

Introduction. The Ambash Family: A Stereotypical “Cult” in Israel

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ABSTRACT: This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is consecrated to the sensational case of Daniel Ambash, branded in Israel as the quintessential “cult leader” and sentenced to 26 years in jail for various crimes, including the “mental enslavement” of women with whom he lived in a situation of *de facto* polygamy. Since these women vehemently deny that they were “slaves,” and insist their sexual relations with Ambash were fully consensual, Israeli courts adopted a dangerous theory of “cultic enslavement” in order to conclude that the Ambash wives were victims *without knowing it*.

KEYWORDS: Daniel Ambash, Ambash Family, Polygamy, Brainwashing, Mental Enslavement, Anti-Cult Movement.

A Dangerous Case: Who Is Daniel Ambash?

As Susan Palmer mentions in the leading article in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, for several years scholars of new religious movements would not touch the Ambash Family with a ten foot pole. Two degrees of judgement in Israel had convicted the leader of this group, Daniel Ambash, for a number of crimes involving sadistic sexual abuse. He had been sentenced to 26 years in jail, although a request to the Supreme Court to revise his conviction is pending at the time of this writing. Scholars tend to be sympathetic to new religious movements, but sexual abuse is a different matter altogether. And there was the risk that, by raising questions about the fairness of Ambash’ prosecution, scholars would simply give ammunition to those who regard them as “cult apologists,” ready to defend even the most bizarre and abusive “cults.”

Outside the narrow field of the study of new religious movements, a well-known French scholar, Georges-Elia Sarfati, had been the first to speak out (Sarfati 2015). But then Sarfati had known Ambash personally since the latter was a famous ballet dancer in France. The accusations simply did not seem to fit.

It was, however, true, as Susan Palmer and Holly Folk documents in their articles, that Ambash in Israel was a different character from the Ambash of his early incarnation in France. He had returned to his Jewish roots and joined a fascinating group, the Na Nach Breslover Hasidim, founded by Rabbi Yisrael Ber Odesser (1888–1994). The Breslover Hasidim trace their origins to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810). The Na Nachs believe that Rabbi Yisrael was the reincarnation of Rabbi Nachman, and that in 1922 he had revealed the mysterious Song of Redemption for the whole humanity that Rabbi Nachman had promised. Ambash became an enthusiastic disciple of Rabbi Yisrael, and put his artistic creativity at the service of spreading his message and the Song of Redemption.

The Polygamy Issue

Ambash, however, parted company from other Na Nachs because he also believed that polygamy—more precisely, *de facto* polygamy, as he never tried to legally marry more than one wife—was actually permitted by Jewish law, and ended up living with six women in different houses.

While one wife turned against him and left the family, I and other scholars met the other wives. Both I and Susan Palmer are familiar with the polygamy of the Mormon splinter groups known in the U.S. as “Mormon fundamentalists,” and I also encountered polygamy as practiced in Israel by Jews from Yemen. What I met in the Ambash family was something different, a unique combination of traditional Judaism and the passion for experimenting with radically alternative lifestyles typical of Ambash’s artistic milieu (see the documentary on the Ambash ladies by Vaturi-Dembo 2016).

Previous engagements prevented me to study the Ambash case in detail. I met the Ambash women only once, and encouraged Susan Palmer and Holly Folk to go to Israel and investigate the affair in depth. I did provide, with others, an expert opinion to the Israeli Supreme Court, published in this issue of *The*

Journal of CESNUR, but it was on the general matters of brainwashing and “mental enslavement” rather than on the Ambash case in particular.

Accusations of Sexual Abuse

Obviously, I do not condone sexual abuse. Nor am I a naïve “apologist” persuaded that all religious movements are benign. I proposed myself a category of “criminal religious movements,” suggesting they should be prosecuted—for their crimes, not for their religious ideas (Introvigne 2018).

In this issue, we give voice to passionate testimonies about the Ambash case. They deny that any abuse of minors occurred, except that some of the Ambash children were abused by the Israeli social welfare system, the courts, and the police, and one girl died. They point out that all testimonies about an alleged sexual abuse were either recanted or obtained under duress and extreme police pressure, of which they offer visual and documentary evidence (see also Hertzog 2018).

The Ambash Family has produced ample evidence pointing out at serious flaws on how the investigation and the trials were conducted (see e.g. Davidoff 2016; R2DIP 2017; “Israel Ambash” 2017; “Ambash Affair” 2018; and “Daniel Ambash” 2018). Personally, I do not have enough elements to come to a conclusion about the abuse allegations. But I note that serious scholars who do came to different conclusions from those of the Israeli courts.

Brainwashing Redux: “Mental Enslavement”

Ambash, however, was not sentenced for minor abuse only. In fact, the largest part of his trials revolved around a different accusation, i.e. that he had abused his (de facto) *wives*. Five out of six wives vehemently deny the accusation, and the motivations of the one who turned witness for the prosecution, in exchange of immunity for crimes she had certainly committed, are highly questionable. Yet, the Israeli courts, as Sarfati explains in his article in this journal, decided to ignore their point of view and to label them as “victims” *against their will*.

How was this possible? Here, precisely, the Ambash case becomes extremely important, and alarming, for scholars of new religious movements. Even if the

Ambash women kept repeating that all their sexual activities with Ambash were fully consensual, the courts insist that such is not the case, because they were in a situation of “mental slavery,” typical of “cults.”

In the expert opinion I and others sent to the Israeli Supreme Court, reproduced in this issue of the *Journal*, we revisit the old controversies about “brainwashing.” Most scholars and courts of law by the end of the 20th century had reached a consensus that brainwashing does not exist. In order to avoid confronting these precedents, in the Ambash case the judges re-labeled brainwashing as “mental enslavement.” But, for all practical purposes, the two concepts are one and the same. “Mental enslavement” is part of pseudoscience, just like brainwashing.

A Stereotypical “Cult”

As Susan Palmer demonstrates, the Ambash case can only be understood within the context of anti-cult campaigns and activities in Israel. Ultimately, the courts and the media argued, we know that the Ambash ladies were “victims” rather than free agents because they were “trapped” into a “cult.” In this respect, the Ambash case is a very dangerous precedent. There are already other cases—Gregorian Bivolaru, the leader of MISA, a movement to which the first issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* was consecrated in 2017, comes immediately to mind—where it is argued that sexual activities by adults on a “cultic” context *cannot be consensual*, since by definition they are the consequence of brainwashing (by any other name).

All groups labeled as “cults” are accused of brainwashing, but here there is something more. In the case of Ambash, as in the one of Bivolaru, repression targets alternative sexual lifestyles. They may be tolerated in a secular context but, for whatever reason, society regards them as particularly offensive when sexual experimentation takes place in a religious context. There is a boundary between religion and sexuality that should not be transgressed. Ambash and his family, thus, appear to be casualties in a much larger struggle about social repression and control.

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