, Hubbard casually explained in a 13 April 1957 lecture that he flunked in math: "I always flunk mathematics" (Hubbard 1957a, 77). As critics and scholars have been apt to show, his college transcript grades confirmed both of these statements.

Moreover, Hubbard never described attending college beyond 1932, as per a 30 December 1954 lecture: "There's a terrific world. What's [man] going to do with it? In 1932 my classmates had decided what he was going to do with it. He was going to blow it up, that's what he was going to do with it" (Hubbard 1954b,

19–20). He also explained in another lecture that he got bad grades and then referenced 1932 as an end point:

I was a member of the first class in nuclear physics (we called it atomic and molecular phenomena then of which nuclear physics, by the way, is only one small part). And I was a member of the first class that taught this subject at George Washington University—got the worst grades there. [...] But nearly all nuclear physicists, atomic and molecular phenomena boys—Buck Rogers boys, we were known as [...] For all the years between '32, let us say, and 1943, nobody had any use for a Buck Rogers boy (Hubbard 1957a, 74–75).

Hubbard's articles never mentioned George Washington University beyond 1932 either, as seen in a 1957 *Ability*:

The other thing I did was to take a Geiger counter and make a test of Washington. A little earlier this Geiger counter had been giving false evidence because the stick used with the counter, as will happen, evidently had some uranium stuck to it. But with the counter in good operating order and clean, it was discovered that the background count of Washington, D.C., is the same as it was in 1932 when I was going to George Washington University and studying radiation (Hubbard 1957b, 2–3).

Nearly a decade later, Hubbard again repeated in a 7 July 1964 lecture that he did not have a college degree and mocked this repeated question from journalists:

I stayed in Washington one hot summer to finish off an awful lot of engineering courses, and so forth, that I needed for credit, you know? People stand around and they say I haven't got any degrees, I haven't got any of this and so forth—they ought to been there that summer, man. I'd much rather been out flying airplanes, because I was having a ball flying airplanes. Instead of that I had to sit in this horrible—they didn't have any air conditioning in Washington and Washington is cool at 95, in most summers, you know? Sitting down there at GW, sweating over this stuff. And one of the courses was materials of construction. I could have cheerfully have choked the guy who ever wrote that textbook. He had the organization facility of an army officer. And my God, brick and concrete, brick and concrete and pebbles and aggregate and the streak characteristic of marble and the tension of steel—were all in the same paragraph. You just couldn't sort it out. Nothing—nothing was ever over here grouped. [...] And with the thermometer bouncing around a hundred, you know, sitting in a roaring hot classroom, you see, trying to walk my way through this—that's why I almost kill reporters who say, 'What degrees do you have?' It's just that one [audience laughs] (Hubbard 1964a).

Wordplay on “degrees” aside, Hubbard's description of the Materials of Construction matched the summer course catalogue and his transcript confirmed his enrollment (George Washington University 1931, 260 and NARA 1932).

Hubbard did state in a 21 January 1961 lecture that he studied nuclear physics in college and later mentioned the year 1934. This sentiment echoed the apparent uselessness of “Buck Rogers boys” from the 13 April 1957 lecture in which he said the lack of general interest in nuclear physicists was true from 1932–1943. Yet, he did not claim to have graduated nor have any serious interest in the subject:

A long, long time ago, I was in a university called George Washington University over in the United States, Washington, DC. I was studying nuclear physics. And I said, “Well, the best thing to do is just to go on and study nuclear physics because my father wants me to. That’s a good reason. And when I finally get through studying nuclear physics, why, I’ll write for a living.” And that’s the way it worked out because nobody wanted a nuclear physicist in 1934. Nobody had anything to do with a nuclear physicist in 1934. We were the Buck Rogers boys (Hubbard 1961a, 3–4).

Hubbard also mentioned that he got a degree in a 13 April 1957 lecture. Although not directly stated, what he referred to was his 1953 honorary PhD degree from Sequoia University awarded for *Dianetics*, not for civil engineering or nuclear physics, as evident from the context:

It’s amusing that I know anything about the subject [nuclear physics] because the basic reason for working in the field of the mind and Scientology and Dianetics, was based upon the use to which this information was being put in the early thirties. [...] But as far as nuclear physics is concerned, the only use I ever made of any of the material, directly and intimately, was to try to define the tiniest particle or wavelength of energy in this universe. I went out on this subject as a special subject on which I wished to base a thesis, and suddenly realized that I probably would find that small particle in the human mind. [...] But this search for the smallest particle led me over to the psychology department of the George Washington University [...] There wasn’t anybody in the psychology department that could do more than add up a column of figures in arithmetic. They were not mathematicians. They did not know how to develop a theory mathematically and extrapolate it in such a way as to get a prediction of what the condition was. [...] I said, ‘This could be a serious thing. We are given to believe that the field of the mind is very definitely covered, that a great deal is known about it. And I have just been studying a subject which threatens to disturb the mental equilibrium of the world in future years, nuclear physics. Someday, someday, somebody will want to know something about the mind.’ And so I went on about my work; I studied, I eventually got a degree in the subject, whatever good that was (Hubbard 1957a, 74–79).

The work and subject that Hubbard “got a degree in” was for his researches into the mind as presented in *Dianetics* awarded by Sequoia University in 1953, although even here Hubbard downplayed that degree. Regardless, Hubbard never

claimed to have graduated from George Washington University with a degree in civil engineering or anything else.

Only Melton noticed that Hubbard never claimed to have good grades or a civil engineering degree. Melton correctly noted, “Hubbard never claimed the kind of formal academic credentials which the average scientist or physician possesses” (Melton 2000, 58). Melton did not elaborate, although he acknowledged the historical discrepancies in a related endnote:

It is the case that some of the biographical sketches of Hubbard published by the Church of Scientology contained mistakes and implied credentials for Hubbard which he did not possess (and had never claimed). In its most recent publication, it has moved to correct those errors (Melton 2000, 75).

The Birth of a Notion

Without reviewing all of the evidence, however, Melton’s claim and endnote may seem unfounded. Thus Kent, who cited Miller as his source, argued that Hubbard deceived his followers:

For at least two books that he wrote [*The Problems of Work* and *Scientology: The Fundamentals of Thought*], Hubbard more-than-exaggerated his credentials when he identified himself as ‘L. Ron Hubbard, C. E. [Civil Engineer], PhD.’, even though he had dropped out of college and never finished his Bachelor’s degree or received a degree in any form of engineering (Miller, 1987: 57). Despite these and many other deceptions about his credentials, he was completely self-referential when instructing his followers about how to do their job assignments or posts (Kent and Lane 2008, 127).

Kent drew this conclusion partly due to early Scientology book editions which showed “C.E.” after Hubbard’s name, specifically *Creative Learning: A Scientological Experiment in Schools* (Silcox and Maynard 1955), *All About Radiation* (HASI 1957, 39), *Scientology: 8–80* (Hubbard 1952a), *Scientology: The Fundamentals of Thought* (Hubbard 1956b), *Scientology 8–8008* (Hubbard 1953 and Hubbard 1956a), *The Problems of Work* (Hubbard 1956c) and *Self-Analysis in Dianetics* (Hubbard 1952b). Kent, however, made the same error as Cooper and Armstrong, because Hubbard not only openly admitted that he held no degrees in his lectures, he also never claimed to in any books. In fact, Victor H. Silcox (1917–2002) and Len J. Maynard (1912–1984) wrote *Creative Learning: A Scientological Experiment in Schools*, not Hubbard, although they

expanded on his work and thanked him for the inspiration (Silcox and Maynard 1955, III). The editors of the Hubbard Association of Scientologists International (HASI) in London and Phoenix also referred to Hubbard as a C.E. in the first editions of *All About Radiation*, *Scientology: 8-80*, *Scientology: The Fundamentals of Thought* and the first three editions of *Scientology: 8-8008*, not Hubbard. They continued to use this title in later editions from HASI and other affiliate printers—not unlike what happened with the *Who's Who* entries. Only the Hubbard Dianetic Research Foundation omitted the C.E. in both the original 1951 manuscript for *Science of Survival* (with Hubbard's handwritten notes) and a signed copy of the original manuscript for *Dianetics 1955!* (Hubbard 1951b and Hubbard 1954c, Copyright Notice).

Unique to *Science of Survival*, *The Problems of Work* and *Self-Analysis in Dianetics*, these books defined Hubbard as an engineer in their introductions upon citing *Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* as the source—again without years or editions. Presumably the October 1951 *Science of Survival* used the 1951 Funk & Wagnalls dictionary entry (Hubbard 1951c, i) because no entry for Dianetics appeared in the 1950 Funk & Wagnalls dictionary, whereas the entry first appeared verbatim in the 1951 *Funk & Wagnalls New Practical Standard Dictionary* (Funk 1951, 1565). An identical definition by Funk & Wagnalls repeated in *The Problems of Work* from 1956 (Funk 1956, 1563 and Hubbard 1956c, v). Because no entries for “*Scientology*” appeared in Funk & Wagnalls, it would appear that *The Problems of Work* editors copied that definition verbatim from an earlier *Ability* (Hubbard Communications Office 1955, Back Cover).

Only London-based Derricke Ridgway Publishing attributed a definition of Dianetics with Hubbard as a C.E. to Funk & Wagnalls in the introduction to the 1952 edition of *Self-Analysis in Dianetics* (Hubbard 1952b, Frontispiece). No records supported this citation, however, because the Funk & Wagnalls dictionary entries for Dianetics remained consistent from 1951 to 1960, with all having referred to Hubbard as an “American engineer” (Funk 1952, 1565). Notably, Hubbard directly criticized Derricke Ridgway in a 30 December 1956 lecture:

Now, up to that time, two books were in distribution in Great Britain: *Dianetics: Modern Science of Mental Health* (British edition, watered down. They like the American edition much better) and *Self-Analysis in Dianetics*. And those two books, hardcover books, were

being published by Derricke Ridgway in London. And Derricke Ridgway was making so much money that he couldn't find anything to do, so he had to make that scarce. And not because of those two books, but because of several other factors—these two books remaining the two solvent items in his inventory—he went bankrupt (Hubbard 1956f, 8).

Hubbard had hinted earlier about the bankruptcy claims, having explained that Derricke Ridgway “squirreled” (altered) Scientology writings: “The biggest squirrel in Great Britain, Derricke Ridgway, was recently to be found in bankruptcy court. I wonder how he got there? We wouldn’t know anything about that, of course!” (Hubbard 1955b, 2–3). Indeed, a 1959 notification of dividends mentioned the 1954 bankruptcy case, which indicated that it went bankrupt the prior year—or recently, as Hubbard wrote (*The London Gazette* 1959, 4131). The only variation in any Funk & Wagnalls definitions from this period appeared in the 1959–1960 *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language International Edition and Britannica World Language Dictionary* which referred to Hubbard as a “U.S. engineer” (Preble 1960, 354). Even so, it did not resemble Derricke Ridgway’s “C.E.” definition. Whether Hubbard directly bankrupted Derricke Ridgway or not would likely require additional research, however, that he attacked the one publisher that clearly misattributed citations only countered the arguments that Hubbard claimed to have been a C.E.

From Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary:

di.a.net'ics noun A system for the analysis, control and development of human thought evolved from a set of co-ordinated axioms which also provide techniques for the treatment of a wide range of mental disorders and organic diseases: term and doctrines introduced by L. Ron Hubbard, C.E., D.Sen., American engineer, (Gr. *dianoetikos*—dia, through, plus *noos*, mind) di.a.net'ic adj.

Figure 6. Funk & Wagnalls dictionary entry from the 1952 edition of *Self-Analysis in Dianetics*, published by Derricke Ridgway.

DI·A·NET'·ICS noun A system for the analysis, control, and development of human thought evolved from a set of co-ordinated axioms which also provide techniques for the treatment of a wide range of mental disorders and organic diseases: term and doctrines introduced by L. Ron Hubbard, American engineer. [*<Gr. dianoetikos* <*dia*, through, + *noos*, mind] — **DI·A·NET'·IC** adj.

Figure 7. Funk & Wagnalls dictionary entry from the 1951 edition of *Funk & Wagnalls New Practical Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, published by Funk & Wagnalls.

Even after the Church of Scientology corrected the errors in its biographies, outside publications continued to make these mistakes for decades. Later editions of *Who's Who in the South and Southwest* kept the incorrect information while adding a “postgrad” to “Princeton Sch. Govt.” in the 1973–74 edition (*Marquis Who's Who* 1973, 353). This apparently influenced *Who's Who in America*, which also added a “postgrad” through 1976–77, retracted it in 1978–79, but then added “student George Washington U., 1934” (*Marquis Who's Who* 1976, 1520–21 and *Marquis Who's Who* 1978a, 1574). Then *Who's Who in the South and Southwest* corrected the “postgrad” error in the 1978–79 edition, but also added “student George Washington U., 1934” (*Marquis Who's Who* 1978b, 349). Meanwhile, *Who's Who in the East* kept the graduation error through 1986 (*Marquis Who's Who* 1984, 362). *Who's Who in America* fully corrected Hubbard’s record in the 1980–81 edition, but only thirty years after Hubbard publicly acknowledged the errors (*Marquis Who's Who* 1980, 1631). Critics hostile to Hubbard naturally ignored this data, including ex-Scientology archivist Armstrong who claimed to intimately know and have Hubbard’s biographical materials and yet never mentioned these discrepancies between the *Who's Who* books and Scientology books in any of his court transcripts (Armstrong 2009a and 2009b). Scientology’s final use of the C.E. title occurred in November 1963 (James 1963, 12), while a 1977 Sea Org Information Letter officially removed the C.E. title and canceled all previous biographies (Sea Organization 1977, 2). As the Church of Scientology corrected the errors in Hubbard’s biography well before even *Marquis Who's Who* did, this undercuts a central claim in the hagiography narrative. Rather, this overlooked evidence has instead indicated that several others, both his supporters and critics, failed to check the sources of the discrepancies.

Although the cause of the initial error in the 1948 *Who's Who in the East* remains unknown, the recent discoveries have all pointed to a *Marquis Who's Who* clerical error in 1945. The first and only publication with the correct information was the 1944 *Who's Who in the East* by Biographical Press, then the first error appeared in the 1946 *Biographical Encyclopedia of the World* by Institute for Research in Biography, Inc., until a completely wrong entry appeared in the 1948 *Who's Who in the East*, published by The A. N. Marquis Company. Notably, the preparatory schools Swavely and Woodward disappeared for a decade from the *Who's Who* biographies, until the 1959 *Who's Who in the South and Southwest*, and so their omission also likely affected the other later book series.

False Attributions

In addition to the aforementioned books and magazines, several other documents have shown that others falsely attributed titles to Hubbard that he himself did not. Wright noticed that the C.E. appeared in the Church of Scientology's Naval Notice of Separation:

There is a Notice of Separation in the official records, but it is not the one [the Church of Scientology] sent me. The differences in the two documents are telling. [...] The church document indicates, falsely, that Hubbard completed four years of college, obtaining a degree in civil engineering. The official document correctly notes two years of college and no degree (Wright 2013, 352).

Indeed, the church version showed incorrect data about Hubbard's college education on what appeared to be a copy of an official government form (Lake 2013). Likewise, the Navy version had the correct data in regards to this issue (NARA 1946). Wright concluded that the church version was a forgery—a conclusion beyond the scope of this analysis—but assuming that Wright was correct, it begs the question as to who forged it, when and for what reason. When considering that Hubbard explained the situation numerous times in lectures and writings, mentioned the error in a 1950 interview, provided the original correct entry to the 1944 *Who's Who in the East*, and that the Church of Scientology stopped using the C.E. title by 1963, whereas *Marquis Who's Who* continued using it until 1986, it would appear unlikely that Hubbard created the Church of Scientology's Notice of Separation.

Curiously, the *Translator's Edition of Scientology*, which spanned six weeks from 1 May to 12 June 1956 in Professional Auditors Bulletins (PABs) 82–88, showed a “PhD, C.E.” in Hubbard’s letterhead. Hubbard likely wrote these bulletins as per his earlier note “I have written here a Translator’s Edition.” It also included a short autobiography:

WHO INVENTED SCIENTOLOGY: Scientology was discovered (found) not invented (created). It was organized by L. Ron Hubbard, an American, who has many degrees and is very skilled by reason of study [...] Hubbard was trained in nuclear physics at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. before he started his studies about the mind. This explains the mathematical precision of Scientology. Doctor Hubbard has been given many honours for his work in the field of the mind.

The alluded “many degrees” here were his Sequoia honorary PhD, the Doctor of Divinity, the Bachelor of Scientology and Doctor of Scientology. Although Hubbard did not describe these degrees, he explained where most of them originated:

Scientology has two main organizations. One of these is the HUBBARD ASSOCIATION OF SCIENTOLOGISTS [...] The other is THE HUBBARD ASSOCIATION OF SCIENTOLOGISTS INTERNATIONAL [...] Scientology practitioners are validated (certified, given diplomas) by these two organizations. Diplomas are given only after very exact training. A person who is skilled in Scientology has a diploma from one of the above two organizations or from THE FOUNDING CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY in Washington, D.C., USA (Hubbard 1956d, 1–3).

What made these PABs unique were that the “PhD, C.E.” title only appeared on them from 82–88. In PAB 89, Hubbard (without titles) wrote: “Now, for me, begins the job of rewriting the Translator’s Edition for book form, since I believe you have noticed, as I did, many typographical errors” (Hubbard 1956e, 1). Although he did not state what these errors were, notably the “PhD, C.E.” vanished from PAB 89 onwards. As he also signed his name without any titles throughout the *Translator’s Edition*, the editors appear to have added the “PhD, C.E.”—similar to the book covers of the same 1952–56 period.

Journalist and Scientology critic Tony Ortega mentioned a 2 January 1958 letter from Washington D.C. to Dr. Edward Condon (1902–1974) purportedly from Hubbard with what appeared to be his signature followed by “C.E., PhD” (Hubbard 1958). Aside from the uncharacteristic writing style, however, a handwritten “/per md” followed his signature. The “/per md” of course indicated that someone with the initials MD wrote it and signed Hubbard’s

signature, as both appeared in the same handwriting style and did not match Hubbard's.

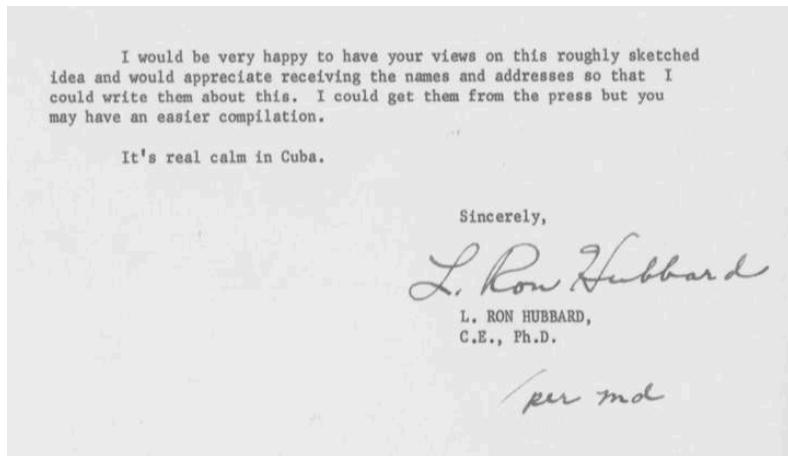


Figure 8. From Ortega's site.

A handwritten signature of L. Ron Hubbard in cursive script, reading "With my very best wishes - L. Ron Hubbard".

Figure 9. From *Science of Survival* manuscript edition.

Similarly, a PE (Personal Efficiency) Handout from April 1961 apparently showed that Hubbard referred to himself as "C.E., PhD" (Hubbard 1974f, 196–99). Nevertheless, Hubbard having authored the *PE Handout* would appear virtually impossible. Firstly, the parenthetical note before Hubbard's name at the bottom stated:

The article 'What Is Scientology?' has been entirely re-written by Ron, and this one should be used in preference to the original one which was written in Johannesburg and issued there.

This article attributed changes to Hubbard without indicating any initial assistant or compiler and instead used only the typists' initials "jl.rd." Yet, the original "What Is Scientology?" article first appeared in the April 1961 *Ability*

issued from Washington D.C., not Johannesburg, as “Scientology”—again written by Eleanore Turner (née Eddy), without a “C.E.” title (Turner 1961a, 6).

Secondly, despite a bracketed note after Hubbard’s name which stated “Originally issued on 12 April 1961. The 14 April 1961 correction added paragraph 9,” no cancellation, revision, or Issue II appeared at the top—atypical for Hubbard Communications Office (HCO) documents. In fact, no 12 April 1961 HCO Information Letter had ever existed. In addition to the lack of proper authorship, revisions and nonexistent references, a “Not HCO Correct” appeared as a small note at the top of this letter, which further indicated an incorrect, unofficial and misattributed status.

Thirdly, Hubbard could not have written or issued the *PE Handout* from Johannesburg as he was in England during this time. Hubbard issued “S.O.P. Goals” from England in HCO Bulletins and Policy Letters between 18 February to 11 April. Additionally, the April 1961 *Ability* stated:

HCO Special Events Course, previously announced to begin on April 17th, HAS BEEN POSTPONED [...] The reason for the postponement of this course is—instructors Dick and Jan Halpern are going to St. Hill [England] for a very thorough briefing from Ron on S.O.P. Goals (Turner 1961b, 10).

In fact, Hubbard abolished the PE Course on 23 January 1961 when the 3rd South African A.C.C. began (Hubbard 1974a, 191). He then appointed Peter Greene (1929–1991) as the Johannesburg HASI Association Secretary on 30 January 1961 (Hubbard 1974b, 146). Then on 15 February 1961, Greene wrote the HCO Policy Letter *Evaluation Script*, which stated, “Script written by Peter Greene on Experience with PE Foundation, Johannesburg, based on recent PE Policy Letters,” but never specified which letters they were based on, and instead attributed the authorship to Hubbard. Greene appeared neither as the originator (i.e. “For L. Ron Hubbard”), the compiler, the assistant (i.e. “PG”), nor even as the typist (i.e. “pg”) at the bottom (Hubbard 1974c, 169–71), which proved misleading. Then, exactly one day after the last 3rd South African A.C.C. lecture of 17 February 1961, without any explanation HCO Information Letters—a type of HCO previously unseen—began to appear on 18 February once Hubbard returned to England (Hubbard 1974d, 193). Additionally, this first issue titled *Magazines, Testing, PE* stated “Not HCO Original,” which indicated authorship by someone other than Hubbard.

The 2 March 1961 HCO Policy Letter *Automatic Evaluation Packet* stated, “all sheets and plan of the Auto Evaluation itself now exist in Johannesburg,” which further indicated Greene’s authorship. The *Automatic Evaluation Packet* unveiled a plan to release eight items, which not only mentioned item number “3. What is Scientology?” but also stated that item “No. 7 State of Release has already appeared in this form. (HCO Info Letter of February 22nd, 1961).” The 22 February 1961 HCO Info Letter not only did not exist, but created a major anachronism as it conflicted with the claims that these items would be written as per the *Automatic Evaluation Packet*: “As soon as I write these handouts mentioned in 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 they will appear as HCO Information Letters for your getting them letter-pressed [emphasis added]” (Hubbard 1974e, 172). Furthermore, the March 1961 *Ability* had first published “The State of Release” (Hubbard 1961b, 1), while an identical “State of Release” later appeared in the aforementioned 14 April 1961 *PE Handout*, thus contradicting the latter’s origination date, type and location claims of “No. 7 (The State of Release) has already come to you as part of a recent Info Ltr [the nonexistent one from 22 February 1961] and is repeated here.” Finally, item number “2. Form Letter giving IQ and Future” had already appeared in Greene’s 15 February 1961 *Evaluation Script*, although unnamed as such. Per all of the available data, all evidence would indicate that Peter Greene wrote the HCO Information letters and thus misattributed authorship and thus the C.E. title to Hubbard.

Conclusion

By all admissions and indicators, Hubbard wanted nothing to do with civil engineering from the outset and publicly repeated this statement. Had he claimed a B.S. C.E. then this would certainly have been fraud, but the allegation that he made such a claim appears to have no support upon closer examination. Although the C.E. might be interpreted as indicating a degree when paired with the honorary PhD, the comma between them clearly signified that these were two separate things: the PhD meant either an honorary or earned PhD, and the C.E. meant Civil Engineer, though not necessarily with a degree, but rather through experience and training. Yet in Hubbard’s lectures and writings, he recognized the misattributions of others, addressed these errors, admitted having bad grades

and poor attendance, having dropped out, and the various mistakes in his biographies.

Without any knowledge of his prior lectures, writings or source materials, it certainly could appear that he misled others on this issue, which likely prompted *A Brief Biography of L. Ron Hubbard* as a means of correction in the first place. Of course, its errors resulted from the unchecked prior errors, however, and only created more confusion and thus more misguided claims that Hubbard faked having graduated. Nevertheless, close inspection of all currently available evidence indicated that Hubbard never lied about his grades nor about having graduated with a civil engineering degree. The fact that no scholar, critic, supporter nor the Church of Scientology itself has thoroughly examined or explained these discrepancies merits reevaluations of several other various claims and criticisms regarding Hubbard, Dianetics, and Scientology. With this new information, one can better view the evolution of errors over the various series instead of attributing them to dishonesty, which only underscores his close friend Robert Heinlein's (1907–1988) famous razor: “Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by incompetence.”

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Trance, Meditation and Brainwashing: The Israeli Use of Hypnosis Law and New Religious Movements

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ABSTRACT: The 1984 Israeli Use of Hypnosis Law is the first of its kind in the world. It permits hypnosis for therapeutic purposes alone, and only by a group of licensed professionals (physicians, dentists, and psychologists who acquired a special permit). The law's vague definition of hypnosis, in fact, gives the criminal offense wide boundaries, in a way that might incorporate a wide range of practices into it, such as guided imagery. As a result, religious freedom is endangered, especially within the alternative-religious/spiritual sphere. The article presents the clear parallels between the law's broad definition of hypnosis and the common understanding of the mind control thesis. The heart of the argument in this article is that two aspects create the link between hypnosis and new religious movements (NRMs). The first is the phenomenological-historical resemblance between various religious techniques and hypnosis, while the other is the fact that both fields (NRM and hypnosis) evoke the same kind of fear, concerning control and manipulation of the mind. Interestingly, preoccupation with the Hypnosis Law has peaked twice—during the early 1980s, and around 2010—and both times coincided with the rise of the moral panic surrounding “cults” in Israel. In order to present these discussions within the correct contexts, the article includes a survey of NRMs' status in Israeli society, the government's anti-cult activity, and the Hypnosis Law. Subsequently, we present the ways in which the law was enforced, and analyze their implications for freedom of religion and worship in Israel. Finally, we end with a series of criticisms of the law, which faces today renewed calls to be revoked.

KEYWORDS: Hypnosis, Hypnotherapy, Legislation in Israel, Anti-Cult Movement, Mind Control, Guided Imagery, Past Life Regression, Israel.

1. Introduction: The Case of a Local and Unique Law and the Israeli NRM Context

“Under Israel’s hypnosis law, everyone is guilty of hypnosis—therapists, artists, religious leaders and even mothers who sing nursery rhymes to their children.” [Natalie Pik, in Even 2012]

Is it plausible that a democratic liberal state limits or prohibits religious rituals that involve trance states, guided imagery practices, or past life regression? Israel’s Use of Hypnosis law [hereinafter: IUHL] may lead precisely to that. This law, the first of its kind in the world to forbid free use of hypnotic practices, has yet to be studied from a religious-cultural point of view, even though its repercussions on freedom of occupation and freedom of religion in Israel have been direct.

There have been two notable peaks in the history of this law—both in parallel with waves of moral panic in regards to “cults” in Israel. The first took place in the beginning of the 1980s, with the legislation of the IUHL along with the publication of anti-cult governmental reports. The second happened around 2010, when the law’s enforcement became greater and more widespread, in coincidence with a series of high profile “cult”-related incidents, as well as the writing of a radical anti-cult report and the initial legislative steps that targeted “harmful cults.”

The IUHL has extensive potential repercussions over many areas—from alternative medicine to religious pluralism—which stem, to a certain extent, from the vague, excessively broad legal definition of hypnosis. Admittedly, the latter is a practice whose understanding is under scholarly dispute. However, its definition in the IUHL is undoubtably too broad, as well as problematic.

In this article we shall explore the connection between hypnosis (and the IUHL) and NRMs, by trying to understand the context within which the two have met—and clashed—in practice in the cultural arena in Israel, as well as the theoretical contexts of the association between the two fields.

In order to perform this study, we have examined political and legal Israeli documents concerning hypnosis: debates at the Israeli parliament, known as the Knesset, legislation drafts, court rulings, official documents by the Advisory Committee under Hypnosis Law [hereinafter: ACHL]. We have also surveyed the

public discourse throughout mass-media and social networks regarding the IUHL, concerning its wording, enforcement, ACHL activity, and opposition to the IUHL, especially on part of spiritual/religious practitioners. We have contacted central establishments and figures who were involved in the “story” of the IUHL: the ACHL, citizens who found themselves or almost found themselves in court, anti-IUHL activists, and so on. We have analyzed the definition of “hypnosis” in the IUHL, and compared it with possible alternative definitions and similar practices, whilst noting the potential correlation between the IUHL and the contemporary religious/spiritual scene. We have utilized an array of studies and tools, from NRM studies, through culture studies, to legal studies.

The article begins (chapter 2) with a description of the Israeli NRMs scene and the anti-cult steps the Executive Branch has taken against it, followed by a section on anti-cult legislation. Later (chapter 3), we present the IUHL and its relevance and applicability to the field of NRMs. Finally (chapter 4), we provide a summary of our criticism of the IUHL as well as the reasons hypnosis is associated with NRMs.

2. Background: NRMs and the Anti-Cult Movement in Israel

2.A. NRMs in Israel—A Status Report

We shall open with a general description of the status of NRMs in Israel, as it is important to understand the different voices that comprise the complex picture of the manners in which state institutions and the overall public opinion address the phenomenon. As we shall see, on the one hand, Israeli society is highly pluralistic as well as tolerant of a variety of religious beliefs and practices, and it seems the spiritual-religious scene is flourishing. On the other hand, the past few years have seen the rise of an anti-cult trend in public discourse, especially in government activity and in the legal arena.

Israeli society is rather pluralistic ever since the 1980s, which saw the gradual rise of multiculturalism (Kimmerling 2001; Mautner 2011). The voices of various sectors and minorities receive attention and interest; many of those who, in the past, have been *perceived* as marginal groups, deviant behaviors, primitive traditions, anomalous identities, are nowadays perceived not only as legitimate,

but even attractive, such as LGBTQ or un-Orthodox Jewish religious movements. To a great extent, the voices of such groups have a much greater presence today in the public arena than they used to. Moreover, the rise of liberal and neoliberal values throughout the state's institutions and the media is recognizable, with manifestations that range from feminist aspects to financial ones (Hirschl 1998; Shafir and Peled 2002; Woods 2009).

This environment is fertile ground for the flourishing of pluralism in Israel within the religious field as well. As a result, we may recognize the gradually multiplying hues of Jewish discourse, the hegemonic religious discourse in Israel, as well as a substantial openness regarding NRMs. Alternative spiritual hues are incorporated into religious Judaism on the one hand, and into Jewish-secular sectors on the other hand (Ruah-Midbar and Klin-Oron 2013; Ruah-Midbar 2012). Indeed, the alternative-spiritual scene in Israel, including various NRMs, is quite vibrant and lively. Several spiritual festivals are held within the public space, television shows pay attention to psychics and treat them as celebrities, backpacking trips to the East have long ago become an almost necessary part of the socialization process undertaken by young citizens, spiritual practices and teachings are at the heart of thousands of centers operating uninterruptedly throughout the country, and a wide range of spiritual specializations seem to flourish, including channeling, healing, coaching, shamanism, yoga, and so on (see e.g.: Lebovitz 2016; Ruah-Midbar 2016; Ruah-Midbar Shapiro forthcoming-b). Even the most conservative establishments show evidence of the infiltration of the new spirituality: spiritual healing methods are included in the state's health insurance, and a variety of businesses consult with spiritual organizational advisors, New Age symbols are utilized in commercial advertisements, Mindfulness and similar methods are integrated into the state's educational system, and so on (see e.g.: Ruah-Midbar and Zaidman 2013; Shmueli, Igudin and Shuval 2010).

With such a background, the rise of anti-cult discourse and activity is surprising indeed (see similar discussion in Ruah-Midbar and Klin-Oron 2013). The media enjoys covering daunting feature stories of "cults," exploitative gurus, and "brainwashing." But even more surprising, is how the anti-cult movement in Israel has managed to harness state branches towards its rising activities over the past few years, so much so that it has placed Israel in the most combative end of

the anti-cult spectrum among First World countries, as we shall see in the following section.

2.B. Anti-Cult Government Activity in Israel—The Executive Branch

Over the past decade, the anti-cult movement in Israel has been wildly successful. Within the movement, several specialists (Ph.D.s) are prominent in promoting the pseudoscientific discourse (Shupe and Darnell 2017) on the dangers of “cults,” especially one highly-active Israeli association—“The Israeli Center for the Victims of Cults” (www.infokatot.com). In 2013, this association has been awarded the Knesset Chairman Quality of Life Award for “human rights and maintaining democratic values,” and has worked hand-in-hand with officials from the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services. This government office has taken upon itself the handling of the matter of “cults,” and nowadays promotes the subject on behalf of the government.

Over the past few decades, other Israeli government ministries have adopted the anti-cult line, as expressed by the publication of reports on the subject (Klin-Onon and Ruah-Midbar Shapiro 2019; Ruah-Midbar and Klin-Onon 2013). During the 1980s, two governmental reports were written—the first by the Israeli police, and the other by an inter-ministerial committee appointed by the Minister of Education, which referenced a wide variety of aspects: education, health, consumerism, affiliation and identity, social and democratic values, and so on (Tassa-Glazer 1987). During the 1990s, a committee was appointed by the Ministry of Economic Strategy, whose goal was to coordinate between government offices. At this stage, “cults” were perceived, throughout various governmental reports, as a matter relevant to many diverse aspects of Israeli state and society, although the committee’s recommendations were somewhat moderate. The police report could not trace any clear criminal activity, and the 1995 report limited anti-NRM governmental activity even further, to “the need to defend the citizens’ freedom of belief and liberty of thought and ensure freedom of association and expression” (State Secretariat 1995, 3).

In reality, none of the recommendations made in the reports were implemented. Although some NRMs were offended by their very mention in these reports (and sometimes even tried to take legal action in order to prevent it—see Sagiv 2017), in the end, the reports had no real legal or executive implications.

Notably, the Knesset did not try to promote any legislation following these reports, despite their recommendations to do so. As mentioned, the background to these events was the public atmosphere in Israel from the 1990s onwards, which was more religiously pluralistic, and at the end of the century, the alternative spiritual arena was extremely lively (Ruah-Midbar 2006).

Over the years, there have been a few instances in which a case involving NRMs reached the Israeli courts. Often, NRMs themselves were the ones to appeal to the courts in order to defend their rights, sometimes even successfully (Sagiv 2017). For example, courts examined: a demand by EST that the government committee on “cults” refrain from including them in its report, or at least coordinate their visit to EST workshops with its members (EST case 1986); a claim made by Jehovah’s Witnesses against municipal authorities that prevented them from enforcing an agreement to rent a central city-owned hall (Jehovah’s Witnesses case 2014); a demand made by the members of an Emin community that the Army acknowledge the pre-military educational program they had established (Emin case 2003); and so on. Such instances were isolated, and did not receive any significant media coverage, nor resulted in the creation of an anti-cult public atmosphere.

Nevertheless, the past decade has seen a change, especially from an establishment-political point of view. This is evident both in governmental law enforcement actions in various fields (for example, the appointment of a cult supervisor in the Ministry of Welfare), and in legislative initiatives (see section 2.C.) as a result of a government report published in 2011—“Report of Ministry of Welfare and Social Services Team: An Examination of the Phenomenon of Cults in Israel” (Itzkovitz 2011). This report uses fierce anti-cult language, whilst relying upon the brainwashing thesis, and recommends significant legislative amendments that would limit “cult” activity. It is the only Israeli report in this field whose recommendations did enter a process of implementation, as we shall detail.

Around 2010, several NRM cases that went to trial made headlines. These groups were all local in nature—rather than globally active groups. Moreover, most of them shared accusations of difficult familial abuse towards women and children. The most widely published case, which had the largest effect on public opinion and government response, was the case of Goel Ratzon (literally: “Redeemer [of] Will”), a man born in 1950, healer and spiritual teacher, who

lived in a sort of commune in Tel Aviv with over twenty women with whom he engaged in intimate relations, and about 50 children they bore him. In 2009, a documentary television-show about this polygamist “family” aired, depicting the women’s extreme idolization of Ratzon. The media became preoccupied with the matter: the community was presented as a “cult,” its “guru” was said to be perceived as the Messiah and suspected of either hypnotizing or bewitching his wives (see e.g., Shalmor 2010). In 2010, the police conducted a complex operation called “Ge’ula meRatzon,” (literally: “Willing Redemption”) that employed about two hundred police officers and social workers towards the arrest of Ratzon, and the removal of the women and children from their homes. Ratzon was indicted with nine counts—slavery (a matter we should like to discuss in a separate article, in the future), obtaining (property) by deception, and various sex offences. In 2014 he was convicted on most counts, excluding slavery, and is now serving a sentence of 30 years (in addition to financial compensation, as well as probation) (Ratzon case 2014).

Following Ratzon’s arrest, his wives appeared both publicly and in the media, and details were revealed of the belief and practice system prevailing in the “commune,” including the criminal sexual activities perpetrated there. This exposure created a wide moral panic, and led to the preparation of a severe anti-cult report by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services, which offered extensive legislative amendments. In the wake of this report, an anti-cult bill was presented in the Knesset, which will be described in subsection 2.C.

The Israeli public at the time was not occupied by the Goel Ratzon affair alone, but by a variety of “harmful cults” that were discussed by the media and the courts. In 2009, Elior Chen, a.k.a. “The Abusive Rabbi,” was extradited back to Israel. Chen was tried and convicted of “rectifying” (in Hebrew: making a *Tikkun*, a Kabbalistic term) children together with his disciples—disturbingly cruel actions, which they believed extracted “harmful beings” (*Mazzikim*) from the children. Chen and his disciples’ trial went on for several years, during which new details of the case occasionally made headlines. In 2010, it was discovered that the leader of the “Ithaca Cult,” Shai Abrahamof, conducted a form of child abuse, that stemmed from spiritual-ideological reasons, and was later incarcerated and committed suicide in his cell. In 2011, the Ambash family—including the patriarch, his six wives, and 17 children who were members of a particular current of neo-Breslov Hasidism—was arrested. Stories of the family’s

unique faith had been circulating in the Israeli media since 2008, and after the Goel Ratzon affair, the polygamist Ambash family was presented as a parallel case, and was called “The Jerusalem Cult” or “The Sadistic Cult.” The patriarch was sentenced to 26 years for enslaving his family/wives, acts of violence, and sexual offences done by him or under his influence (Ambash case 2018). His wives’ fight for appealing the verdict and proving his innocence is ongoing, and takes place to this day, both in the legal arena and in the media.

Over the past decade, the above cases as well as other local Israeli “cult” cases have riled up public discourse, which includes the voices of politicians, state officials, journalists, anti-cult activists, and laypersons, who claim that in each case there is no doubt that the one they deal with is indeed a “cult,” and that a dangerous “guru” has “brainwashed” his disciples. In light of this strengthening trend in the Israeli public, and in particular the roots it has struck in the political arena, which reached actual anti-cult government activity (especially the advancement of legislation on the subject), Israeli scholars have attempted to counterbalance the anti-cult voice (Ruah-Midbar Shapiro forthcoming-a). They have written letters to various state officials, invited them to panels and workshops on the subject, became involved in the media discourse, enlisted international academic scholars in these activities, and even founded an information center on the subject of contemporary religions in Israel (<http://meida-center.org.il>), which began publishing academic reports on NRMs-related topics. Overall, we may say that academic activity did not significantly change the anti-cult public discourse, and was also unsuccessful in convincing officials and politicians of the problematic nature that lies in anti-cult legislation and activities.

2.C. Anti-Cult Government Activity in Israel—Legislature

In light of the criminal cases exposed within the NRMs arena, and especially the mental, physical, sexual, social and financial harm their members were subjected to, over the past few years the State of Israel has promoted legislation that aspires to limit the activity of “harmful cults” in particular (Cults Bill 2015). This unique legislation, unparalleled throughout the world, focuses on the phenomenon of “cults.” Its purpose, as defined in the explanation provided for the 2015 “Bill for the Treatment of Harmful Cults,” is to fight the “conversion

process” that “cult” recruits undergo “in order to attain control, loyalty and absolute commitment to the cult’s leadership,” while “cult” members commit criminal offences.

This bill—an initiative by many members of the Knesset—was brought to the Knesset table on July 20, 2015, and submitted to the Knesset Constitution, Law and Justice Committee for a preliminary reading. It attested to the widespread concern regarding “cults” in the public discourse in Israel, independent of any political affiliation. The bill was passed unanimously—by the 36 members of the Knesset who participated in the Plenum discussion, in a preliminary reading (three more readings are still required before the final version of the law passes). The bill is a direct consequence of the 2011 Ministry of Welfare report. It proposes to activate sanctions on “harmful cult” members in a way similar to how law enforcement treats criminal organizations (group leaders receive up to 10 years in prison, assets are seized, and so on). The bill defines (in section 1) a “harmful cult” as:

A group of people, whether organized or unorganized, who congregate around a person or an idea, in a manner that enables exploitative relationships of dependency, authority, or mental distress with one or more members through methods of controlling thought processes and behavioral patterns, and operates in an organized, methodical and ongoing fashion, while committing crimes that the Israeli law defines as felonies, or sex offences, or egregious violence, in accordance with The Rights of Victims of Crimes Act – 2001.

Academic scholars in Israel and throughout the world have expressed their disdain of the wording of the Israeli bill, via letters sent to Knesset members and appearances in the media (Ruah-Midbar Shapiro forthcoming-a; and see e.g., the critical article by Cavaglion 2018). Widespread criticism was directed at the excessively broad definition of “harmful cult,” which used vague and controversial terms in a manner that allowed for different subjective interpretations of the offense’s components, which is obviously problematic in the interpretation of any criminal offense. As a direct result, the line between “harmful cult” and lawful religious activity was blurred, as the creation of a moral or spiritual dependency and control over thought processes and behavioral patterns is an inseparable part of any religious affiliation, and characterizes the conduct of many believers.

In addition to criticism of the definition’s vagueness and inclusivity, academics claimed that the law hurt freedom of religion, belief, and conscience. However,

the main criticism addressed the “mind control” thesis upon which the bill rests. According to this thesis, “cults” possess complete control over their members thought processes, and, as a result, over their actions, whilst voiding their free will and distorting their personality (see below, subsection 3.B.II, part b, and again at the beginning of section 4). This thesis was abandoned by experts of the scientific community, and ruled out by courts worldwide (Melton 2000).

Although the Israeli legislator saw it fit to cope with the legislation of a specific law concerning “cults,” this was not actually necessary, as the Israeli legal arena has already made use of a variety of other laws in the Israeli Penal Code and Civil Code when dealing with “harmful” NRMs. Notable among these are the Legal Competency and Guardianship Law, 5722 - 1962, which prohibits the conversion of a minor without the consent of both parents or legal guardians; sections from the Israeli Penal Code, dealing with giving favors to entice conversion and receiving favors for converting others; “perpetrating and exploitation” offense—referring to those who exploit situations that prevent the victims from giving their free consent; breaches of the article that forbids a person from pretending to perform witchcraft (Warshawski 2006); and sexual offences.

In addition, a unique anti-cult legislative amendment was set in Israel in 2010 in the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Law (Sexual Harassment Law 1998: Amendment 10 of 2002). According to this amendment, though a victim of sexual harassment showed no signs of resisting the sexual suggestions or attitude, the perpetrator could still be convicted if the crime was committed while exploiting a relationship of authority or dependency,

[...] within the framework of guidance or counseling by a clergy person, or one pretending to be a clergy person, or a person who is known to be or presents herself as someone who possesses unique spiritual traits.

Moreover, in this context we should note the extensive and different governmental and legislative efforts made to regulate the field of alternative/complementary medicine in Israel, as this field overlaps both with the field of NRMs as well as the subject of hypnosis, as we shall see. The widespread growth in the consumption of alternative/complementary medicine-related products and services in Israel over the past decades led to the appointment of the Elon Committee for the Examination of Complementary Medicine in Israel, which submitted a report on behalf of the Israeli Ministry of Health in 1991 (Elon

Report 1991). The report in turn led to the beginnings of legislation on the matter (such as the Acupuncture Practice Law of 2002). Still, regulation of the field remains professionally and medically controversial, and in fact, most of the field has yet to be regulated today (Cohen 2009; Shmueli, Igudin and Shuval 2010).

Summing up, in today's Israeli arena there is legislative ground for the restriction of NRMs' activities, and further relevant legislation is on the rise. Although different laws may limit NRMs' activity, around the world as well as in Israel, the IUHL—which is unique to Israel—adds a potential layer to these limitations. In the next chapter, we shall dedicate our discussion to the IUHL, which also concerns practices common in the NRMs field. As we shall see, the IUHL was also applied to the contemporary spiritual/religious arena in Israel, and has incurred a counter-reaction by practitioners from the field of alternative/complementary medicine, spiritual psychotherapy, and so on.

3. The IUHL and NRMs

“The Hypnosis Law tears the masks off this overzealous desire to look out for the citizen's tender consciousness [...] it exposes a deep-seated cultural phobia [...] those who are afraid are willing to put up with spirituality and New-Age as long as they are integrated as an easily digested product within consumerist society, but would quickly ban any path and method with any potential to radicalize human consciousness. [But] the inquisition shall fall.”
[Hartogsohn 2012]

3.A. The Law—Review and Criticism

In 1981, the Knesset began discussing the legislation of a law on hypnosis, and in 1984, the final draft of the IUHL was approved. The background for this debate in the Knesset was an event from 1975, which made headlines and involved a girl who fell into a coma following a hypnosis show, from which she did not awake for about a week. She was hospitalized while physicians tried, and failed, to wake her. According to the common claim, only a certain psychiatrist,

then one of the foremost hypnotists in Israel, managed to wake her up (Bonshtein 2014, 123–25). Although this unusual event was an isolated one, and contradicted what was known and documented in the professional literature on hypnosis, Israeli legislators saw it fit to protect the public through a special law, the first of its kind in the world.

The official purpose of this law, promoted by then Minister of Health, Knesset Member (hereinafter: MK) Eliezer Shostak (1911–2001), was “to ensure the safety and physical and mental health of the citizens of the state,” and to prevent the misuse of this method and any damage it might cause to the hypnotized person (see Shostak’s speech, in Knesset 1981). The legislators decided to “prevent the misuse of the hypnosis process” (Shostak, in Knesset 1981). To do so, the law decreed the field should be regulated through the foundation of a professional society of hypnotists, as well as an advisory committee in the Ministry of Health, which would supervise the growing use of hypnosis and prevent it from being performed by people who lacked the proper training, or for showmanship and entertainment purposes.

The IUHL prohibits a person from hypnotizing another, unless s/he is a licensed hypnotist. The legalized use of hypnosis has been limited to physicians, dentists, and expert psychologists, and only when the patient has given consent to be hypnotized. Additionally, the law states that those who are not licensed hypnotists shall not pretend, whether directly or implicitly, to be a hypnotist, nor express willingness to hypnotize. Another limitation in the law addresses the goals for which one may utilize hypnosis:

1. Medical diagnosis or treatment; 2. Psychological diagnosis or treatment; 3. Scientific research; 4. Scientific teaching in the field of hypnotism; 5. Refreshing a person’s memory in the course of a police or security investigation (see also Bazak 2006: ch. 8.)

In 1991, The Use of Hypnosis Regulations were supplemented to the main Israeli legislation. These regulations’ uniqueness lies in their imposition of widespread limitations over the field of hypnosis, when compared to other hypnosis laws worldwide (Aviv, Gilboa, Golan and Peleg 2007; Binyaminy and Hass 2016). In other places across the world, the limitations on using hypnosis often relate only to entertainment acts and amusement purposes. However, even those countries, such as Norway, Sweden, Austria, and Australia, which also enforce regulations limiting the use of hypnosis to physicians, dentists, and expert psychologists, do not define the required training and licensing process in

their legislation, as opposed to Israel (Bonshtein 2014; Kleinhauz and Beran 1981).

A prerequisite to setting the incidence of the IUHL in motion is that the defendant commit an action defined as “hypnosis.” Article 1 of the IUHL defines “hypnosis”:

Hypnosis means any act or process intended or likely to cause, by means of suggestion, changes in the state of consciousness or degree of awareness, or in the body, sensation, feeling, thinking, memory or behavior, of another person.

This is a highly broad and vague definition, which refers to conceptual components that are themselves not entirely clear, and which necessitate an interpretation that has a critical effect on how the law is applied. Discussing the question of the limitations that lie in the definition of the law and the interpretation of its components extends beyond the scope of this article (and we intend to expand on it in a separate article). However, we do wish to point out several things in short. First, the definition of hypnosis has been under intense scholarly dispute for several decades now, while the IUHL has not been updated since 1984, meaning that more than three decades have passed since the bill.

Throughout the years, the American Psychological Association has appointed committees in order to define hypnosis (1993, 2003, 2013). Their definitions have become more and more inclusive over the years, in order to find a common denominator shared by the wide variety of theoretical and therapeutic approaches in the field, beyond their various scholarly differences (Elkins, Barabasz, Council and Spiegel 2015). Despite their generalizing attitude, even the broadest definition offered in 2013 was not as wide as the one provided by the 1984 IUHL (Elkins, Barabasz, Council and Spiegel 2015, 383):

A state of consciousness involving focused attention and reduced peripheral awareness characterized by an enhanced capacity for response to suggestion.

Another definition of hypnosis, relevant to the application of the IUHL, is provided by the Israeli Society of Hypnosis, which manages the training of hypnotists in accordance with the law. This definition clarifies that hypnosis is a natural state, and poses no danger whatsoever, which begs the question why it must be forbidden or limited in the first place. As the Society’s website states (The Israeli Society of Hypnosis n.d.):

Hypnosis is a state in which a person utilizes its ability to concentrate in order to turn her attention inwards. In a state of hypnosis, persons allow themselves to turn most of attention

and resources in order to bring about either physical or mental change, to cultivate a more efficient connection with their subconscious, or to improve communication between mind and body. Any situation in which we turn most of our concentration toward one goal, as if “ignoring” the rest of the world around us, possesses the characteristics of a hypnotic state.

This broad definition presents hypnosis as a natural and harmless phenomenon, much like different states of concentration. The society even claims that “a person who is under hypnosis is constantly aware of her surroundings, and can exit the process whenever she so wishes” (The Israeli Society of Hypnosis n.d.).

Much like these descriptions and definitions, a look at the explanation of hypnosis provided by the ACHL, who supervises the application of the IUHL, is most soothing. According to the committee (Aviv n.d.),

Under hypnosis, the patient is not asleep, his willingness to accept suggestion increases while maintaining reality checks. In spite of popular myths, the patient does not lose control while under hypnosis and s/he does not become more malleable. On the contrary [...]

Having addressed the definition of “hypnosis” and “hypnotic state,” if we would focus on a single component of hypnosis, for example, “suggestion,” we would see how this scholarly controversial term is also vague. For instance, one definition (Hirschfeld n.d.) of “suggestion” is:

a process which allows a person to transfer a certain idea via either verbal, motorial, or vocal communication, whilst bypassing her intellectual control processes.

A simple look at this definition reveals that it may be applied to a wide variety of practices, and that it is not at all clear why the law should indeed seek to limit or stop them. We shall revisit this point later, noting that this citation also contradicts some statements in the definitions of hypnosis we previously quoted.

In addition to the problems in defining “hypnosis” and its components, the enforcement of the IUHL may encounter other challenges. For example, the IUHL excludes any act of “self-hypnotism,” thus decriminalizing this particular practice. The difficulty that arises from this exception is that, if the law is indeed meant to prevent any harm that comes from using hypnosis by the unskilled, this concern may also be applied to self-hypnosis, which may cause mental or physical self-harm. The legislation does not address this problem at all. Although the definitions in the IUHL are very broad, many problematic aspects, both ethical and professional, are completely overlooked by this law. For example, the IUHL does not address a series of ethical problems, such as the obligation of

documenting the hypnosis process, defining the therapeutic relationship before providing treatment (for example, defining the nature of the intervention), the wording of the hypnotized person's informed consent in order to prevent abuse and invasion of privacy, and so forth.

Having discussed the IUHL's explicit purpose, we ought to address its other purposes, as discussed in the professional literature. For instance, scholars have disagreed on the question of whether one can deliberately make a hypnotized person commit a felony (Nardi 1984). Several scholars believe it is possible, while others rule out this claim, as they think one cannot differentiate between actions committed under hypnosis and those committed out of one's own free will. Others completely deny the possibility that hypnotized persons can be compelled to act against their own will (see e.g., Bryan 2011; Orne 1972; Watkins 1972). Jewish law scholar, Yaakov Bazak (2006: 143-44) claims, in regard to hypnotized persons, that "clearly we cannot hold one person responsible for any repressed tendencies that unwillingly broke through," despite the scholarly dispute surrounding the question of whether a person under hypnosis can commit a criminal offense she would not have committed had she not been hypnotized, or whether this is only possible if "she has latent inclinations towards such acts."

In light of this scholarly dispute, it is interesting to note that according to article 34G, which was added as an amendment to the Israeli Penal Code in 1994, a hypnotized person is defined as one who exists in a state of "automatism" (lack of control), therefore, should she carry out any criminal actions while in that state, she would not be held criminally accountable (ch6). Thus, this legislation takes a stand regarding the scholarly dispute and implies that the hypnotist has the ability to affect and make another person commit involuntary criminal offences. In a clear contradiction, the ACHL determined that "hypnosis is not a means of taking control of the hypnotized person, and she cannot be made to act against her own will or ethics" (ACHL n.d.). Indeed, both the IUHL and the Penal Code show the Israeli legislators' fear that the hypnosis process might lead the hypnotized person to carry out involuntary actions.

In relation to the field of NRMs, we cannot ignore the similarity between this fear and the parallel fear of brainwashing, a technique that allegedly allows one to influence others and to induce them to perform involuntary, destructive, and possibly even criminal acts. We will discuss this issue later in the article, under

subsection 3.B.II, part b (and in our conclusion). Moreover, the relation between the definition of hypnosis and the field of NRMs also stems from the fact that a significant amount of practices in the latter may fit this broad and vague definition, such as guided imagery, healing, NLP, and even relaxation techniques (another topic we shall discuss later, in the same subsection, part a).

To summarize, the IUHL's broad definition on the one hand allows the authorities to enforce it in far too broad contexts, while on the other hand limits its enforcement by allowing (and encouraging) practitioners who do not meet licensing terms to act without supervision, by using an alternative labeling for their hypnotic practices, such as “guided imagery.”

We should also note that in the days this article was sent to print, MK Oren Hazan submitted a proposal to repeal the Hypnosis Law (Repeal Proposal 2018). According to a media publication of July 5, 2018 (Attali 2018), this proposal follows an initiative by mentalist Nimrod Har'el (see discussion on Har'el in subsection 3.B.I), and is supported by the claim that,

Hypnosis in itself is not dangerous, therefore there is no reason to prevent anyone from performing it regularly. On the contrary, this tool can only contribute and help. [... The legislation] has alienated many people's willingness to make use of this helpful means, which could have improved their lives significantly [... and has] created a monopoly in which only very few licensed persons can practice hypnosis.

Finally, the Knesset is called upon to “fall into line with the rest of the world, wipe out this erroneous anachronistic remnant from its law books, and enable a free use of hypnosis tools.”

3.B. The IUHL's Relevance to NRMs

“The whole history of hypnosis is about a group of people who made efforts to prevent it from passing on to anyone else. From ancient Egyptian priests and shamans, to today's physicians.”
[Avishalom Drori, in HypnoDoco 2015]

As mentioned, our central research question in this article involves the relevance and linkage between the IUHL and the new religious arena: how may the IUHL be relevant to NRMs? Does it affect, or may affect, the NRMs arena, and in what context? Therefore, in the following subsections we shall discuss the

IUHL's applicability to the field of NRMs, on two levels—first (subsection 3.B.I), we shall present the cases in which the IUHL was applied or actively enforced, and accordingly, how it affected the NRM arena. Second (subsection 3.B.II), we shall deal with the potential relevance of the IUHL to this arena from a theoretical-analytical point of view.

3.B.I. IUHL Application—In Practice

As a result of the IUHL, as of 2016 only about 700 people became licensed hypnotists in Israel (and about 20-25 others were added to that number on average yearly), among them about 250 physicians, 150 dentists, and 300 psychologists (Binyaminy and Hass 2016, 472, 478). Each practice, demonstration, or instruction of hypnosis (as defined by the law) by unlicensed people, or those proclaiming they are hypnotists, is illegal. In reality, almost half of the therapeutic professionals in Israel practice hypnosis without a license. According to a survey, only 27% of those who perform hypnosis in Israel are licensed (Aviv, Gilboa, Golan and Peleg 2007, 50, 52), excluding alternative therapists who use methods such as guided imagery and NLP (a discussion on these practices follows). The ACHL estimates that “the majority practice hypnosis through the use of various therapeutic techniques,” which have not been formally defined as hypnosis—and as we shall see, this is a wide variety of techniques. In fact,

it was impossible to estimate their number or to track them down [...] so that] it can be argued that this estimation of the unauthorized use of hypnosis is an underestimation (Aviv, Gilboa, Golan and Peleg 2007, 50, 55).

Perhaps this is the reason why the IUHL has only been discussed in the Israeli courts in two cases since its legislation, and they ended with a whimper, the first with a total acquittal, and the second with a lenient plea bargain. However, supervision of IUHL enforcement and prevention of its violation were in fact put into practice, upon the ACHL's appointment by the Ministry of Health. The ACHL became the executive branch for the supervision of use of hypnosis, and we will later show how this supervision affected religious/spiritual freedom. But first, we will describe the two cases in which ACHL actions led to indictments in accordance with the IUHL, the first in the entertainment field, and the second in the therapeutic field. Notably, the discussions in both entertainment and

therapeutic contexts are intertwined in terms of practice, the public discussion, and the law.

As mentioned earlier, there was one entertainment-related case that reached the courts, and ended in an acquittal: in 2002, Israeli illusionist Tzahi White was cleared of all charges (White case 2002), following a television performance during which he “hypnotized” the actor Aki Avni, and made him levitate. The charges relied upon the legal prohibition that an unlicensed person may not present herself as a hypnotist, as well as the prohibition of hypnotism for entertainment purposes. In his court hearing, White made the claim that he did not hypnotize but merely used legerdemain (White case 2002, section 5):

In one of my acts, I cut a woman into three pieces. Just like in another one of my acts, in which I make someone supposedly levitate by hypnotizing them. Just like I don't really cut, I don't really hypnotize.

It should be stated that Avni himself did confirm that he was not hypnotized, but that he was acting. Nevertheless, the prosecution claimed that Avni was indeed hypnotized. White's acquittal was a result of a long court case, which lasted three years. In his pronunciation of a verdict of acquittal, the judge used harsh words when addressing the central witness used by the State Advocacy as an expert of hypnosis, stating: “We cannot attribute any value, and I emphasize the word ‘any,’ to Dr. Livne's expert opinion.” In presenting the scientific complexity of the definition of hypnosis from the witness stand, this expert witness in fact unintentionally exposed the complexity and problematic nature of understanding the processes of hypnosis, and the boundaries between the definition of hypnosis and other practices. Without voicing our own thoughts on this witness's opinion, we should still note that the scholarly and clinical discourse of hypnosis is indeed convoluted and complex, and may be perceived by laypersons as paradoxical (Elkins, Barabasz, Council and Spiegel 2015). While the clinical discourse can digest such blurred boundaries, in a legal context this ambiguity is intolerable. The principle of legality necessitates certainty and clear boundaries in the legal definition, and a criminal conviction goes further and demands proof beyond any reasonable doubt. Therefore, the court could not tolerate this expert opinion, and it was absolutely ruled out (White case 2002, section 13):

As the cross-examination advanced, cracks began to show in the [witness's] conception until it finally collapsed altogether. From the witness's initial theory, that Avni was

hypnotized from the get-go, the theory then changed to a new version according to which Avni started out acting, and at some point entered a hypnotic state, and later the theory changed again to another theory, according to which Avni “hypnotized himself,” after which yet another theory was provided, according to which a person can hypnotize another person without meaning to; until finally the witness acceded and stated that he only saw “signs” of hypnosis. All of which lead us to the conclusion that this opinion is highly flimsy [...]

As a result, White sued the state for the anguish and damages caused to him by these unnecessary legal proceedings, and received compensation. In this context, it is also worth mentioning that Israeli mentalist, Nimrod Har’el, revealed that in 2009, he was interrogated by the police under suspicion that he had performed hypnosis on his television show. However, after a brief chat, the detectives decided to drop the charges against him, and according to Har’el, even thanked him for sparing them unnecessary embarrassment (Har’el 2012). In 2012, Har’el starred in a television show by the name of “Psycho” in which he demonstrated telepathy, “thought planting,” and various suggestions to random people on the street, claiming that in those instances, in which seemingly he had used hypnosis, he was actually making use of a different technique (ReshetTV 2012).

Unlike these cases, in 2012 a bill of indictment was submitted against therapist Natalie Pik, which ended in a plea bargain in which she was convicted of hypnotizing a man without a license and impersonating a hypnotist (Pik case 2012). Pik is an Israeli who studied humanities in both Israeli and Italian universities, and did not complete her degree. Later, she acquired a diploma as a movement therapist in Australia, as well as a diploma of Health Clinical Hypnosis with honors from the Academy of Hypnotic Science in Melbourne, Australia. According to her, she applied to the ACHL in order to acquire an Israeli license, but her request remained unanswered. In 2010, a detective hired by the ACHL was among the few people who attended her lecture, and it was him who led to Pik’s indictment. Pik claims that, in order to avoid a showcase trial, she chose to sign a plea bargain and face conviction (Even 2012). As part of her plea-bargain, Pik was fined 2000 ILS (about €400) and was sentenced to two years-probation. Ever since, Pik has continued her therapeutic work without disruption, using guided imagery, NLP, and since 2017, mostly Hatha Yoga.

Ever since her conviction, Pik has become one of the leaders of the public fight against the IUHL. Like her, many practitioners in the alternative-spiritual field, therapists from a variety of alternative approaches, and mentalists have spoken out in various media publications against the IUHL. They have pointed out its

absurdity, blamed the ACHL of ulterior motives that aim at preserving the exclusivity of a professional community, called out for the democratization of the distribution of consciousness altering techniques, and indicated the inherent problems in the differentiation between “hypnosis” and a wide variety of similar techniques and states of consciousness (see e.g., Har’el 2012; Hartogsohn 2012).

In fact, to this day other complaints submitted by the ACHL to the Israeli police have not turned into indictments, although the ACHL actively tries to prevent practitioners from the alternative-spiritual field from presenting their work as hypnosis, teaching people self-hypnosis, or hypnotizing them, or from disguising hypnotherapy under other labels. However, in reality, in today’s Israeli spiritual arena some blossoming practices are in fact parallel, close, similar (and sometimes identical) to hypnotic techniques: NLP, guided imagery, past life regression, channeling, hypnobirthing, coaching, mental training (including José Silva’s [1914–1999] Mind Control Method), and others. These methods have been circulated in books, websites, training centers, and clinics—all unlicensed and unsupervised by the state. The boundary separating illegal actions and legal ones according to the IUHL is unclear. For this reason, many people in the spiritual field simply prefer to avoid using the term “hypnosis” explicitly, and continue their work as therapists or teachers of affirmations, suggestions, coaching, altering consciousness states, and more (without a license, obviously).

The ACHL has spoken out many times in the media, warning of disguising illegal use of hypnosis behind other labels, such as NLP. While the ACHL’s chairman has said that they have no intention of suing each and every yoga instructor who ends classes with relaxation, the ACHL has taken action to limit, on the one hand, unlicensed people from performing hypnosis-like activities, and, on the other hand, mystical activities by licensed hypnotists. Accordingly, in 2009 the ACHL has forbidden licensed hypnotists from performing past life regression (Even 2009; Cohen 2010).

3.B.II. IUHL Application—Theoretic Discussion

So far, we have presented cases in which the IUHL has been applied to the Israeli NRM arena, influenced it, or provoked its response, as spiritual/religious practitioners felt that it injures their freedom of action. As we have seen, the

reaction to the IUHL has taken place at two main points in time: the first, when it was legislated in the early 1980s, and the other, during the enforcement wave around 2010. In parallel, both periods have been characterized with government anti-cult activity, which was preceded by a “cult” related moral panic. This exemplifies a clear connection between the anti-cult issue and the fear of hypnosis, and in this subsection, we shall attempt to understand this connotation’s theoretic background.

We should like to examine the principal and theoretical relevance hypnosis has to the field of NRMs. We wish to discuss the context and the relationship between the two fields. For example, in various debates about “cults” at the Knesset, the fear was expressed that they make use of “hypnosis,” and during debates on the prohibition of “hypnosis,” the danger it might be used to serve “cult” interests was mentioned. For instance, MK Ya’acov Cohen stated, during the Knesset Plenum in his motion for the agenda on the subject of illegal “cult” activity (Knesset 2008, 215):

Psychologists have discovered that various techniques used by cults contain elements of hypnosis, which are strictly forbidden. Additionally, cult members convince new members to surrender all their money to this end.

The very heart of our argument in this article is that *two aspects create the association between hypnosis and NRMs*: the first is *the phenomenological-historical resemblance between various religious techniques and hypnotic techniques*, while the other is *the fact that both fields (NRM and hypnosis) evoke the same kind of fears, regarding the control and manipulation of the mind*. Accordingly, we shall now present both aspects.

a. The phenomenological-historical resemblance between religious techniques and hypnosis

We would like to argue that there is a substantial phenomenological resemblance between hypnosis and the religious-spiritual field (or, at least, that the connotation between the two in public discourse appears as plausible). To do so, we shall start with a historical look into the roots of hypnosis (Abramowitz 2014, ch.1; Gauld 1995; Pintar and Lynn 2009).

The term “hypnosis” was derived from the name of the ancient Greek god, Hypnos, the god of sleep. The term was coined by the surgeon James Braid (1795–1860) in the mid-19th century, when he used Mesmeric techniques on his patients, believing they had fallen into a sort of sleep. Later, Braid discovered that his patients were not asleep at all, despite the fact that they closed their eyes and entered a state of deep calm, but rather the opposite—they were acutely attentive. However, the term remained, and “inducing a hypnotic state” is often used in the same breath as the hypnotically suggestive word “sleep.” Braid was the link between Mesmerism and 20th century-hypnosis, as he conducted the initial translation of the method, which was originally understood to be the propulsion of magnetic fluids in the body, into a neurological rationale, to be later replaced by psychological terms.

The German-Austrian physician, Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), claimed the rationale of his method to be “animal magnetism,” which involved a mysterious and invisible liquid that flows through every living being. Mesmer was accused of charlatanism, and his work was surrounded by scandal. 1784 saw the foundation of the French Royal Commission that examined the scientific basis for Mesmerism, and dismissed the magnetic theory, concluding that the treatments were only effective because of the patients’ imagination. Thus, the committee perceived the basis of Mesmer’s work as mental, rather than physical. No wonder the verb “mesmerize” in English, after the method’s founder, is synonymous with “hypnotize.” In fact, in retrospect, with the acknowledgment of the power of hypnotism and the placebo effect, nowadays we may confirm that elements of the practice of Mesmerism can *indeed* heal.

Despite criticism of the method, different practices and ideas from Mesmerism remained the tools of various spiritual therapists and practitioners (see e.g., Albanese 1992), in fact, to this very day, some in the field of conventional medicine and some in the field of alternative/complementary medicine, including the use of placebo medications (or procedures), magneto-therapy, and hypnotherapy, for both physical and mental aims. This continuity, in spite of the harsh criticism directed at Mesmerism, in fact opened the door to the foundation of modern hypnosis.

From a phenomenological point of view, we can describe the various techniques—from modern hypnosis to magnetic sleep—as trance practices, which have been part of physical and mental healing processes since time

immemorial (see e.g., Abramowitz 2014, 16). A variety of such techniques have been utilized in the religious traditions of various cultures: performing supernatural acts during rituals, prophecy, healing, mysticism or witchcraft, all of which were carried out by shamans and religious practitioners since ancient times. Today, such practices are not common in mainline Western religions, though they still prevail throughout some currents of those religions, such as Sufi trance techniques in Islam, Shamanic techniques in Hasidic Judaism, glossolalia or exorcism among certain Christian denominations, and of course in a variety of other faiths, such as among Native Americans, in folk religion in Korea, among Hindu Fakirs, and others.

The contemporary alternative spiritual/religious scene willingly adopts mystical and magical techniques from various traditions, and also calls for the democratization of techniques formerly reserved for selected people and their wide distribution, sometimes whilst creating popular variations (academically recognized as “invention of a tradition”; see e.g., Lewis and Hammer 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that different trance techniques are now common in the NRMs arena. In their popularized versions. NRMs have even furthered the distribution of religious techniques throughout psychological contexts and toward psychological ends (Beit-Hallahmi 2012).

Among these techniques, we may single out the practice of guided imagery, which has parallels and roots in various spiritual traditions, from the Kabbalah (Reiser 2018) to Asian religions (Puttick 2000). Guided imagery has become one of the most common techniques in the alternative spiritual arena, and a sort of representative icon of it. This technique is used towards a wide variety of goals—from losing weight to overcoming fear—but it is most commonly used in relaxation. The latter use is relevant to a wide range of fields, from concluding physical activity (such as physical workouts) to emotional preparation for a grade school exam. The ACHL addressed relaxation techniques used in yoga for a reason, as some of these techniques, which are based on breathing, concentrating on the words of the instructor, and visualization, can supposedly also be defined as hypnosis. The guided imagery technique, over its various versions, has made its way into the mainstream in various ways (Puttick 2000). First, it entered the therapy sessions of conventional psychology, and later, it was adopted by more conservative circles, such as businesses, schools, and so on.

Adjacent techniques to that of guided imagery, or such that include a form of guided imagery, have been developed over the past few decades by various alternative therapists and spiritual teachers, on the one hand, and by academic scholars on the other. The process led to the proliferation and distribution of various methods. NLP (Neurolinguistic Programming) was developed by self-help and hypnosis expert Richard Bandler and by linguist John Grinder. It was significantly influenced by the methods of psychologist-psychiatrist Milton Erickson (1901–1980), the father of one of the most common hypnosis methods. There were also mental training and mind control methods (such as the variety of tools developed and distributed by José Silva), affirmations and words of power, and more.

Another spiritual technique prevalent in the field of NRMs, which was presented as being in contradiction to the IUHL, is past life regression. This technique attempts to go back and reveal events from the patients' previous lifetimes, in order to heal them and solve problems in their current life. Here, hypnosis enables patients to regress to a certain moment in their past to heal the trauma that stems from a past event. Many cases have been made public, in Israel and around the world, in which hypnosis was used to regress patients to events that preceded their birth. Past life regression therapy aims at uncovering these events *from the outset*, thereby assuming a religious belief in reincarnation. Being connected to two modern rationalistic secular establishments, allopathic medicine and law, the ACHL had difficulty with this matter.

While the ACHL could not prohibit the practice by alternative therapists, its chairperson has spread stories in the media, of patients who needed hypnosis in order to overcome “malfunctions” inflicted by past life regressions. From 2009 onwards, the ACHL has explicitly forbidden licensed hypnotists from engaging in past life regression, claiming that “this is a mystical process conducted by those who believe that a person had other lives previous to their birth” (Even 2009). The ACHL chairperson explained, on the one hand, that apparently “past life regression involves a process of influence between the hypnotist and the hypnotized” and, on the other hand, that “past life regression and hypnosis are unconnected” (Even 2009). Apparently, he was interested in making a clear distinction between the two, even though he paradoxically identified them with one another in order to do so. Arguably, this prohibition of a mystical/religious

practice, which is not presented as hypnosis, is comparable to forbidding hypnotist from participating in prayer.

In an article by the ACHL chairperson and co-authors, the writers also denounce Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) as a therapeutic technique that makes use of hypnosis (Aviv, Gilboa, Golan and Peleg 2007, 50). Some Israeli professionals even claim that hypnosis arguably overlaps with healing and complementary/alternative medicine (e.g. Aviv, Gilboa, Golan and Peleg 2007; Binyaminy and Hass 2016, 478), another field that in turn partially overlaps with the field of NRMs. We could have referred to a wide variety of additional therapies and techniques prevalent throughout the NRMs scene in Israel and worldwide, from meditation to hypnobirthing.

The above examples demonstrate the phenomenological resemblance and historical-cultural context that link hypnosis with a variety of religious practices, old as well as new. As our discussion continues, we should like to examine the resemblance between both fields from another outlook, the fear that lies behind the limitations imposed on both NRMs and hypnotist activities.

b. The common fear of religious techniques and hypnosis

The most central and prominent concern that propels anti-cult actions forward is the possibility that NRMs subject their members to mind control. Even though the mind control, or “brainwashing,” thesis is unacceptable within scholarly discourse and was also overruled in court hearings worldwide time and again (Melton 2000; Shupe and Darnell 2017; Introvigne 2018), it is still widespread and highly successful in public discourse.

The mind control thesis was adopted by the anti-cult movement in the 1970s, successfully conquering the mass-media discourse. A possible definition of brainwashing/mind control is (Shupe and Darnell 2017, x),

The theory that there exist arcane, rarely understood techniques to enable nefarious persons to “capture” individual free will and render persons extremely suggestible to another’s wishes.

This vague description of a mysterious and malevolent technique, in which a person submits to suggestion, is very similar to popular definitions of hypnosis

(Bryan 2011). It lies at the heart of the argument we make in this article, and therefore will be revisited in the summary.

In fact, the fear of mind control is connected to other specific mental aspects NRMs were suspected of. One is the suspicion that NRMs' leaders plant memories (or awaken false memories) among those who join them. It is argued that these false memories are perceived by new NRMs members as newly awakened repressed (but genuine) memories, that often lead them to disassociate themselves from their families or to other behaviors perceived as "destructive" by the anti-cult movement. A similar concern revolves around the pursuit of altered states of consciousness by various means, including the use of hallucinatory drugs, a matter which, in and of itself, is usually illegal and perceived as dangerous. The concern that hypnotists may alter their subject's memory and create false memories has also come up in a legal context, especially in light of the fact that the IUHL allows the use of this practice for interrogation purposes (see Gabay 2012; Har'el 1983.)

Generally, concerns that NRMs members would experience hostile mind takeover lead to present them as helpless, and therefore as in need of the special protection of the law and law enforcement authorities. In this sense, we can view both the limitations imposed on NRMs, as well as the attempts to enforce the IUHL in regard to NRMs arena, as a result of the wish to defend the members of a disadvantaged group, viewed as such due to the control allegedly exerted upon their minds by NRMs' leaders through powerful techniques. In fact, the IUHL expresses a similar idea: the state has a duty to protect its citizens when they are at a disadvantage, in this case patients who expose themselves to suggestions by their therapists under a hypnotic state, which makes them especially susceptible.

Therefore, the IUHL is combined with two central NRMs-related concerns: the first identifies NRMs' members as a disadvantaged group, while the other recognizes the particular danger of mind control within NRMs.

4. Summary and Conclusions

"Forbidding states of consciousness is extremely dangerous, it's a sign of dark regimes." [Natalie Pik, in Livne 2013]

IUHL's original purpose had nothing to do with NRMs, even though it was legislated in the early 1980s, a time during which the moral panic about NRMs arose in Israel, and although its enforcement was increased around 2010 (as we have described in subsection 3.B.I.), when the moral panic surrounding "cults" in Israel (described in section 2.B.) was reawakened. Therefore, although the IUHL's original declared purpose did not concern NRMs, nowadays its relevancy to the field becomes evident.

If we take a look at the two rather vague and broad definitions of the above-discussed controversial terms, hypnosis and mind control, we will discover a great deal of resemblance between the two. Psychologist Philip Zimbardo defines mind control as

the process by which individual or collective freedom of choice and action is compromised by agents or agencies that **modify or distort perception, motivation, affect, cognition or behavioral outcomes** (Zimbardo 2002, emphasis added; see also the definition above in subsection 3.B.II., part b).

Similarly, the IUHL defines "hypnotism" as (emphasis added):

any act or process intended or likely to cause, by means of suggestion, **changes in the state of consciousness or degree of awareness**, or in the **body, sensation, feeling, thinking, memory or behavior**, of another person.

And indeed, the purpose of the IUHL is clearly described as a means of protecting hypnotized people from danger, particularly the dangers posed to their minds. If we revisit the purpose of the Israeli legislation, ACHL members (Aviv, Gilboa, Golan, and Peleg 2007, 48; two of the authors of this article are members of ACHL) state that,

There is widespread agreement among professionals and researchers that hypnosis, just as any other therapeutic intervention, bears potential risks when carried out inexpertly.

Accordingly, the law's goal is "to promote patients' safety and to prevent harm resulting from the misuse of hypnotic interventions."

This protection of the public, and individuals, from injury to their mind through techniques designed to powerfully influence it, in a way that may almost force them to submit to external opinions, originated outside the autonomous individual who is supposed to make decisions in a conscious and rational manner, resembles the necessity to protect the public from "cults" in the anti-cult discourse.

Clearly, the IUHL serves a professional group of hypnotists, as it limits those licensed to work in the field to a small group, who was properly trained by members of the same “clique” (see e.g., Repeal Proposal 2018). The members of this esteemed and relatively small group admit that the law aims at “improving the reputation, by increasing the awareness, and by refuting misconceptions about hypnosis” (Binyaminy and Hass 2016, 478), and that it is also meant to “improve this clinical practice’s status and reputation,” and is designed to “help hypnosis gain the credibility it deserves in the eyes of the public and the professional community” (Aviv, Gilboa, Golan, and Peleg 2007, 49).

In our context, that is, the intense linkage between hypnosis and brainwashing, this professional group’s interest in the field of mental health is worthy of comparison to another professional interest, that of deprogrammers, professionals (with or without a qualification as therapists) who claim they “help” victims of “cults” to leave their movements, shake off the remains of mind control, and rehabilitate their lives (Shupe and Darnell 2017, xi). Both cases place the treatment of the alleged danger posed to the individual or public mind in the hands of a small group of mental health professionals.

In the above sequence of arguments, there is an evident contradiction between two claims by IUHL supporters. The first is that hypnosis poses no danger, and that this profession should be promoted by refuting the fears surrounding it. The other is that hypnosis may be dangerous, therefore its performance by anyone other than a licensed professional should be prevented. The professionals’ concern for their own benefits hinders the application of IUHL in a manner that would protect patients from the interests of said clique.

Thus, it is worth listing a series of critical comments about the IUHL and its enforcement, some of which have already been mentioned above, while others are less connected to NRMs, and therefore will be mentioned briefly (and will be expanded upon in a different article).

First, the legal definition of hypnosis of IUHL is too broad and inapplicable. In its current form, it may suit a wide variety of actions, from neo-shamanic rituals to political speeches. The latter example is evident in Knesset debates, during which speakers have repeatedly accused their opposing parties of “hypnotizing the public.” For example, MK Ehud Olmert, of the Likud party (right-wing) had this to say during a debate on the IUHL bill (Knesset 1981):

We may have to give this matter further thought—sanctioning those who engage in a process of collective autosuggestion and confuses both themselves and their audience for such a long time, as the Ma’arakh party [left-wing] does. So I would like to say: Knesset members have individual immunity, but there is no collective immunity [...] I would like to propose to you, if I may even propose anything, if you’re up for it: escape your autosuggestion.

This claim, though it may have been merely said in jest, demonstrate just how flexible an interpretation may be given to breaking the IUHL. In fact, this broad definition turns the IUHL to a decree that the public cannot abide, which may be the cause of its limited and sporadic enforcement. Interestingly enough, however, such arguments were not included in the proposition to revoke the law (see Repeal Proposal 2018.)

Second, the excessively broad definition of hypnosis may, as we have seen, be used by law enforcement and leaders of the licensed hypnotic profession to clip the wings of therapists, spiritual instructors, and religious practitioners, especially from the alternative arena—that is, non-mainstream groups of main religions, as well as the marginal NRMs. This concern, as we have seen, is not merely a theoretical one, and was indeed applied by the ACHL to practitioners in the spiritual-alternative arena, such as those who deal with past life regressions or NLP, and of course, those who explicitly state they have either performed or taught hypnosis. Although (almost) no charges were issued in this field, ACHL activity and the existence of the IUHL are harmful to religious freedom, and especially minority religions, and therefore also sabotage religious pluralism.

Third, hypnosis is not merely a religious practice prohibited by the Israeli law, but also a profession—ergo, the IUHL also hurts freedom of occupation, which was recognized as a constitutional right in the “Israel Basic Law: Freedom of Occupation.” The fact that a limited body of professionals only is allowed to perform hypnosis makes treatments in this method especially expensive, thus limiting it to the wealthy alone. The advantages the IUHL gives this limited professional group lead to its biased enforcement, which suits this clique and its leaders’ changing interests. Additionally, desired ethical limitations (shortly listed in section 3.A.) that should be applied to this profession are not included in the IUHL or its regulations, which is a case where “the cat has been appointed to guard the cream.” Moreover, the fact that this profession’s identity is typically secular, limits use of hypnosis to secular contexts alone (as we have seen in

relation to the past life regression issue), thus coming back to the matter of limiting freedom of religion.

When we take a look at the situation in Israel over the past decade, as a result of the existence and enforcement of such a unique law as IUHL, as well as in relation with “cults,” surprisingly, we find in the field of *entertainment* experiences a relative freedom regarding hypnosis (following the White and Har’el cases), even when compared to the worldwide standard, while the *spiritual-religious* field has been the target of repressive enforcement. Nevertheless, enforcement in the religious/spiritual field does not seem to have any clear direction either, but the unpredictability of the authorities in imposing such selective enforcement creates an ongoing uncertainty in the field.

Summing up, NRMs and hypnosis find themselves sharing an associative field, due both to the fear of mind control and the perception of NRM members, as well as hypnotized persons, as mentally disadvantaged victims who are subjected to a (potentially) powerful takeover of their minds. *In reality, ironically enough, the IUHL, which was meant to defend a disadvantaged constituency, has become yet another force that further weakens it*—perhaps as the immediate result of its paternalistic approach. Thus, the fear of mind control has made *the NRMs arena especially vulnerable*. Only, this vulnerability is not due to hypnotic techniques but rather *to the very existence of the IUHL*. This law limits NRMs’ freedom, including the practice, distribution and teaching of religious and spiritual techniques, as well as the freedom of providing individuals with spiritual support and services.

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La “fobia delle sette” in Italia: *fake news* al servizio della denigrazione religiosa

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ABSTRACT: Partendo da osservazioni comuni nella letteratura sociologica e giuridica sui fenomeni della “fobia delle sette” e della diffamazione religiosa, l’articolo esplora i temi delle *fake news* in materia di nuovi movimenti religiosi, delle campagne di odio e discredito di *media* e gruppi anti-sette e della situazione attuale in Italia. Premesso il quadro normativo e giurisprudenziale sui limiti del diritto di cronaca e di critica giornalistica, e sulle forme più frequenti di abuso e distorsione a danno della libertà religiosa, il testo analizza alcune angolazioni del problema delle campagne d’odio e della denigrazione religiosa, sulla base delle impostazioni di Desplan, Goffman e Becker, e svolge alcune riflessioni sul contesto normativo internazionale e comunitario. Analizza poi alcuni casi italiani, degli ultimi anni, di *fake news*, *hate speech* e campagne di stampa allarmistiche e distorte contro movimenti religiosi nuovi o minoritari, o gruppi che non hanno in realtà nulla di religioso, ma vengono qualificati impropriamente come “sette” o “psicosette”.

KEYWORDS: *Fake News*, Libertà Religiosa, Sette, Psicosette, Fobia delle Sette, Diffamazione Religiosa, Decalogo sul Diritto di Cronaca, *Hate Speech*.

“Fobia delle sette”, media e diritto di cronaca

Le riflessioni di Brock K. Kilbourne e James T. Richardson sulla “fobia delle sette” (Kilbourne e Richardson 1984) e degli stessi sociologi e di altri sul *labeling* di minoranze e nuovi movimenti religiosi come “sette” pericolose (Di Marzio 2012), utilizzando insidiosamente i *media* nella loro denigrazione, e amplificandone o creandone ad arte gli elementi devianti per suscitare insofferenza ed intolleranza, si sono arricchite, negli ultimi anni, di inediti e pericolosi sviluppi. Questo fenomeno è divenuto assai visibile anche in Italia, un

Paese che pure presenta, nel suo apparato costituzionale e normativo, validi presidi e tutele significative della libertà religiosa e di culto, con la costruzione di campagne mediatiche di stampo sensazionalistico e palesemente deformato, per non parlare di vere e proprie *fake news*, a danno di movimenti e comunità religiose o legati alla spiritualità. Questo è avvenuto, molto spesso, strumentalizzando abusi e crimini individuali, certamente gravi e meritevoli di pene adeguate, ma utilizzati scorrettamente per colpire culti nuovi o minoritari nel loro complesso e generare veri e propri “panici morali”, quasi sempre sproporzionati, ingiusti e ingiustificati.

La stigmatizzazione di gruppi religiosi come “sette” è una delle minacce più gravi e frequenti alla libertà religiosa in Occidente. Ed è presente anche in Italia. Risulta assolutamente evidente che in ogni gruppo possano esservi fanatici che distorcono gli insegnamenti originali, o perfino delinquenti incalliti, maniaci sessuali, truffatori, lesto-fanti. È anche vero che, se vengono commessi reati, vanno perseguiti secondo la legge, ed esistono norme precise, ispirate al principio della responsabilità personale: sottolineare, però, che chi ha commesso il reato era membro, o anche dirigente, di un gruppo religioso, così denigrandolo, a che cosa serve, se non a punire ingiustamente il gruppo intero?

Prima di esaminare, seppure in una rapida sintesi, i principali casi italiani recenti di campagne di disinformazione, distorsione, o vera e propria denigrazione di comunità e gruppi religiosi, sembra utile richiamare le più ricorrenti modalità e tecniche giornalistiche di “costruzione della devianza” attraverso le quali i *mass media*, con il crescente peso e contributo diffusivo dei *social network*, come Facebook o Twitter, presentano in una direzione negativa, aggressiva e discriminatoria i culti minoritari o i nuovi movimenti religiosi. Svilupperemo poi, seguendo alcuni approcci significativi sulla “costruzione della devianza” (Desplan, Goffman, Becker), qualche riflessione sulla “diffamazione religiosa” e sulla sua enorme pericolosità.

Va preliminarmente osservato che, in Italia, l’esercizio legittimo del diritto di cronaca e dell’attività giornalistica (il cui fondamento è evidenziato dall’art. 21 della Costituzione, sulla libertà di manifestazione del pensiero) ha subito una lenta evoluzione giurisprudenziale, in esito alla quale la Corte di Cassazione ne ha definitivamente previsto, con un celebre “decalogo” (contenuto nella nota sentenza 5259/84), i tre limiti invalicabili: l’“utilità sociale della notizia” (l’interesse pubblico, effettivo, alla pubblicazione o diffusione); la “verità” (reale

o putativa, cioè ritenuta tale dall'operatore dell'informazione, sempre che questo avvenga a seguito di una doverosa e rigorosa verifica delle fonti) e la "continenza" (o "forma civile"), cioè la proporzionalità e moderazione di esposizione, senza maliziosità, accostamenti suggestionanti o presentazioni deformate dei fatti, o inutilmente aggressive, nella notizia pubblicata (Corte di Cassazione 1984). Il superamento costante di questi tre limiti, in materia di notizie relative a gruppi religiosi nuovi e minoritari, è purtroppo sempre più visibile e frequente.

Nel "decalogo" della Cassazione sono poi precisati alcuni concetti particolarmente importanti, che vale la pena di riportare per intero:

La verità dei fatti, cui il giornalista ha il preciso dovere di attenersi, non è rispettata quando, pur essendo veri i singoli fatti riferiti, siano, dolosamente o anche soltanto colposamente, taciti altri fatti, tanto strettamente ricollegabili ai primi da mutarne completamente il significato. La verità non è più tale se è "mezza verità" (o comunque, verità incompleta): quest'ultima, anzi, è più pericolosa della esposizione di singoli fatti falsi, per la più chiara assunzione di responsabilità (e, correlativamente, per la più facile possibilità di difesa) che comporta, rispettivamente, riferire o sentire riferito a sé un fatto preciso falso, piuttosto che un fatto vero sì, ma incompleto. La *verità incompleta* (nel senso qui specificato) deve essere, pertanto, in tutto equiparata alla *notizia falsa*.

La forma della critica non è civile non soltanto quando è eccedente rispetto allo scopo informativo da conseguire o difetta di serenità e di obiettività o, comunque, calpesta quel minimo di dignità cui ogni persona ha sempre diritto, ma anche quando non è improntata a leale chiarezza. E questo perché soltanto un fatto o un apprezzamento chiaramente esposto favorisce, nella coscienza del giornalista, l'insorgere del senso di responsabilità che deve sempre accompagnare la sua attività e, nel danneggiato, la possibilità di difendersi mediante adeguate smentite nonché di ricorrere con successo all'autorità giudiziaria. Proprio per questo il *difetto intenzionale di leale chiarezza* è più pericoloso, talvolta, di una notizia falsa o di un commento triviale, e non può rimanere privo di sanzione.

E lo sleale difetto di chiarezza sussiste quando il giornalista, al fine di sottrarsi alle responsabilità che comporterebbero univoche informazioni o critiche senza, peraltro, rinunciare a trasmetterle in qualche modo al lettore, ricorre – con particolare riferimento a quanto i giudici di merito avevano nella specie accertato – a uno dei seguenti *subdoli espeditivi* (nei quali sono da ravvisarsi, in sostanza, altrettante forme di offese indirette):

A. al *sottinteso sapiente*: cioè all'uso di determinate espressioni nella consapevolezza che il pubblico dei lettori, per ragioni che possono essere le più varie a seconda dei tempi e dei luoghi ma che comunque sono sempre ben precise, le intenderà o in maniera diversa o addirittura contraria al loro significato letterale, ma, comunque, sempre in senso fortemente più sfavorevole – se non apertamente offensivo – nei confronti della persona o dell'organizzazione che si vuol mettere in cattiva luce. Il più sottile e insidioso di tali

espedienti è il racchiudere determinate parole tra virgolette, all'evidente scopo di far intendere al lettore che esse non sono altro che eufemismi, e che, comunque, sono da interpretarsi in ben altro (e ben noto) senso da quello che avrebbero senza virgolette;

B. agli *accostamenti suggestionanti* (conseguiti anche mediante la semplice sequenza in un testo di proposizioni autonome, non legate cioè da alcun esplicito vincolo sintattico) di fatti che si riferiscono alla persona che si vuol mettere in cattiva luce con altri fatti (presenti o passati, ma comunque sempre in qualche modo negativi per la reputazione) concernenti altre persone estranee ovvero con giudizi (anch'essi ovviamente sempre negativi) apparentemente espressi in forma generale e astratta e come tali ineccepibili (come ad esempio, l'affermazione il furto è sempre da condannare) ma che, invece, per il contesto in cui sono inseriti, il lettore riferisce inevitabilmente a persone ben determinate;

C. al *tono sproporzionalmente scandalizzato e sdegnato*, specie nei titoli, o comunque all'artificiosa e sistematica drammatizzazione con cui si riferiscono notizie neutre perché insignificanti o, comunque, di scarsissimo valore sintomatico, al solo scopo di indurre i lettori, specie i più superficiali, a lasciarsi suggestionare dal tono usato, fino al punto di recepire quanto corrisponde non tanto al contenuto letterale della notizia, ma quasi esclusivamente al modo della sua presentazione (classici a tal fine sono l'uso del punto esclamativo – anche laddove di solito non è usato – o la scelta di aggettivi comuni, sempre in senso negativo, ma di significato non facilmente precisabile o comunque sempre legato a valutazioni molto soggettive, come, ad esempio, “notevole”, “impressionante”, “strano”, “non chiaro”;

D. alle vere e proprie *insinuazioni anche se più o meno velate* (la più tipica delle quali è certamente quella secondo cui “non si può escludere che...”, riferita a fatti dei quali non si riferisce alcun serio indizio), le quali ricorrono quando, pur senza esporre fatti o esprimere giudizi apertamente, si articola il discorso in modo tale che il lettore li prenda ugualmente in considerazione a tutto detimento della reputazione di un determinato soggetto (Corte di Cassazione 1984).

La Corte di Cassazione ha poi precisato nel 2011 alcuni rilievi interessanti:

È interesse dei cittadini essere informati su eventuali violazioni di norme penali e civili, conoscere e controllare l'andamento degli accertamenti e la reazione degli organi dello Stato dinanzi all'illegalità, onde potere effettuare consapevoli valutazioni sullo stato delle istituzioni e sul livello di legalità caratterizzante governanti e governati, in un determinato momento storico.

Il diritto di cronaca giornalistica, giudiziaria o di altra natura, rientra nella più vasta categoria dei diritti pubblici soggettivi, relativi alla libertà di pensiero e al diritto dei cittadini di essere informati, onde poter effettuare scelte consapevoli nell'ambito della vita associata. È diritto della collettività ricevere informazioni su chi sia stato coinvolto in un procedimento penale o civile, specialmente se i protagonisti abbiano posizioni di rilievo nella vita sociale, politica o giudiziaria. In pendenza di indagini di polizia giudiziaria e di

accertamenti giudiziari nei confronti di un cittadino, non può essere a questi riconosciuto il diritto alla tutela della propria reputazione: ove i limiti del diritto di cronaca siano rispettati, la lesione perde il suo carattere di antigiuridicità.

Va però precisato che la reputazione del soggetto coinvolto in indagini e accertamenti penali non è tutelata rispetto all'indicazione di fatti e alla espressione di giudizi critici, a condizione che questi siano in correlazione con l'andamento del procedimento. Rientra cioè nell'esercizio del diritto di cronaca giudiziaria riferire atti di indagini e atti censori provenienti dalla pubblica autorità, ma non è consentito effettuare ricostruzioni, analisi, valutazioni tendenti ad affiancare e precedere attività di polizia e magistratura, indipendentemente dai risultati di tali attività. È quindi in stridente contrasto con il diritto/dovere di narrare fatti già accaduti, senza indulgere a narrazioni e valutazioni "a futura memoria", l'opera del giornalista che confonda cronaca su eventi accaduti e prognosi su eventi a venire. In tal modo il cronista, in maniera autonoma, prospetta e anticipa l'evoluzione e l'esito di indagini in chiave colpevolista, a fronte di iniziative giudiziarie né iniziate né concluse, senza essere in grado di dimostrare l'affidabilità di queste indagini private e la corrispondenza a verità storica del loro esito. Si propone ai cittadini un processo "agarantista", dinanzi al quale il cittadino interessato ha, come unica garanzia di difesa, la querela per diffamazione (Corte di Cassazione 2011).

La sentenza prosegue richiamando che

a ciascuno il suo: agli inquirenti il compito di effettuare gli accertamenti, ai giudici il compito di verificarne la fondatezza, al giornalista il compito di darne notizia, nell'esercizio del diritto di informare, ma non di suggestionare, la collettività (Corte di Cassazione 2011).

Per la verità, nell'ultimo quinquennio la giurisprudenza italiana ha parzialmente ridotto, con alcune decisioni significative, la portata rigorosa del "decalogo" sui limiti della cronaca, dando luogo a un *revirement* non sempre condivisibile, che ha circoscritto la responsabilità di televisioni, giornali e giornalisti, producendo purtroppo effetti che sono sotto gli occhi di tutti: gogne, linciaggi, spettacolarizzazione delle indagini, lesioni irreversibili dell'onore e dell'immagine di persone, gruppi e carriere, quasi sempre (o almeno nella maggioranza dei casi) basati su inchieste che si concludono con assoluzioni, proscioglimenti, prescrizioni (negli ultimi dieci anni sono finiti nel nulla, per prescrizione, un milione e settecentomila processi, di cui il settanta per cento ancora in fase di indagini preliminari).

La sentenza n. 6902/2012 della Cassazione, come riassunta da Gloria Urbani, ha avuto modo di precisare come

il diritto di cronaca possa essere esercitato anche quando ne deriva una lesione dell'altrui reputazione, costituendo così causa di giustificazione della condotta, a condizione che

vengano rispettati i limiti della verità, della continenza e della pertinenza della notizia.

Orbene, è fondamentale che la notizia pubblicata sia vera e che sussista un interesse pubblico alla conoscenza dei fatti. Il diritto di cronaca, infatti, giustifica intromissioni nella sfera privata laddove la notizia riportata possa contribuire alla formazione di una pubblica opinione su fatti oggettivamente rilevanti (Urbani 2013).

Rispetto alla giurisprudenza precedente,

la Corte fa un passo in più: oltre a ravvisare gli estremi della verità, della pertinenza e della continenza della notizia, risponde al quesito se sia possibile che un singolo titolo possa essere denigratorio e diffamatorio. A tal proposito, giova ricordare che la portata diffamatoria del titolo di un articolo di giornale deve essere valutata prendendo in esame l'intero contenuto dell'articolo, sia sotto il profilo letterale sia sotto il profilo delle modalità complessive con le quali la notizia viene data (Urbani 2013, che richiama Cassazione 2009).

Del resto,

sussiste l'esimente dell'esercizio del diritto di cronaca (nella specie giudiziaria) qualora il titolo dell'articolo attribuisca alla persona offesa – nei cui confronti penda un procedimento penale – una condotta avente riscontro negli atti giudiziari e nell'oggetto dell'imputazione e corrispondente al contenuto dell'articolo (...) l'esercizio del diritto di critica assume necessariamente connotazioni soggettive ed opinabili, in particolare quando, come nella specie, abbia per oggetto lo svolgimento di pubbliche attività di cui si censurino le modalità di esercizio e le disfunzioni utilizzando un linguaggio volto a sollecitare l'interesse dell'opinione pubblica (Corte di Cassazione 2012).

Si configura

l'esimente del diritto di critica quando il discorso giornalistico ha un contenuto esclusivamente valutativo e si sviluppa all'interno di una polemica intensa su temi di rilevanza sociale, senza trascendere ad attacchi personali finalizzati all'unico scopo di aggredire la sfera morale altrui (Corte di Cassazione 2006).

Si afferma, però, che anche espressioni “particolarmente pungenti costituiscono corrette manifestazioni della critica, risultando prive di offensività se attengono a materia di rilievo sociale” (Urbani 2013).

“Diffamazione religiosa” e stigmatizzazione

Come operano i limiti del diritto di cronaca e di critica, concretamente, oggi in Italia nei confronti delle minoranze religiose o dei nuovi movimenti religiosi? Anzitutto, deve rilevarsi la costante e generale sopravvivenza, a dispetto delle

acquisizioni costanti delle discipline sociologiche che ne censurano l'impiego da anni, dell'utilizzo della denominazione di "sette" per comunità, gruppi e movimenti religiosi percepiti, per il solo fatto di essere minoritari per rilievo storico e numero di aderenti, come devianti, pericolosi o addirittura minacciosi per la società o la cultura maggioritaria. Come ha scritto Fabrice Desplan, sociologo e antropologo francese, che seguirò ampiamente in questo paragrafo, siamo di fronte a un vero e proprio fenomeno di "diffamazione religiosa" (Desplan 2016, 167).

Desplan è molto chiaro sul punto, e osserva che

nell'indifferenza più o meno generale, i gruppi religiosi sono vittime di diffamazione. Questo lato del diritto e delle relazioni sociali è, tuttavia, poco menzionato. Quando una organizzazione religiosa è sospettata di avere una prassi incompatibile con il diritto, la morale o una presunta tradizione, diventa oggetto di diffamazione. Eppure, nonostante le varie sentenze della Corte europea dei diritti umani (CEDU), la diffamazione dei gruppi religiosi persiste. La Francia si è particolarmente distinta in questo senso (Desplan 2016, 166).

L'autore ha studiato il fenomeno della stigmatizzazione religiosa in diversi contesti europei, e si è soffermato sulla realtà francese con alcuni spunti interessanti che dovrebbero far riflettere. "Nel diritto francese, nota Desplan, la diffamazione è un reato definito come tale dalla legge sulla libertà del 29 luglio 1881, articolo 29, comma 1" (Desplan 2016, 166). La norma recita:

Ogni accusa o imputazione di un fatto che mette a repentaglio l'onore o la considerazione della persona o dell'ente a cui l'atto viene attribuito è una diffamazione. La pubblicazione diretta o attraverso la riproduzione di tale accusa o di tale imputazione è punibile, anche se fatta sotto forma dubitativa o se riguarda una persona o un ente non specificamente nominati, ma la cui identificazione è resa possibile da discorsi, urla, minacce, cartelli scritti o stampati o manifesti.

Desplan riassume così i criteri di applicazione della norma francese:

L'intenzione è presunta colpevole (legge 19 luglio 1881, art. 35 bis). Spetta all'autore e/o al diffusore di dichiarazioni palesemente diffamatorie provare la propria buona fede, dimostrando: a) che disponeva di elementi probanti che sostenevano la sua argomentazione per credere alla verità dei fatti indicati; b) che non intendeva fare del male, ma informare; c) che il danno subito, l'alterazione dell'immagine del gruppo calunniato, è proporzionato; d) che aveva preso delle precauzioni per evitare la diffamazione. Parlare di diffamazione è quindi, alla luce di questi criteri del diritto, considerare un impatto negativo sull'immagine di un gruppo o di una pratica religiosa come risultato di un'azione deliberata (Desplan 2016, 166-167).

Desplan analizza poi le recenti pronunce della CEDU in materia di diffamazione di movimenti religiosi e di uso del termine “setta” (Desplan 2016, 167-170). L’autore si sofferma sulla sentenza *Paturel* del 22 dicembre 2005, particolarmente pertinente per il dibattito che ci riguarda. Christian Paturel è un Testimone di Geova molto noto in Francia per le sue posizioni battagliere nei confronti dei movimenti anti-sette che, dal canto loro, attaccano i Testimoni di Geova come “setta”. Le sue critiche contro il più grande movimento anti-sette francese, l’UNADFI (Union nationale des associations de défense des familles et de l’individu), gli hanno valso una causa per diffamazione, a seguito della quale è stato condannato. Paturel ha fatto appello alla CEDU, la quale ha ritenuto che un’applicazione formalistica del diritto francese al suo caso non fosse sufficiente (Corte Europea dei Diritti dell’Uomo 2005). Secondo la CEDU, le caratteristiche del dibattito francese sulle “sette” impongono che a chi critica associazioni come l’UNADFI sia lasciata una certa libertà di espressione e di critica, anche accesa.

Questa sentenza della CEDU, secondo Desplan,

impatta direttamente sulla costruzione giuridica del concetto di diffamazione e su una storia antica. In Francia, la diffamazione è stata codificata nel quadro della libertà di espressione della stampa. Questo contesto è ora in tensione con la nuova giurisprudenza (Desplan 2016, 177).

Nel caso Paturel, la CEDU ha osservato che le indagini dell’autore si fondano su “una base di fatto non inesistente”, e sono parte di un “dibattito pubblico”. È interessante notare come la presenza di un “dibattito pubblico” diventi per la CEDU un parametro fondamentale per valutare la diffamazione, alla stregua di una nozione di diffamazione che non è statica, ma dinamica e complessa. Questo è particolarmente vero in materia religiosa dove si contrappongono, secondo Desplan, il “diritto all’esagerazione” e la “nozione di offesa” (Desplan 2016, 168).

È ancora Desplan a richiamare la nostra attenzione su due sociologi, le cui opere – al di là delle pertinenti osservazioni dello studioso francese – meritano di essere esplorate direttamente. Il primo è Erving Goffman (1922–1982), autore del celebre *Stigma* (1963), un’opera che propone una complessa mappatura delle diverse nozioni di devianza che portano alla stigmatizzazione:

Tre tipi molto diversi di stigma devono essere menzionati. In primo luogo, ci sono le abominazioni del corpo – le varie deformità fisiche. In secondo luogo, ci sono le deformità

del carattere individuale, come la volontà debole, le passioni innaturali o dominanti, le credenze ingannevoli o troppo rigide, la disonestà: tutte cose che possono essere ricavate dal passato di una persona, dove si troveranno, per esempio, malattie mentali, tempo trascorso in carcere, droghe, alcolismo, omosessualità, difficoltà di trovare un lavoro, tentativi di suicidio o comportamenti politici radicali. Infine, esiste lo stigma tribale della razza, della nazione, o della religione, e questo è uno stigma che si trasmette lungo il lignaggio e può contaminare nello stesso modo tutti i membri di una famiglia (Goffman 1963, 13).

Un altro aspetto interessante del libro di Goffman è l'osservazione secondo cui un individuo e un gruppo si espongono allo stigma quando contestano i valori maggioritari di una determinata società

Queste sono persone che si considera siano impegnate in qualche tipo di negazione collettiva dell'ordine sociale. Sono percepite come persone che rifiutano ogni possibilità di migliorare la loro situazione secondo le modalità approvate dalla società. Anzi, mostrano apertamente la loro mancanza di rispetto per coloro che la società considera migliori di loro. Sono empi, che dal punto di vista della società rappresentano il fallimento degli schemi motivazionali (Goffman 1963, 170).

Naturalmente queste parole sono facilmente applicabili allo stereotipo della "setta". Le "sette" disturbano perché vivono e affermano valori diversi da quelli della maggioranza. Goffman distingue fra "emarginati tranquilli" (Goffman 1963, 171), che sono almeno temporaneamente tollerati perché non mettono in discussione le norme stabilite dell'ordine sociale, e membri di "comunità devianti" che non si limitano a vivere diversamente, ma proclamano ad alta voce che il loro stile di vita è migliore di quello della maggioranza. Qui Goffman offre precisamente l'esempio dei "membri delle sette" che, a differenza degli "emarginati tranquilli", si permettono addirittura di "ottenere non solo simpatia, ma addirittura conversioni" al loro stile di vita alternativo, e sono quindi oggetto di uno stigma particolare (Goffman 1963, 171).

Il secondo autore su cui Desplan attira la nostra attenzione è Howard Becker, uno dei padri della sociologia della devianza, autore di *Outsiders* (Becker 1963). Si "devia" da qualcosa, e questo qualcosa è la normalità, ma sia della devianza sia della normalità esistono diverse definizioni. Becker, in *Outsiders*, ne propone tre.

In primo luogo, "la concezione più semplice della devianza è essenzialmente statistica, e definisce come deviante qualunque cosa che si allontani eccessivamente dalla media" (Becker 1963, 4). Questa concezione, però, è "troppo semplice" per servire veramente alle scienze sociali (Becker 1963, 5).

Una seconda “meno semplice ma più comune concezione della devianza la identifica come qualche cosa di essenzialmente patologico, che rivela la presenza di una ‘malattia’” (Becker 1963, 5). Non si tratta solo di stabilire una relazione di causa e di effetto e di “considerare la devianza come frutto di una malattia mentale” (Becker 1963, 5). In realtà, chi parla di devianza inventa nuove “malattie sociali” ignote ai medici (Becker 1963, 6-7). Anche in questo caso, non siamo lontani dalla “patologizzazione” del “problema delle sette”, che è tipica dei movimenti anti-sette e li porta a usare espressioni come “malattia” o “epidemia”.

Benché, notava Becker, alcuni sociologi abbiano adottato il secondo modello, l'unica nozione propriamente sociologica di devianza è la terza, che considera la devianza “creata dalla società”:

I gruppi sociali creano la devianza, costruendo regole la cui violazione costituisce la devianza, applicando queste regole a certi gruppi particolari di persone, ed etichettandoli come *outsider*. Da questo punto di vista, la devianza *non è* una qualità intrinseca alle azioni di una persona ma una conseguenza dell'applicazione delle regole e di sanzioni a un “trasgressore” da parte di altri. Il deviante è qualcuno cui questa etichetta è stata applicata con successo; e il “comportamento deviante” è il comportamento che la maggioranza etichetta come deviante (Becker 1963, 9).

L'impostazione beckeriana offre spunti davvero interessanti anche per una lettura del fenomeno attuale delle *fake news* e delle campagne ispirate dalla “fobia delle sette”. Desplan la applica al contesto francese, citando la critica della nozione corrente di “setta” da parte di sociologi come Jean Baubérot e Jean-Paul Willaime (Willaime 1999; Baubérot 2006). Ma è evidente che la logica di Becker non è all'opera solo in Francia. Sono le maggioranze sociali a decidere quali gruppi sono “sette”, contro le quali sembra che i *media* meno scrupolosi possano liberamente scatenarsi.

Da questo punto di vista, è significativo come il percorso di autoregolamentazione deontologica giornalistica, così attiva e sensibile anche in Italia per mille tematiche spesso collimanti col *politically correct* (minori, tutela della *privacy*, differenze di genere e semantica dell'eufemismo maschile-femminile, divieti di utilizzo di espressioni linguistiche percepite come virtualmente lesive della dignità o in grado di turbare minoranze politiche, etniche, culturali, ecc.), non abbia prodotto alcun serio risultato sul tema della libertà religiosa dei nuovi gruppi, dei loro diritti e della dignità degli aderenti.

La situazione italiana: fake news e tecniche di manipolazione giornalistica

Tornando al panorama italiano, va rilevato che la produzione di *fake news* e campagne sensazionalistiche finalizzate al discredito di un gruppo religioso avviene, in evidente superamento del limite della “verità” (almeno putativa) e all’obbligo di verifica diligente delle fonti, con modalità ricorrenti, tra le quali spiccano: a) l’utilizzo prevalente, nella presentazione della notizia o del servizio, di dichiarazioni o interviste di ex adepti o fuoriusciti dal gruppo, o di parenti in disaccordo con le scelte di vita dei familiari, o comunque di persone ostili, per i motivi più svariati, al movimento; b) l’assenza di escussione, o loro marginalizzazione o attribuzione di rilievo minimo, al riscontro, con parità di spazio, a fonti oggettive ed attendibili, organismi neutrali di studio e ricerca ed esperti, e/o, soprattutto, al paritario diritto di replica dei gruppi denigrati; c) gli accostamenti maliziosi o suggestionanti a fatti criminosi o abusi di singoli esponenti o appartenenti, inducendo l’erronea equiparazione, o la confusa connessione, tra i reati e le responsabilità soggettive e la generalità del gruppo, le sue dottrine, le modalità di proselitismo e disaffiliazione; d) l’induzione di idee, dubbi, diffidenze e sospetti generali, nel lettore o nello spettatore, rispetto a coartazioni della volontà, forme di soggezione psichica, connessi alla struttura del gruppo minoritario, o addirittura alla necessità doverosa di “deprogrammazione” o di terapie di “guarigione” degli aderenti; e) l’enfatizzazione di dichiarazioni e posizioni di organismi e strutture, pubbliche e private, fortemente controversi negli ambienti sociologici, cosiddette “anti-sette”, o “antiplagio” (nonostante la lodevole cancellazione, dall’ordinamento italiano, del reato di plagio ad opera della nota pronuncia della Corte Costituzionale del 1981), tradizionalmente sostenitrici, nella prassi televisiva e mediatica, con il loro “attivismo anti-sette”, di campagne di denigrazione e discredito, spesso discriminatorie e limitatrici della libertà religiosa e di culto, con una evidente carenza, agevolmente ricavabile dalla qualità degli interventi, di professionalità culturalmente adeguate e di preparazione specifica, e con la contestuale e conclamata assenza di seri percorsi formativi degli operatori di tali strutture.

Il sistematico impiego di queste modalità, e la conseguente qualificazione come “sette” di tipi di gruppo o nuovi movimenti caratterizzati da dottrine e valori minoritari, per questo solo considerati come devianti e sospetti, tralasciando o minimizzando generalmente fatti ed episodi, talvolta ben più gravi, avvenuti nel contesto di religioni storiche maggioritarie, consente di ritener che,

anche in Italia, il fenomeno descritto dalla sociologia delle religioni come “fobia delle sette” (approfondito anche nel nostro Paese con spunti originali da studiosi significativi come Raffaella Di Marzio, Massimo Introvigne e Luigi Berzano), sia in pericolosa crescita, e valga la pena di segnalarne e descriverne, quindi, alcune tra le più gravi e nefaste conferme dell’ultimo periodo.

A Catania, nell'estate 2017, una massiccia campagna di stampa individua, nel contesto di alcuni abusi sessuali gravi, la presenza di un “gruppo religioso” di “cinquemila adepti”, definito nella maggior parte degli articoli “setta religiosa” o “comunità religiosa”, con l'utilizzo del consueto repertorio di espressioni semanticamente suggestionanti: “setta”, “santone” (Gangi 2017), “apostoli” (*LaSicilia.it* 2018). Si scoprirà poi che si tratta, in realtà, di un'associazione culturale, denominata Associazione Cattolica Cultura ed Ambiente (ma la denominazione completa appare in uno solo dei ventidue articoli consultati), che opera essenzialmente nella coltivazione e vendita di prodotti agricoli, e che il “santone” (quasi ottantenne), autore dei presunti abusi sessuali, non ha alcuna preparazione o formazione religiosa, né titoli o pretese religiose. L'unico riferimento a una figura religiosa è a un sacerdote cattolico, che ha fatto parte dell'associazione, ma è deceduto da molti anni. Peraltro, la Corte di Cassazione, nel febbraio 2018, ha annullato l'ordine di carcerazione del presunto “santone” (*LaSicilia.it* 2018).

La macchina delle *fake news*, però, ha funzionato, e la presentazione del gruppo come “setta” è stata la garanzia di una maggiore possibilità di “fare notizia”, anche se la religione o la religiosità c’entravano ben poco con vicende e abusi personali, per quanto gravi. Ma considerare l'associazione una “setta”, demonizzandola come se le violenze sessuali di un singolo fossero, in qualche modo, connaturate ai valori associativi o alle dottrine del gruppo, o addirittura tipiche delle “sette” in genere, appare davvero una torbida forzatura.

Nel marzo 2018 il vocabolario mediatico della denigrazione religiosa recupera un termine già usato in passato, ma rispolverandone i contenuti: la “psicosetta”. Le indagini della polizia su un imprenditore marchigiano, da anni attivo nel settore dell'alimentazione macrobiotica, accusato di “riduzione in schiavitù”, sono prontamente riferite colorandole con espressioni come “setta”, “adepti”, “schiavi” (*Repubblica* 2018). Si manifestano, subito dopo l'apoteosi dell'indignazione “anti-psicosette”, alcune apposite associazioni “contro le psicosette” e per tutelare le “vittime di psicosette”. Manca nel gruppo qualsiasi

riferimento, anche minimo, a forme di religiosità o dottrina del trascendente, ma il repertorio linguistico usato nelle campagne di stampa è sempre il solito: “psicosetta” e “manipolazione delle persone” (Medde 2018). Il vertice della *fake news* è l'accostamento malizioso al termine “promessa di miracoli”: l'indagato, è vero, prometteva miracoli, ma quelli della dieta (e lo faceva da un trentennio), e non altri (attenzione, quindi, a dire “quel chirurgo fa miracoli!”). Il lessico utilizzato da pressoché tutti i giornali consultati (una ventina) è, inequivocabilmente, tale da suggerire nel lettore l'idea di una “setta”, con elementi religiosi o spirituali, in grado di manipolare menti deboli e immature.

Nel maggio 2018 si assiste a una nuova diffusione di *fake news* da manuale: un imprenditore, o ex imprenditore, è arrestato per una megatruffa, legata a fondi esteri, commessa nel periodo 2012–2014. Nel 2017, l'indagato (che, sia chiaro, se ha commesso reati va punito applicando la legge) era stato ordinato prete ortodosso in una Chiesa non canonica, e aveva fondato una piccola comunità (di tre persone) in Umbria. I titoli giornalistici sono esemplari, e parlano come di consueto di “setta religiosa”, “arcivescovo”, “congrega religiosa”, “adepti”, “chiesa scismatica” (*Rainews.it* 2018). Peccato che le operazioni finanziarie contestate risalgano almeno a tre anni prima della svolta religiosa dell'indagato, cioè a un periodo in cui era un semplice imprenditore senza interessi o attività religiose: all'epoca non c'era alcun gruppo, né Chiesa, né prete, né adepti.

Un altro caso clamoroso, perché prodotto da un canale televisivo del servizio pubblico (Rai3), ha suscitato nel 2018 una ridda di polemiche e di durissime critiche da parte di gruppi, sociologi e docenti, presentando in un contesto di sapienti e maliziosi accostamenti suggestionanti tradizioni religiose importanti come Damanhur, la Soka Gakkai o Scientology, stigmatizzate come “sette”, e affiancati nel servizio, con una certa spregiudicatezza e un notevole cinismo, ad altri fatti riprovevoli di singoli, che con i gruppi in sé e le dottrine professate non c'entrano assolutamente nulla. Un buon esempio di strumentalizzazione e discreditò generalizzante dei nuovi movimenti religiosi o delle minoranze religiose è, come di consueto, riferito al perdurante e ossessivo uso del termine “sette religiose” (Magnani 2018). Alla trasmissione è seguito un approfondito e condivisibile commento critico (Di Marzio 2018). Le critiche si sono concentrate sull'evidente taglio denigratorio della trasmissione, e sull'animosità personale nei confronti delle “sette” mostrata dalla conduttrice. Il vero problema è che il diritto e la giurisprudenza, di fronte all'evoluzione brusca e così rapida delle *fake news*,

appaiono del tutto in ritardo e impreparati.

Ma il caso forse più clamoroso, conclusosi dopo sei anni, per il quale il termine “psicosessa”, oltre che “setta”, è stato utilizzato per una lunga campagna mediatica screditante, poi smentita da una sentenza che escludeva la pertinenza di questi lemmi, è certamente quello relativo al gruppo Arkeon. La comunità, attiva dal 1999 con basi originariamente collegate alle tecniche reiki e definita “di crescita personale” e di “sviluppo e conoscenza personale”, presentata come aconfessionale, era stata fondata da Vito Carlo Moccia sulla base di seminari da lui tenuti a partire dal 1989. È stata oggetto di una indagine da parte della Procura di Bari, conclusa nel 2008 con il rinvio a giudizio del fondatore e di dieci membri. Durante e dopo l’indagine giudiziaria gli imputati si sono trovati al centro di una virulenta campagna di stampa, con evidenti accostamenti suggestionanti di tipo manipolatorio, ben al di là del normale diritto di cronaca.

Arkeon non intendeva proporsi come un movimento religioso o spirituale separato da altri. Sacerdoti cattolici, come il popolare volto televisivo padre Raniero Cantalamessa, si erano occupati, con toni tutt’altro che critici, del gruppo e delle sue attività. Eppure, i principali organi di informazione hanno giocato sullo stereotipo della “setta” fin dai primi servizi sull’inchiesta di Bari. “La grande truffa della psico-setta”, “Le truffe della setta”, “I preti nella psico-setta”, “La manipolazione mistica”, “Sette: il racconto-choc di una vittima di Arkeon”, “Erano premurosi, poi mi hanno stuprata”, “Arkeon: mio marito succube della setta”, e così via. Una meticolosa elencazione è presente in rete (“Il caso Arkeon” 2018). I giudici ipotizzarono una pletora di reati addirittura encyclopedica: truffa, violenza privata, maltrattamenti, stupro, procurato stato di incapacità, calunnia. L’unica condanna rimasta in piedi contro Vito Moccia, dopo cinque anni di accuse infondate, è quella dell’abuso di professione di psicologo. Lo stesso Tribunale di Bari, nella sentenza di primo grado, ha scritto:

L’esito di questo giudizio ha sconfermato la sussistenza della principale e più grave delle accuse, costituita dall’essere Arkeon una “psico-setta”, ha portato ad escludere la sussistenza di uno stato di incapacità di intendere e volere per i partecipanti a qualsiasi tipo di seminario e di tecniche manipolatorie della mente, nonché di violenze di ogni genere poste in essere nei confronti di minori. In questo giudizio non vi è stata contestazione di reati fiscali ed è emerso che i costi dei seminari erano fissi e noti ai partecipanti. Il processo ha portato ad escludere la sussistenza dell’aggravante dell’aver indotto nei partecipanti il timore di un pericolo immaginario, come cagione giustificativa degli esborsi economici, nonché di quella del danno di rilevante entità e da questo è conseguita la ritenuta

improcedibilità dei reati di truffa, con riferimento ai quali non era stata sporta alcuna querela da parte delle vittime (Tribunale di Bari 2012).

Vale la pena, in questo sintetico contributo descrittivo della “diffamazione religiosa” in Italia, descrivere sommariamente anche il fenomeno del florilegio di gruppi “anti-sette” o di “difesa di vittime delle sette”, proliferato nel nostro Paese specialmente nell’ultimo decennio. Finché a parlare di “sette distruttive”, che rappresenterebbero “una vera emergenza sociale ed educativa” e “un fenomeno sempre più pericoloso”, o a fare opera di discriminazione e di allarmismo, sono militanti apertamente atei o agnostici non c’è poi troppo da stupirsi: molti di costoro vorrebbero eliminare, radicalmente, l’influenza di tutte le religioni. E forse le religioni stesse. Ma se lo fanno gruppi ed esponenti cattolici, che dovrebbero essere ben consci della gravità della persecuzione religiosa e del discredito verso i culti minoritari, c’è da rabbrividire. Istigare all’odio verso i nuovi movimenti religiosi o le religioni minoritarie, o associarle per principio a reati o a manipolazioni, da parte di esponenti cattolici, non sembra certo conforme all’insegnamento degli ultimi Pontefici, che hanno chiesto perdono per un atteggiamento passato di uomini di Chiesa non sempre rispettoso dei principi della libertà religiosa.

Che fare?

Come reagire? Qualche passo importante per contrastare la “diffamazione religiosa” potrebbe derivare dalla valorizzazione della normativa europea contro l’*hate speech* (linguaggio o discorso di odio). Assai spesso i post su Facebook, gli articoli di giornale o le dichiarazioni rese in televisione o sui loro blog dagli esponenti “anti-sette” assumono proprio le caratteristiche di quello che nella normativa europea ed internazionale viene da tempo classificato come *hate speech*. Per la raccomandazione del Comitato dei Ministri del Consiglio d’Europa del 30 ottobre 1997, nell’espressione *hate speech* si intendono raccogliere

tutte quelle forme di espressione che diffondono, incoraggino, promuovano o giustifichino il disprezzo razziale, la xenofobia, l’antisemitismo o altre forme di odio fondate sull’intolleranza, fra cui l’intolleranza espressa mediante un nazionalismo aggressivo e l’etnocentrismo, la discriminazione e l’ostilità nei confronti delle minoranze, dei migranti e delle persone di origine straniera (Council of Europe 1997).

Nel gennaio 2003 a Strasburgo ha visto poi la luce la Convenzione di Budapest

sulla criminalità informatica: con questa, gli Stati aderenti si obbligavano ad adottare sanzioni penali per punire la diffusione di materiale razzista e xenofobo attraverso i sistemi informatici, fra cui minacce e insulti, nonché la negazione, la minimizzazione, l'approvazione o la giustificazione di crimini di genocidio o di crimini contro l'umanità.

La Convenzione, cui l'Italia ha aderito, afferma chiaramente che ogni firmatario ha il dovere di

adottare provvedimenti legislativi e di altro genere al fine di qualificare come illeciti di natura criminale (secondo i rispettivi ordinamenti), laddove commessi deliberatamente e senza giusta causa, le seguenti condotte: (...) insultare pubblicamente, per mezzo di un sistema computerizzato, altre persone a causa della loro appartenenza ad un gruppo che si distingue per razza, colore, discendenza od origine etnica o nazionale, o per religione (...); oppure un gruppo di persone che si distingue per una qualunque di queste stesse caratteristiche.

Occorre evidenziare che nel diritto internazionale il divieto di ingiusta discriminazione è un principio giuridicamente vincolante, sancito dall'art. 21 della Carta dei diritti fondamentali, secondo cui

è vietata qualsiasi forma di discriminazione fondata, in particolare, sul sesso, la razza, il colore della pelle o l'origine etnica o sociale, le caratteristiche genetiche, la lingua, la religione o le convinzioni personali, le opinioni politiche o di qualsiasi altra natura, l'appartenenza ad una minoranza nazionale, il patrimonio, la nascita, la disabilità, l'età o l'orientamento sessuale.

E nelle “convinzioni personali” rientrano sicuramente tutte le opinioni e appartenenze, anche quelle maldestramente bollate, a fini discriminatori come “pseudo-religioni” o “sette”.

Il Parlamento Europeo, con una risoluzione approvata il 14 marzo 2013, ha evidenziato l'esigenza di una revisione del precedente quadro normativo comunitario, in modo da includervi espressamente anche le manifestazioni di intolleranza religiosa (Parlamento Europeo 2013).

Come si vede, gli strumenti giuridico-normativi sovranazionali per fronteggiare e punire chi diffonde odio, intolleranza e discriminazione antireligiosa, ci sono, e sono ben chiari. Il problema è la scarsa, scarsissima volontà di applicarli.

Anche l'ordinamento italiano offre un complesso di strumenti penali antidiscriminatori ricco e variegato contro *fake news* e seminatori di odio e

intolleranza verso i movimenti religiosi nuovi o minoritari.

Se la notizia falsa pubblicata in rete è diffamatoria, non è difficile comprendere come a carico dell'autore della “bufala” potrebbe e dovrebbe ritenersi configurabile il reato di diffamazione aggravata di cui all'art. 595, comma terzo, c.p., che prevede la reclusione da sei mesi a tre anni. Qual è la conseguenza giuridica per tutti coloro che hanno contribuito alla diffusione della notizia, per esempio condividerla su Youtube o Facebook? Qui si apre uno scenario di interrogativi diversi e per molti versi grotteschi. Nel caso ci si limiti alla semplice condivisione, non si commette, secondo l'opinione prevalente dei giuristi italiani, alcun illecito a meno che non sia provata la consapevolezza, all'atto della condivisione, del carattere falso della notizia. Diversamente, ove il soggetto non si sia limitato a condividere la notizia, ma abbia anche aggiunto un commento denigratorio o un ulteriore “carico lesivo” addizionale nei confronti della persona o del gruppo oggetto del testo o del video, dovrebbe integrarsi il reato di diffamazione, a meno che il soggetto si sia limitato a esprimere una propria opinione sulla base di una notizia che appariva verosimile, anche se poi si è rivelata falsa (con i consueti canoni applicativi della cosiddetta “verità putativa”). Assai complicato è però ottenere una sentenza, anche in relazione alle note difficoltà di individuare il foro competente a giudicare reati commessi in rete.

Ove la “bufala” abbia avuto invece l'effetto di suscitare allarme “presso l'autorità, o presso enti o persone che esercitano un pubblico servizio”, il reato astrattamente configurabile è quello di “procurato allarme”, individuato dall'art. 658 c.p., che è punito “con l'arresto fino a sei mesi o con l'ammenda da euro 10 a euro 516” (importi davvero risibili, poco più che un'infrazione stradale minore).

Diversamente, in molti casi si potrebbe configurare il reato contravvenzionale di abuso della credulità popolare, punito dall'art. 661 c.p. con una sanzione amministrativa pecuniaria che va da 5 mila a 15 mila euro, “se dal fatto può derivare un turbamento dell'ordine pubblico” (reato di pericolo astratto). Si noti che queste fattispecie sono oggetto di una tendenza alla depenalizzazione, e sono in ogni caso sostituibili con la cosiddetta “conversione” in pena pecuniaria. Sul piano della effettiva deterrenza, e della efficacia intimidatoria, nonché della rilevanza statistica, siamo quindi provvisti solo in teoria di vere risposte penali, in grado di esercitare un freno reale al fenomeno, la cui effettività risulta affievolita.

Qualche tentativo di riforma, e di introduzione di una disciplina più specifica e rigorosa, per la verità, nelle ultime legislature c'è stato. La senatrice Adele

Gambaro, nella passata XVII Legislatura, aveva proposto un disegno di legge recante “Disposizioni per prevenire la manipolazione dell’informazione online, garantire la trasparenza sul web e incentivare l’alfabetizzazione mediatica”.

Il testo proponeva alcune modifiche al codice penale, introducendo due nuove fattispecie:

– l’art. 656-bis, che punisce con l’ammenda fino a 5 mila euro, chi pubblicherà o diffonderà notizie false, esagerate o tendenziose che riguardino dati e fatti infondati o non veri sui social che non siano espressione di giornalismo online;

– l’art. 265-bis in forza del quale si prevede la reclusione non inferiore a 12 mesi e l’ammenda fino a 5 mila euro per chiunque diffonda o comunichi voci o notizie false, esagerate o tendenziose, che possano destare pubblico allarme o per chiunque svolga comunque un’attività tale da recare danno agli interessi pubblici.

Chi, diffondendo “bufale” su Internet, incorra anche nel reato di diffamazione potrà essere costretto a pagare quindi una somma a titolo di riparazione al cittadino offeso. L’importo di tale somma aggiuntiva è determinato in base sia alla gravità della diffamazione sia al grado di diffusione della notizia.

Parte dell’opinione pubblica, con molti giuristi, si è mostrata perplessa o contraria alla idea di riforma della senatrice Gambaro, intravedendo nella proposta legislativa derive autoritarie che potrebbero disincentivare anche la condivisione di notizie vere e determinare un sacrificio eccessivo in termini di condivisione delle idee e della libertà di espressione.

Il dibattito è appassionante e acceso. Forse, tra un intervento assente o troppo lieve e uno troppo autoritario-repressivo, occorrerebbe trovare una via di mezzo equilibrata, che cerchi la soluzione in campagne educative sul corretto e proficuo utilizzo della Rete e rafforzi il rigore deontologico degli operatori professionali dell’informazione prevedendo interventi repressivi penali, seri ed incisivi, allorché vengano a essere lesi diritti e libertà fondamentali, che ogni Stato democratico ha il dovere di fare rispettare, specie per la tutela della libertà religiosa e di culto. Una legge è urgente, non deve colpire la libertà di espressione, ma punire severamente le *fake news* denigratorie e inutilmente aggressive e stigmatizzanti, vera mina sempre innescata contro la libertà religiosa.

Sarebbero molti gli altri casi, anche recenti e recentissimi, da segnalare e stigmatizzare, ma basti osservare che il comune denominatore è sempre lo stesso:

associare un'idea o alludere a una forma religiosa, esoterica, spirituale, legandola a fatti, etichette ed episodi che, sovente, non c'entrano nulla, è uno sport mediatico sempre più diffuso, attrae maggiormente il lettore, e i giornalisti non hanno finora ritenuto in alcun modo di autolimitarsi, con qualche regola o codice di autodeterminazione deontologica su questi temi, per prevenire ed evitare *fake news* e coloriture che, oltre a stravolgere la realtà, creano una pericolosa minaccia alla libertà religiosa dei singoli e dei gruppi. La reazione alla crisi dei giornali, la progressiva riduzione delle vendite in edicola, l'anarchia dell'informazione web, con migliaia di testate e blog incontrollati e incontrollabili, fanno il resto. Occorre "arpionare" l'attenzione e l'occhio, e il sacro e la religione aiutano. Peccato che la tendenza sia fortemente negativa e gravemente nociva della verità, della reputazione e dei diritti di chi crede.

È ora di dire basta e intervenire. Anche sensibilizzando, in misura crescente e con forme magari inedite e più incisive, i gruppi religiosi diffamati e discriminati ad avvalersi di tutti gli strumenti offerti dal diritto italiano e internazionale per punire chi, con il pretesto di combattere manipolazioni immaginarie, è il vero manipolatore della realtà oggettiva. Sreditare appartenenze, identità e valori ferisce l'onore e le sensibilità e danneggia sovente chi, in buona fede, professa convinzioni che ritiene basilari per la propria vita, il senso stesso dell'esistenza ed il proprio sistema di relazioni. Oltre a compromettere l'esercizio autentico di quella libertà religiosa che le Costituzioni moderne, e quella italiana del 1948 ne è uno degli esempi migliori, considerano patrimonio irrinunciabile e intangibile della dignità della persona umana.

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La Soka Gakkai che non c’è. *Fake news* e movimenti antisette

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ABSTRACT: L’articolo tratta della diffusione e degli effetti delle *fake news* diffuse da gruppi e singoli militanti del movimento antisette, che etichettano organizzazioni religiose-target come “sette”, “psicosette” o “sette distruttive”. Nonostante la grande varietà di gruppi e movimenti religiosi presenti in un determinato contesto, le *fake news* riproducono invariabilmente lo stesso copione, al fine di indurre nel pubblico l’idea generalizzata della pericolosità sociale di movimenti religiosi non solo del tutto innocui, ma anche ben integrati nella società, dove svolgono un ruolo positivo nella promozione del dialogo e dei diritti umani. Un esempio emblematico di questo processo di distorsione comunicativa è la diffusione di *fake news* sull’Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai (IBISG), uno dei numerosi gruppi bersagliati ed etichettati come “sette”, che “manipolano la mente” dei loro seguaci, nelle *fake news* diffuse da alcuni ex-membri, dirigenti e membri di associazioni antisette.

KEYWORDS: *Fake News*, Soka Gakkai, Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai, Movimenti Antisette, Sette.

Introduzione

Il fenomeno delle *fake news* si sta configurando come uno degli effetti più negativi dell’espansione dell’informazione digitale, producendo conseguenze talora rilevanti a livello planetario, riuscendo a creare delle vere e proprie realtà parallele credute “vere” da milioni di persone, che, nonostante non abbiano alcun fondamento, riescono a influenzare le decisioni di molti. È possibile affermare che, attualmente, non esiste un solo settore dell’informazione che non sia affatto dalla “malattia” delle *fake news*. In questo contributo si tratterà di quelle riferite al mondo delle religioni minoritarie, considerate “nuove” o “alternative” in un determinato contesto culturale.

Il fenomeno della disinformazione su organizzazioni religiose, sia minoritarie sia maggioritarie, è sempre esistito, ma attualmente si assiste a una più ampia e veloce diffusione di queste notizie false grazie all'uso di Internet e dei *social network* (Bakir e McStay 2018) e all'abitudine dei media generalisti di riprendere le notizie da altre fonti senza effettuare alcun controllo sulla loro attendibilità.

Nel caso specifico in oggetto, i principali creatori di queste false notizie sono persone e associazioni “antisette” la cui azione è in grado di provocare gravi conseguenze sociali. Infatti, la riproposizione e amplificazione di dati e notizie false e allarmistiche, nell’ambito specifico delle minoranze religiose, suscita iniziative e provoca decisioni, anche da parte di apparati istituzionali, che causano la violazione delle fondamentali libertà e dei diritti civili di intere comunità religiose. L’effetto prodotto sull’opinione pubblica è la creazione di un’immagine distorta secondo la quale queste organizzazioni sarebbero un pericolo per la società e, in particolare, per i soggetti più deboli.

Chiarificazioni terminologiche

Prima di esaminare nel dettaglio il caso delle *fake news* riferite alla Soka Gakkai è necessario chiarire il significato di alcuni concetti che saranno utilizzati in questo contributo: “*fake news*”, “sette”, “manipolazione mentale” e gruppi “antisette”.

Per quanto riguarda le *fake news*, il sociologo italiano Massimo Introvigne, in un’intervista rilasciata il 9 maggio 2018, le definisce così:

Le *fake news* non sono semplicemente delle notizie false. Esse infatti vengono diffuse continuamente e sistematicamente non solo attraverso i media (questa è “disinformazione”), ma anche attraverso i *social media*. Si tratta di notizie false che vengono ritenute vere perché provengono, oltre che dai media professionisti, anche da privati cittadini che sembrano agire in modo indipendente. Il movimento antisette ha diffuso spesso notizie che oggi noi chiameremmo *fake news*. Il problema è che oggi noi non abbiamo a che fare solo con organizzazioni private ma anche con i governi (Introvigne 2018).

Le falsità diffuse su gruppi religiosi minoritari tendono a confermare pregiudizi e paure infondate sul “diverso”, di cui l’opinione pubblica è già affetta, anche nelle fasce sociali più istruite, in alcuni settori delle istituzioni, e nell’informazione generalista (Gelfert 2018).

Il primo elemento ricorrente in questo genere di *fake news* è l'uso generalizzato, da parte di gruppi antisette e dei media, del termine "setta". Al fine di definire questo particolare fenomeno, negli anni 1980, due studiosi americani hanno coniato il termine *cultphobia* (fobia delle sette), da loro definita, ironicamente, una nuova "malattia mentale" (Kilbourne e Richardson 1986, 259). Il termine "setta", infatti, prescinde dal suo significato letterale ed etimologico – che indica un gruppo separatosi da un altro maggioritario o che segue un leader e una dottrina particolare – e diventa uno "stigma": la "setta" è un'organizzazione criminale, guidata da *leader* che persegono finalità distruttive a danno del singolo e della società, nella quale si schiavizzano e si sfruttano – fisicamente e psicologicamente – le persone.

Per queste sue connotazioni fortemente discriminanti, il termine "setta" è stato ormai abbandonato nelle pubblicazioni scientifiche della maggior parte dei sociologi della religione (Richardson 1993), che prediligono altri termini privi di connotazioni dispregiative, come "movimenti religiosi", "nuovi movimenti religiosi", "movimenti religiosi alternativi", "minoranze religiose". L'abbandono dell'uso del termine "setta" fu dovuto alla preoccupazione per l'atteggiamento antireligioso del movimento antisette americano e per la minaccia che lo "stigma" poteva rappresentare per la libertà di religione (Hood. et al. 2009, 259-267; Shupe et al. 2004). Anche autorevoli istituzioni internazionali, come il Consiglio d'Europa, hanno emanato raccomandazioni agli Stati membri, invitandoli a non criminalizzare organizzazioni religiose o spirituali: "non è necessario definire che cosa è una setta o decidere se è una religione oppure no" e, in caso di violazioni delle leggi, si raccomanda di

usare le procedure normali della legge civile e penale contro le pratiche illegali portate avanti in nome di gruppi di natura religiosa, esoterica o spirituale (Council of Europe 1999).

Una delle accuse più gravi, diffuse nelle *fake news* contro le "sette", è quella di praticare la "manipolazione mentale" o "controllo mentale" ai danni degli adepti. La manipolazione mentale sarebbe messa in atto, unitamente all'inganno, nella fase del reclutamento (Hassan 1988; Singer e Lalich 1995), anche dopo l'affiliazione, per rafforzare il controllo sul neofita, e per rendere difficile o impossibile l'uscita dal gruppo (Zablocki 1997; 1998).

In questo caso la falsificazione o "pseudoverità" presente nelle *fake news* sta nel fatto che queste teorie, propagandate come "scientifiche" e presentate come

condivise da un ampio numero di studiosi, in realtà hanno pochissimi aderenti in ambito accademico perché, alla prova dei fatti, si sono rivelate infondate. A partire dagli anni 1970 studiosi di diverse branche del sapere, in ambito psicologico e sociologico, si sono occupati di puntualizzare lo stato delle ricerche in questo campo, contribuendo a smascherare varie e diffuse forme di disinformazione che vorrebbero scientificamente provata l'esistenza di tecniche di manipolazione mentale attuate nelle “sette” (Introvigne 2002; Anthony e Robbins 2004). Inoltre, importanti associazioni professionali le hanno rifiutate, perché prive di fondamento empirico e quindi non scientifiche (APA 1987) e autorevoli rappresentanti nel mondo accademico della psicologia della religione hanno affermato che la teoria del “lavaggio del cervello”, applicata alla conversione ai nuovi movimenti religiosi, non è compatibile nemmeno con il processo della “persuasione coercitiva”, né in relazione al modello elaborato in Europa né a quello cinese (Hood et al. 2009, 271).

I risultati delle ricerche sul campo, anche sui movimenti più controversi, lasciano emergere una realtà molto più complessa, che va nella direzione opposta a quella diffusa nelle *fake news*: i modelli psicologici, elaborati per interpretare il fenomeno della conversione a gruppi religiosi e spirituali minoritari, si collocano in un *continuum*, che vede ai due estremi i concetti di “libertà di scelta” (modello intrinseco) e di “persuasione coercitiva” o “lavaggio del cervello” (modello estrinseco), con molte posizioni intermedie (Anthony e Robbins 1996). Nella maggior parte dei casi, le caratteristiche psicologiche del convertito, verificate con strumenti d’indagine quantitativi e qualitativi, sono quelle proprie di un individuo attivo – in diversa misura –, variamente libero e responsabile, in interazione con una proposta religiosa più o meno autoritaria e persuasiva (Cowan 2014, 699; Di Marzio 2014).

È ora il momento di chiedersi chi sono i gruppi antisette, i responsabili principali della creazione e diffusione di questo genere di notizie false. Per comprendere appieno questa tipologia di gruppi è necessario fare riferimento al fenomeno della disaffiliazione, cioè l’uscita da un movimento religioso e le sue conseguenze. La maggior parte degli ex-membri riesce a superare il momento della disillusione e del distacco dalla comunità, autonomamente, lasciandosi alle spalle l’esperienza passata e attivandosi per trovare nuove forme di aggregazione che possano corrispondere alle proprie aspirazioni. Tuttavia, per alcuni ex-membri, il periodo successivo all’abbandono del gruppo si rivela maggiormente

problematico, soprattutto dal punto di vista emotivo: questi soggetti avvertono sentimenti ambivalenti nei riguardi della loro decisione di lasciare il gruppo, e talora soffrono per il senso di fallimento personale e la perdita del sostegno della comunità di cui si sentivano parte. In questi casi, una funzione utile di supporto affettivo, anche non professionale, è quella svolta da gruppi di sostegno, formati da altri ex-membri che si adoperano per aiutare gli altri, almeno nei primi difficili momenti di transizione e riadattamento alla società.

Si tratta di gruppi generalmente poco organizzati, molti dei quali, con l'avvento di Internet, hanno assunto le caratteristiche di *network* virtuali animati da ex-membri. Essi mettono a disposizione notizie e consigli su come superare il momento della fuoriuscita, in relazione a uno specifico movimento, oppure in riferimento a un'ampia gamma di gruppi e movimenti. Il loro atteggiamento può variare molto: dalla neutralità di approccio, che non vede nell'attività di proselitismo una forma di lavaggio del cervello, all'ostilità aperta (Bromley 2004). In quest'ultimo caso il movimento abbandonato è considerato come l'unica ragione delle sofferenze che gli ex-membri devono affrontare dopo la disaffiliazione e la loro conversione è reinterpretata come un effetto causato dal lavaggio del cervello (Barker 1998). In effetti, la teoria del lavaggio del cervello, come spiegazione unica della conversione ai nuovi movimenti religiosi, è essenziale per sostenere le attività delle tre componenti principali del movimento antisette: amici e parenti di membri affiliati, ex-membri e gruppi antisette. La teoria del lavaggio del cervello, infatti, per ciascuno di questi soggetti, funziona come "conforto", "consolazione" e "misura di controllo" (Cowan 2014, 693).

Secondo autorevoli studiosi, l'*anti-cult movement* (ACM, movimento antisette) nel suo complesso rappresenta una tipologia particolare di movimento sociale che nasce come contrapposizione a un altro tipo di movimento. Per questo motivo, l'ACM può conseguire i suoi obiettivi solo se i gruppi sociali a cui si oppone esistono e sono attivi nella società. In questo senso, gli autori affermano che l'approccio sociologico più adatto a studiare l'ACM

sia quello di analizzare la sua struttura ed economia interna come quella tipica di un contro-movimento e, a livello esterno, considerarlo come un *network* di gruppi alleati tra loro (Shupe et al. 2004, 185).

La struttura di questi gruppi si configura, pertanto, come un *network* integrato di ruoli (organizzazione) e simboli (ideologia) caratterizzanti. I ruoli chiave sono quelli dei membri, dei leader, nonché degli esperti di assistenza e recupero –

deprogrammatori, *exit counselor*, terapisti –, degli esperti in ambito giuridico – avvocati – e degli “apostati” – ex-membri disaffiliati da nuovi movimenti religiosi che aderiscono al movimento antisette. Per ciò che riguarda l’ideologia, essa si fonda sull’idea che nella società stia emergendo un nuovo problema, quello delle “sette”, e che questo problema sia sottovalutato e si stia diffondendo rapidamente, rappresentando, così, un pericolo per la società. Conseguentemente, sarebbe dunque importante intraprendere azioni concrete per recuperare gli individui compromessi – deprogrammazione/*exit counseling* – e contrastare i gruppi dai quali sono stati danneggiati (Shupe et al. 2004).

In questa stessa linea si pongono i contributi di altri autori che mettono in rilievo l’attività dei gruppi antisette finalizzata a creare dei “panici morali” (Jenkins 1998), con il sostegno della stampa scandalistica e di informazioni allarmistiche diffuse anche attraverso Internet. Essi, oltre a promuovere campagne d’odio – contro aggregazioni religiose e spirituali etichettate come “sette” in senso criminologico –, cercano anche di ottenere dai governi l’istituzione di nuove leggi che puniscano la manipolazione mentale (Introvigne 2002).

Come accennato in precedenza, l’indubbia inconsistenza scientifica e la totale irrealità delle *fake news* diffuse dai gruppi antisette, non hanno impedito che l’opinione pubblica e, talora, anche le istituzioni le prendessero per “vere”. In Italia, per esempio, questo tipo di falsificazione ha richiamato l’attenzione di alcuni settori istituzionali, sfociata, da una parte nella creazione di una squadra di polizia denominata SAS (Squadra Anti-Sette) (Ministero dell’Interno 2006) e dall’altro nel tentativo reiterato di reintrodurre nel Codice penale il reato di plagio, già abolito dalla Corte Costituzionale, con il nuovo nome di “manipolazione mentale”.

Autopsia della fake news. “Perché la SGI è una setta (secondo i criteri di Steven Hassan)”

L’organizzazione religiosa presa di mira, in questo caso, è l’Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai, che ha siglato l’Intesa con la Repubblica Italiana il 14 giugno 2016 e che in Italia supera gli 85.000 membri (Introvigne e Zoccatelli 2018). Per conoscere la storia, la dottrina e la pratica religiosa della Soka Gakkai

ci si può riferire a un’ampia letteratura scientifica sul movimento (per esempio: Dobbelaere 1998; Machacek e Wilson 2001; Seager 2006; Metraux 2010).

A questa organizzazione è attribuito l’infamante stigma di “setta” nell’articolo di Kathy Aitken “Perché la SGI è una setta (secondo i criteri di Steven Hassan)” (Aitken 2018a), pubblicato il 26 giungo 2018 sul sito dell’AIVS (Associazione Italiana Vittime delle Sette), nella sezione “Documenti” riservata alla Soka Gakkai, e poi rilanciato sui *social network* gestiti dalla stessa associazione e da altre similari e “simpatizzanti”.

Prima ancora di esaminare il contenuto di questa *fake news* è importante segnalare il primo motivo per cui un lettore attento dovrebbe usare cautela nel prendere per vero ciò che legge: la totale assenza di riferimenti e l’impossibilità di controllare la fonte, a cominciare, in questo caso specifico, dalla versione originale in inglese, sono elementi essenziali di ogni *fake news* che si rispetti.

1 – I “criteri di Steven Hassan”

Nella *fake news* la stigmatizzazione della Soka Gakkai come “setta” si fonda sui “criteri di Steven Hassan”. Anche in questo caso non sono forniti riferimenti di alcun tipo su questo autore o sul testo nel quale sarebbero illustrati i suoi criteri, come in precedenza. Tuttavia, l’autore citato e il suo libro (Hassan 1988) sono conosciuti nel vasto e variegato mondo di persone e organizzazioni che si occupano di “sette”, a diverso titolo. Steven Hassan ha cominciato a occuparsi di “sette” dopo essere stato “deprogrammato”. A diciannove anni era entrato nella Chiesa dell’Unificazione fondata dal reverendo Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012) e ne era uscito in seguito alla “deprogrammazione” commissionata dai suoi genitori, una pratica molto diffusa negli anni 1970-1980 negli Stati Uniti, dichiarata successivamente illegale e oggi quasi del tutto abbandonata negli USA e altrove (Shupe et al. 2004).

Il caso di Hassan non è isolato: sono molti gli ex-membri “deprogrammati” che hanno aderito al movimento antisette; persone che “sono più inclini degli altri a vedere la loro passata affiliazione come l’effetto di una ‘manipolazione mentale’” (Wright 2014, 720). Dopo l’abbandono del gruppo, Hassan si è dedicato a diffondere informazioni sui pericoli dei “culti distruttivi” e ha elaborato un metodo per aiutare le persone a uscire dalle “sette” in un modo meno violento

rispetto alla deprogrammazione da lui subita. Egli definisce questo metodo “*exit counseling*”, un’attività che è in seguito diventata la sua professione.

È evidente che Aitken non ha scelto “a caso” la teoria di Hassan sulle quattro forme di controllo mentale – espresse con l’acronimo BITE: “Behavior, Information, Thought, Emotion” – (Hassan 1988, 60-67). Si tratta di un autore senza dubbio “di parte”, che ha pubblicato per la prima volta il suo libro in seguito a un’esperienza per lui traumatica all’interno di una “setta” e a una disaffiliazione indotta con coercizione, attraverso la “deprogrammazione”, e che non risulta collegato ad alcuna istituzione accademica.

2 – “La SGI è un culto distruttivo”

L’articolo inizia con una sintesi della definizione che Hassan dà di “culto distruttivo”, e cioè

un’organizzazione con un regime autoritario piramidale diretto da una persona o da un gruppo di persone che hanno il controllo dittoriale. I nuovi membri vengono reclutati per mezzo di un inganno, cioè alle persone non viene detto in anticipo quali sono i veri obiettivi del gruppo o cosa ci si aspetta da loro se diventano membri. Inoltre, vengono impiegate tecniche di controllo mentale, in primo luogo per attirare persone ignare nella setta e quindi per mantenerle (Aitken 2018a, 1).

Dopo questa premessa, l’autrice afferma che

gli ingredienti principali di una setta sono la leadership autoritaria, l’inganno e il controllo distruttivo della mente. SGI li ha tutti (Aitken 2018a, 1).

La definizione di “culto distruttivo”, all’interno del variegato mondo dei movimenti antisette, è utilizzata per colpire i movimenti religiosi più diversi, senza fare alcuna distinzione, come se si trattasse di organizzazioni create con una sorta di “stampo”, che funzionano tutte nello stesso modo e sono ugualmente “pericolose”. Si tratta di un’informazione del tutto falsa, non solo per l’evidente diversità di movimenti e gruppi considerati tutti allo stesso modo “culti distruttivi”, ma anche per il fatto che queste organizzazioni non rimangono sempre identiche a sé stesse, ma mutano nel tempo, talvolta anche in modo radicale.

Nelle *fake news* prodotte dal movimento antisette, come quella presa in esame, tutte le “sette” attirerebbero seguaci con l’inganno. Su questo aspetto esiste una vasta letteratura scientifica, basata su ricerche e studi effettuati su diversi

movimenti religiosi, che smentisce un'accusa così generalizzata. Certamente l'inganno è sempre possibile, ma le motivazioni per cui le persone si affilano sono le più diverse; nella maggior parte dei casi la scelta è libera e consapevole, fondata su dati reali e una conoscenza sufficiente del movimento cui si aderisce (Lofland e Stark 1965; Rambo 1993; Buxant 2007; Saliba 2004; Coates 2011).

Nel caso della Soka Gakkai l'accusa di ingannare le persone alle quali “non viene detto in anticipo quali sono i veri obiettivi del gruppo o cosa ci si aspetta da loro se diventano membri” (Aitken 2018a, 1) su quali basi si fonda? Le persone che si avvicinano alla Soka Gakkai e che desiderano affiliarsi non devono solo “praticare” (cioè recitare il *daimoku*) ma impegnarsi per la “rivoluzione umana” e la promozione della pace e della felicità nel mondo. È dunque richiesto loro lo studio del buddhismo di Nichiren Daishonin (1222-1282), con relativi esami, la partecipazione a riunioni di discussione, e l'impegno nelle attività umanitarie e culturali promosse dal movimento (Introvigne e Zoccatelli 2018). La realtà dei fatti dice esattamente l'opposto della *fake news*: le persone che iniziano il loro cammino per diventare membri sanno esattamente a cosa vanno incontro e hanno a disposizione tutto il tempo necessario per studiare e riflettere sulla loro scelta. Chiunque sia o sia stato membro del movimento può confermare questo fatto, anche se il modo in cui la proposta di adesione è formulata, e il neofita è seguito nel suo cammino spirituale, possono differire. In un movimento che ha un numero così elevato di praticanti, sparsi in diversi continenti, potrebbe essersi verificato qualche caso di “inganno” più o meno intenzionale, ma questo non contraddice la grave falsità dell'accusa rivolta all'organizzazione nel suo insieme.

Per quanto riguarda, poi, la questione della leadership, la Soka Gakkai ha una lunga storia di trasformazioni nella dirigenza, nel modo di rapportarsi al contesto sociale e politico giapponese e poi occidentale, nei suoi rapporti con i monaci della Nichiren Shoshu, e così via. Dunque, l'accusa di esercitare una “leadership autoritaria” sui membri, su quali fatti e situazioni reali si fonda? Chi è il leader autoritario e chi lo ha definito tale? Si sta parlando di Daisaku Ikeda (1928-), oppure di qualche dirigente nazionale o locale? E cosa si intende per “autoritario”? Il termine richiama subito l'idea di qualcuno che impedisce ordini e impedisce al subalterno di esprimersi e agire liberamente, ma non è dato sapere nulla di più preciso, tanto che anche questa affermazione rimane, come le altre, sospesa nel nulla, priva di qualsivoglia fondamento o circostanza probante.

La terza accusa – quella di esercitare un “controllo distruttivo della mente” – è talmente estrema da divenire caricaturale. È un tipo di affermazione che, nel lettore facilmente suggestionabile, suscita una reazione emotiva voluta da chi fabbrica questo tipo di *fake news*: la paura di essere trasformati da forze “oscure” in ciò che non si vuole essere. L’immagine suggestiva che si forma nella mente del lettore è quella dei dirigenti della Soka Gakkai impegnati ad annientare, neurone dopo neurone, la “mente” dei “poveri” malcapitati che entrano nel movimento. Si è già mostrato come le teorie sull’esistenza della “manipolazione mentale”, in tutte le loro formulazioni, siano ormai del tutto screditate in ambito scientifico, ed è quindi evidente come questa sia un’accusa senza alcun fondamento.

Se ciò non bastasse, per smentire questa *fake news*, basterebbe recarsi a qualche incontro del movimento, parlare con i membri o intervistarne qualcuno, come personalmente mi è capitato di fare. I membri della Soka Gakkai che ho incontrato – sia quelli affiliati da molto tempo, sia quelli ancora all’inizio della loro formazione – sono persone del tutto normali, adattate alla società, che hanno i loro dubbi e le loro certezze, come tutti i credenti.

3 – L’acronimo BITE

Per comprendere l’applicazione che nell’articolo si fa dell’acronimo BITE alla Soka Gakkai è importante prima di tutto chiarire di cosa si sta parlando. Si è già chiarito il contesto in cui la teoria di Hassan è stata elaborata. Per ciò che riguarda i contenuti, l’acronimo BITE indica i quattro tipi di controllo mentale che si verificherebbero nelle “sette”: controllo del comportamento, dell’informazione, del pensiero e delle emozioni (Hassan 1988, 60-67). L’autore dichiara di essersi ispirato alla teoria della dissonanza cognitiva di Leon Festinger (1919-1989) per elaborare il suo modello, in cui, alle tre componenti elaborate da Festinger (Festinger et al. 1956), egli aggiunge la quarta, e cioè il controllo delle informazioni (Hassan 1988, 59).

Non è questa la sede per distinguere la complessa teoria della “dissonanza cognitiva”, elaborata da Festinger, che riguarda temi generali sulla conformità alle norme e il funzionamento dei gruppi sociali, dall’applicazione che ne fa Hassan, al fine di avvalorare la sua teoria riferendosi a un autore importante. Dovendo soprassedere su questo aspetto, perché il tema esula dagli obiettivi di questo contributo, è però utile sottolineare come le *fake news* diffuse negli

ambienti antisette riescano spesso a fuorviare il lettore poco informato citando autori le cui teorie *sembrano* rifarsi ad altre precedenti, elaborate da ricercatori accreditati in ambito accademico, ma in realtà spesso ne travisano i fondamenti teorici, il significato e le conclusioni (Introvigne 2002, 81-110).

4 – Controllo del comportamento

Nella teoria di Hassan (Hassan 1988, 60-61) questo tipo di controllo si esercita più facilmente sugli adepti isolandoli completamente dalla società. Nell'articolo di Aitken, l'autrice afferma che, nonostante la Soka Gakkai non richieda ai suoi membri di vivere in comunità separate dalla società, questa strategia è messa in atto attraverso un controllo severo sulle amicizie e conoscenze con persone che non fanno parte del movimento, nei riguardi delle quali la Soka Gakkai chiederebbe di essere “iper-vigilanti”. Tale indicazione sarebbe presente sia negli “scritti di Nichiren” che in “quelli della SGI”, ma l'autrice non specifica da quali testi ha tratto le citazioni letterali di Nichiren Daishonin e Daisaku Ikeda. Volendo esaminare, comunque, le due citazioni che fornisce, supponendo che gli autori siano effettivamente i due indicati, ci si trova di fronte a generiche e condivisibili esortazioni a scegliere con cura le proprie amicizie e a coltivare quelle che aiutino a progredire nel cammino intrapreso:

Nichiren ha scritto: “Gli amici diabolici sono quelli che, parlando dolcemente, ingannando, lusingando e facendo abile uso delle parole, conquistano il cuore degli ignoranti e distruggono la loro bontà della mente”. Più recentemente, Daisaku Ikeda ha scritto: “Avere buoni amici è come essere equipaggiato con un potente motore ausiliario. Quando incontriamo una collina ripida o un ostacolo, possiamo incoraggiarci a vicenda e trovare la forza per continuare ad avanzare” (Aitken 2018a, 1).

Queste esortazioni, secondo l'autrice, nascondono un “messaggio in codice”, che sarebbe questo:

Stai lontano da quelle persone che potrebbero farti perdere la fiducia nel Gohonzon e quindi farti pensare di lasciare il SGI (Aitken 2018a, 1).

Il fantomatico “messaggio in codice”, che sarebbe presente nelle due citazioni, può essere decifrato solo dall'autrice che, con ogni evidenza, è dotata di una notevole dose di fantasia.

5 – Controllo delle informazioni

Il secondo tipo di accusa falsa rivolta alla Soka Gakkai è che praticherebbe il “controllo delle informazioni”. Hassan afferma che nei “culti distruttivi” le informazioni sono deliberatamente nascoste o distorte, le comunicazioni sono menzognere e si impedisce alle persone di entrare in contatto con informazioni esterne alla “setta” (Hassan 1988, 65-67). In questo caso, la falsa accusa è quella di fare “propaganda” millantando meriti e successi inesistenti:

la SGI si assicura che i suoi membri siano bombardati da propaganda che promuove la sua agenda dubbia – da qui le infinite newsletter che vengono fuoriuscite [sic] dal quartier generale della Soka Gakkai a Shinanomachi a Tokyo. Le informazioni vengono fornite come se la SGI fosse di qualche importanza sulla scena mondiale mentre, in realtà, la maggior parte delle persone non ne ha mai nemmeno sentito parlare. La maggior parte dei discorsi di Ikeda seguono lo stesso schema e dicono più o meno la stessa cosa, tutto il tempo. È così che funziona l’indottrinamento (Aitken 2018a, 1).

Per avvalorare questa falsa informazione l’autrice cita qualche frase di un discorso di Daisaku Ikeda. Si tratta del “discorso del SGI presidente [sic] Ikeda in una conferenza dei leader esecutivi a livello nazionale tenutasi a Tokyo, il 25 novembre 2003” (Aitken 2018a, 1), nel quale il leader si congratula per i successi ottenuti nel corso dell’anno 2003, lodando l’intero movimento e definendo quell’anno “l’Anno della Gloria e la Grande Vittoria”. Queste espressioni di Ikeda sono utilizzate come “esempio dell’uso manipolativo del linguaggio impiegato da Ikeda e SGI”. In sostanza, il discorso di un leader religioso che incoraggia i fedeli, usando parole perfettamente coerenti in un tipo di comunicazione esortativa come quella citata, che potrebbe essere pronunciato da qualsiasi altro dirigente di una religione, è spacciato per “propaganda”, nel senso più dispregiativo del termine.

L’autrice falsifica così il senso del discorso, il suo contesto e perfino le intenzioni del tutto comprensibili di Ikeda in quel particolare frangente. In un certo senso, è come citare un discorso di Papa Francesco nel corso di un’udienza del mercoledì, per dire che egli fa un’opera di propaganda menzognera perché in alcune frasi, ricche di metafore e pronunciate con entusiasmo, elogia i membri di qualche movimento per i successi ottenuti nell’evangelizzazione. Questo *modus operandi*, in effetti, è un altro esempio tipico delle *fake news* diffuse dal movimento antisette contro i presunti “culti distruttivi”: il medesimo comportamento è definito “distruttivo” o “manipolativo” se a compierlo è il

leader di una “setta”, mentre non è neppure notato o commentato se chi lo mette in atto è il leader di una religione maggioritaria o, semplicemente, ancora non inserita nella lista dei “culti distruttivi”.

L’altra “accusa”, incredibile quanto falsa, presentata come “prova” del fatto che la Soka Gakkai fa propaganda diffondendo menzogne, sarebbe quella di “inviare continuamente newsletter dal suo quartier generale”, un’affermazione senza significato, mentre quella successiva, in cui l’autrice afferma che i successi e i riconoscimenti ricevuti dalla Soka Gakkai non esistono, anzi “in realtà, la maggior parte delle persone non ne ha mai nemmeno sentito parlare” (Aitken 2018a, 1), è totalmente fuori dalla realtà. La falsità di questa notizia si confuta molto semplicemente, attingendo ai dati raccolti dai sociologi, che hanno realizzato molti studi sulla Soka Gakkai. Uno degli studi più recenti è quello di PierLuigi Zoccatelli, il quale ha raccolto i dati sulla crescita dei membri della Soka Gakkai in Italia – passati da 31.876 nel 2003 a 75.440 nel 2015 – e in Europa, dove da 38.070 nel 1997 arrivano a circa 120.000 nel 2014. Un altro dato, riferito ancora all’Italia, che smentisce ulteriormente l’affermazione che “la maggior parte delle persone non ne ha mai nemmeno sentito parlare”, è che il nostro è il Paese che presenta la crescita più consistente di membri rispetto a tutti gli altri Paesi del continente. Se poi si guarda ai dati del Giappone, la notizia si rivela ancora più macroscopicamente falsa, poiché in quel Paese la Soka Gakkai conta circa 10 milioni di fedeli (Zoccatelli 2015; Machacek e Wilson 2001; Seager 2006; Metraux 2010).

Nell’articolo di Aitken anche Daisaku Ikeda è accusato di mentire quando afferma:

Non abbiamo mai ricevuto una tale alluvione di complimenti e congratulazioni dai nostri amici, sostenitori e figure di spicco in tutto il mondo (Aitken 2018a, 2).

L’autrice prima si chiede chi siano gli estimatori del movimento a cui allude Ikeda, e poi conclude: “Non lo sapremo mai, probabilmente perché non esistono” (Aitken 2018a, 2). Il grado di falsità di questa affermazione è evidente: sono, infatti, innumerevoli le attività che hanno reso la Soka Gakkai molto conosciuta in tutto il mondo, dove i suoi membri sono impegnati in ogni ambito della società. La Soka Gakkai giapponese, per esempio, ha fondato università, musei, scuole, e prestigiosi centri culturali, e molti suoi membri si sono distinti nei campi della scienza, dell’economia, dello sport e dell’educazione.

Per quanto riguarda l'Italia, nel bilancio sociale 2016, pubblicato dall'IBISG, sono elencate tutte le attività e le iniziative che mettono la Soka Gakkai in primo piano, nella società, per la difesa e la promozione dei diritti umani e la pace nel mondo (IBISG 2016). Per fare un solo esempio, tratto dal documento, si può citare la promozione del Comitato Senzatomica, che dal 2011 è attivo per l'abolizione delle armi nucleari. Questa iniziativa è stata portata all'attenzione delle istituzioni italiane e mondiali anche grazie a una mostra itinerante che, nel 2017, è stata presentata a Bruxelles, assieme ai partner di Rete Italiana per il Disarmo, per il workshop organizzato da ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) e PAX. Senzatomica ha partecipato attivamente, come rappresentante della società civile italiana ai negoziati presso la sede delle Nazioni Unite. Solo questa mostra ha avuto 324.210 visitatori. Inoltre,

la Soka Gakkai Internazionale è una ONG (Organizzazione Non Governativa) registrata presso numerosi dipartimenti dell'ONU: il Consiglio economico e sociale (ECOSOC), l'Alto Commissariato per i Rifugiati (UNHCR) e il Dipartimento di Pubblica Informazione (IBISG 2016, 20).

Sulla base di queste informazioni, verificabili da chiunque, c'è da chiedersi chi, in realtà, stia facendo “propaganda” e “falsificando le informazioni”.

6 – Controllo del pensiero

Questa forma di controllo, secondo Hassan, si manifesterebbe attraverso l'uso di un linguaggio specifico e la coartazione di qualsiasi manifestazione di pensiero critico o l'espressione di dubbi sulla “setta” o il suo leader, spingendo i membri a sentirsi costantemente in opposizione al mondo esterno, in una visione dicotomica secondo la quale tutto il bene sarebbe nel gruppo e tutto il male al di fuori di esso (Hassan 1988, 61-63). Nell'articolo di Aitken si afferma che la Soka Gakkai utilizzerebbe proprio queste strategie:

Il potere che la macchina di propaganda della SGI esercita sui membri di astenersi dal dire o dal pensare a qualcosa di negativo sull'organizzazione è così forte che persino l'idea di fare una innocente ricerca su internet di opinioni “alternative” sul [sic] SGI è sufficiente a riempirli di paura (Aitken 2018a, 2).

Quest'affermazione perentoria è “suffragata” da tre citazioni del tutto inaccurate ed estrapolate dal loro contesto – come di consueto –, riferite a tre autori appartenenti a tre epoche diverse della storia del buddhismo: Nichiren

Daishonin, Daisaku Ikeda e Shakyamuni (563-483 a.C.?). Nella prima citazione ci sarebbe la conferma che “Nichiren ha usato molto linguaggio combattivo e SGI ha seguito l’esempio”. Si tratta di una citazione di ventidue parole:

Ha detto: “Il buddismo si occupa principalmente della vittoria o della sconfitta, mentre l’autorità secolare si basa sul principio della ricompensa e della punizione” (da “L’eroe del mondo”, WND I: 102, pp. 835-841).

La citazione si trova all’interno di un discorso espresso in sette pagine di cui, tuttavia, il lettore non sa nulla: le ventidue parole citate, potrebbero, se lette nel loro contesto, avere un significato completamente diverso da quello che è loro attribuito.

La seconda citazione è di Ikeda, questa volta non corredata da alcun riferimento:

Il buddismo si preoccupa di vincere. Quando combattiamo un nemico potente, trionferremo [sic] o saremo sconfitti – non c’è una via di mezzo. Combattere contro le funzioni negative della vita è parte integrante del buddismo. È attraverso la vittoria in questa lotta che diventiamo Budda (Aitken 2018a, 2).

Secondo l’autrice quest’affermazione di Ikeda sarebbe molto diversa da quanto avrebbe detto Shakyamuni:

Interessante quanto questo sia diverso dal buddismo del fondatore della filosofia, Shakyamuni: “Vincere genera ostilità. Perdendo, ci si sdrai nel dolore. Il calmo si sdrai con facilità, dopo ave [sic] messo la vittoria e la perdita da parte” (Dhammapada, 15) (Aitken 2018a, 2).

In questo caso, la distorsione e falsificazione delle informazioni, oltre che nella scelta opinabile di paragonare tre testi di persone vissute in epoche e contesti totalmente diversi, riguardano soprattutto il contenuto, poiché sono messi sullo stesso piano due concetti diversi per esprimere i quali i due autori, Shakyamuni e Daisaku Ikeda, usano la stessa parola: “vittoria”. Tuttavia, quando parla di “vittoria”, Ikeda intende qualcosa di totalmente diverso rispetto a quello che l’autrice vuole far intendere: non solo Ikeda non spinge i membri della Soka Gakkai a opporsi al mondo esterno, ma esorta a fare esattamente l’opposto, cioè affrontare la lotta più difficile, che è quella contro sé stessi. È questa la battaglia che i membri della Soka Gakkai devono vincere.

7 – Controllo emotivo

Secondo Hassan, il controllo emotivo consiste nella manipolazione delle emozioni dei seguaci attraverso l'induzione di fobie – come la paura di perdere la salvezza eterna una volta lasciato il gruppo – e il senso di colpa, nonché in una forma d'indottrinamento che arriva a ridefinire le emozioni positive e negative e a influire sulle relazioni interpersonali allo scopo di separare l'adepto dalle persone alle quali è legato (Hassan 1988, 63-65). Anche questo tipo di controllo, come gli altri, sarebbe messo in atto nella Soka Gakkai: “La letteratura di SGI è piena di ammonimenti ai credenti per non abbandonare la loro fede” (Aitken 2018a, 2). È evidente che questa accusa non ha nulla a che fare con quanto dice Hassan, a proposito del controllo delle emozioni, e si tratta, comunque, di un’“accusa” che potrebbe essere diretta contro qualsiasi organizzazione religiosa.

Delle due citazioni riportate, come negli altri casi “a sproposito”, senza riferimenti bibliografici e fuori da ogni contesto, non è possibile nemmeno fare una confutazione. È invece opportuno segnalare un ulteriore elemento che fa di questa *fake news* un vero “capolavoro” di falsità: l’offesa personale rivolta a Daisaku Ikeda, di cui è citata una poesia, definita dall’autrice “una delle sue molte poesie esecrabili”. Daisaku Ikeda ha ricevuto centinaia di riconoscimenti e premi, tra i quali: il Premio per la Pace delle Nazioni Unite, il premio dell’Alto commissariato per i rifugiati, la medaglia di Grande ufficiale delle Arti e Lettere del Ministero della cultura francese, della croce onoraria delle scienze e delle Arti del ministero dell’educazione austriaco, l’Anello dottorale dall’Università di Bologna Alma Mater, il riconoscimento di Grande Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana dal presidente Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (1920-2016) – attribuito a personalità di rilievo del mondo letterario, artistico, sociale e umanitario –, e altre (Ciaramella 2007, 61-63). L’affermazione che le sue poesie sarebbero “esecrabili” trasforma le falsità presenti nell’articolo in ingiurie, tanto che verrebbe da attribuirgli proprio la qualifica di “esecrabile”.

Della stessa portata sono anche altre riflessioni della stessa autrice, pubblicate nella pagina facebook dell’AIVS, dove la Aitken afferma che i dirigenti della Soka Gakkai sono dei “ciarlatani” e degli “imbecilli”, e che il mantra recitato due volte al giorno non è altro che “una serie di sillabe su un pezzo di carta”. Inoltre, invita chi legge a rivolgere

un pensiero a quelle poche persone sfortunate che hanno ricevuto la cosiddetta “guida” da parte di persone che ricoprono posizioni di responsabilità all’interno della Soka. Questi ciarlatani, che pensano di essere in qualche modo qualificati per dare consigli alle persone, molti dei quali sono in un profondo stato di crisi, devono essere fermati. Non sono professionisti medici; non sono consiglieri; sono degli imbecilli che borbottano una serie di sillabe su un pezzo di carta. Come osano! (Kathy Aitken, ex SGI-UK e ora Socia AIVS) (Aitken 2018b).

Dopo avere descritto la sua delusione e la sua uscita dal movimento, la Aitken, come accade in un certo numero di resoconti di ex-membri, usa toni ed espressioni gravemente offensive verso milioni di fedeli che recitano quotidianamente Daimoku, il rito fondamentale dinanzi all’oggetto di culto (Gohonzon), che ognuno custodisce nella propria casa. Questo atteggiamento verbalmente aggressivo, tuttavia, non appartiene alla maggioranza degli ex-membri del movimento, i quali cessano di recitare e di frequentare le riunioni senza diventare “nemici” o diffondere notizie false sul movimento che hanno lasciato. Ho potuto verificare questa differenza di atteggiamento intervistando alcuni ex-membri della Soka Gakkai, che – nonostante la fuoriuscita – avevano ancora buoni rapporti con il gruppo oppure semplicemente avevano, nel frattempo, dato inizio ad altre esperienze, lasciandosi serenamente alle spalle la loro fede buddhista, senza rimpianti e senza rancori.

Questa *fake news* ha una degna conclusione, con la quale l’autrice mette il sigillo finale alla sua articolata falsificazione, finalizzata a disegnare un’immagine criminogena della Soka Gakkai, del tutto immaginaria e, come si è visto, priva di qualsiasi fondamento. L’articolo si conclude con una citazione tratta dal libro *Seductive Poison* di Deborah Layton (Layton 1998), una sopravvissuta al massacro del Tempio del Popolo verificatosi nella Guyana nel 1978. Nel brano citato Layton descrive alcuni elementi che, sulla base della sua esperienza, aiuterebbero a capire se il gruppo a cui una persona si è affiliata è una “setta”. Tali elementi, richiamano, almeno in parte, le quattro forme di controllo mentale elaborate da Hassan. L’esperienza della Layton, secondo l’autrice dell’articolo,

riassume perfettamente il tipo di dilemma che può incontrare qualcuno sfortunato abbastanza da essere inviato nel [sic] SGI (Aitken 2018a, 2).

Questo riferimento alla tragedia del Tempio del Popolo è un vero e proprio “cavalo di battaglia” utilizzato molto spesso nelle *fake news* create e diffuse dal movimento antisette: ogni volta, come in questo caso, che un determinato gruppo religioso è incluso nella lista dei “culti distruttivi”, dopo avere enumerato i

“crimini” o “abusi” che si verificherebbero al suo interno, è chiamata in causa, come metro di paragone, la tragedia del Tempio del Popolo.

Per comprendere l’uso, del tutto fraudolento, dell’esperienza di un ex-membro del Tempio del Popolo come termine di paragone con quello che potrebbe avvenire a un membro della Soka Gakkai, è necessario dare alcuni brevi cenni di storia del Tempio del Popolo, mentre per una disamina più ampia, si rimanda al contributo di Rebecca Moore (Moore 2009). Il Tempio del Popolo era una comunità che dagli Stati Uniti si era trasferita in Guyana, dove aveva fondato la città di Jonestown, il cui credo combinava diverse idee di tipo sociale e religioso, tra le quali il pentecostalismo, il socialismo, il comunismo e l’utopismo, guidata da Jim Jones (1931-1978), un pastore dei Discepoli di Cristo. Il 18 novembre 1978, al termine della visita alla comunità da parte di un membro del Congresso americano, Leo Ryan (1925-1978), quest’ultimo, tre giornalisti e un adepto vennero assassinati. Subito dopo, oltre 900 residenti e seguaci del leader Jim Jones, morirono per avere bevuto, volontariamente o forzatamente, del cianuro diluito in una bevanda.

Il caso di Jonestown è utilizzato spesso nelle *fake news* costruite dal movimento antisette come esempio dell’esistenza del lavaggio del cervello e di leader carismatici che riducono mentalmente in schiavitù i loro seguaci. In realtà anche in questo caso l’esame delle cause della tragedia si è rivelato molto più complesso, come afferma Rebecca Moore, forse la maggiore specialista accademica del Tempio del Popolo. Ella riferisce che le indagini psicologiche e sociologiche effettuate prima e dopo la tragedia, per verificare l’attendibilità di queste ipotesi, le hanno entrambe escluse perché prive di fondamento (Moore 2012).

Questi pochi cenni sulla tragedia di Jonestown sono sufficienti a mostrare l’evidente falsità e faziosità della similitudine che Aitken fa tra l’esperienza di una persona che aveva fatto parte di un movimento con le caratteristiche totalitarie del Tempio del Popolo, guidato da un leader squilibrato, violento, mentalmente disturbato e dipendente da stupefacenti, e quella di milioni di membri – o ex-membri – di un’organizzazione come la Soka Gakkai, impegnata da sempre nella difesa dei diritti umani, della pace, del dialogo e della fratellanza tra i popoli, guidata da un leader come Daisaku Ikeda, di cui non è necessario ricordare ancora le qualità, i meriti e le attività culturali e sociali, di cui si è accennato in precedenza.

Conclusione: Un altro modo di vedere

Desidero concludere questo contributo con un brano tratto da un saggio di Daisaku Ikeda, particolarmente adatto a terminare, con una riflessione propositiva, questa disamina delle affermazioni false, e talora deliranti, delle numerose citazioni falsificate, illogiche e tendenziose utilizzate per costruire la *fake news* “Perché la Soka Gakkai è una setta (secondo i criteri di Steven Hassan)”.

In uno dei suoi discorsi Daisaku Ikeda illustra, con semplicità e profondità, quali sono le radici del pregiudizio e come quest’ultimo sia la causa di innumerevoli conflitti, che talora sfociano in guerre sanguinose:

La crescita e lo sviluppo dei media ha in realtà accresciuto il pericolo del proliferare di stereotipi e di immagini manipolate. Siamo tutti esposti a questo rischio. È vitale che tutti noi ci poniamo alcune domande importanti: accetto senza alcuna critica le immagini che mi sono mostrate?; credo ciecamente ai fatti rappresentati senza prima esaminarli?; mi sto involontariamente lasciando condizionare dai pregiudizi?; riesco veramente a cogliere la realtà delle cose?; sono stato sul posto?; ho incontrato le persone coinvolte?; ho ascoltato ciò che hanno da dire?; mi sto facendo deviare da voci incontrollate e tendenziose? Credo che questo tipo di dialogo interiore sia di fondamentale importanza, perché le persone coscienti, pur mantenendo pregiudizi inconsci, possono interagire con gente di altre culture più facilmente di coloro che sono convinti di non avere pregiudizi. Quando smettiamo di guardare noi stessi, quando non ci poniamo più domande, diventiamo arroganti e dogmatici. Il nostro interagire diventa una via a senso unico, non riusciamo ad ascoltare gli altri e il vero dialogo è perciò impossibile. Il tipo di dialogo che può portare alla pace deve iniziare con un aperto e onesto dialogo con noi stessi (Ikeda 2009, 7).

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