

## Book Reviews

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Massimo Introvigne, *Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA)*. Milan and Udine: Mimesis International, 2022. 142 pp. USD 19.99. EUR 15,00. ISBN: 9788860773747.

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The fields of studies of Western esotericism and new religious movements witnessed, particularly in the last ten years, a growing interest in two crucial themes, sexuality and eros. Since the beginning of the 2000s, different kinds of contributions (i.e. collections of essays; PhD dissertations; monographic works) were devoted to the role of both sexuality and eros in modern esoteric currents and new religious movements. More exactly, these publications have been focusing on the manifestations of eros and sexuality in rituals, disciplines, and socio-religious communities and experiments. One of the recurring leitmotifs, which regularly emerges throughout these contributions, is that of the so-called “sex magic.” Although the notions “eroticism” and “sexuality” have been used interchangeably (or as synonyms), “sex magic” refers to certain specific practices within the history of Western esotericism and new religious movements. In other words, sex played a major role on a theoretical and practical level in certain modern esoteric and religious groups. Thus, it can be affirmed that in these groups sexual practices were finalized to *magical* or *spiritual* aims.

Since the beginning of his book, Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne does not apply the category of “sex magic” to the “dangerous Romanian cult” MISA—as Italian media labeled it after the Italian special police S.A.S. (“Squadra Anti

Sette,” Anti-Cult Squad), on December 6, 2012 raided the private houses of twenty-five Italian and foreign citizens associated with it (to this very day, nobody has been committed to trial in Italy after this raid). On the one hand, argues Introvigne, there is no “clear-cut distinction” between magic and religion, on the other hand, the label “sex magic” is not always accepted by practitioners (8). In addition, the “sex magic” category would not in any case apply to MISA. Thus, the Italian sociologist opts for the use of “sacred eroticism.”

As it is possible to notice by leafing through the pages of the volume, the choice of the term has a two-fold aim. First, it sets the ground for the analysis of MISA movement and puts into context its esoteric, artistic, and sociological background. Second, it allows to consider those problematic aspects that are connected with the religious/esoteric declination of eroticism in late modernity.

Introvigne warns the reader since the introductory part of the volume: “Irrespectively of how you call it, sacred eroticism is rarely popular with the media” (8). The immediate reaction to the inclusion of sexuality or eroticism in the theory and practice of a religious or esoteric group is hostility towards that movement, its leader, its members. We can easily expect to see the erotic components of the group associated with sexual abuses of which the leaders are accused, or with the notion of “deviance.”

Introvigne, who does not use the derogatory word “cult” and prefers to call groups such as MISA “new religious movements,” as most scholars in his field do, “fully believe[s] that sexual abuse should not be condoned under any pretext. Religious liberty is not a valid defense for rapists, and perpetrators should be prosecuted and punished” (22), he writes. On the other hand, he finds media reconstructions of religious movements engaged in sacred eroticism as “deviant cults” quite simplistic. Media and the public opinion may tend to perceive erotic rituals as invariably abusive and criminal. Introvigne does not discard the possibility that, in some groups, abuse may occur. However, he challenges the discursive strategy of the media that label religious or esoteric movements that include in their doctrines teachings on eroticism as necessarily “deviant,” “criminal,” or “abusive.”

To explain what “sacred eroticism” is all about, Introvigne analyzes both MISA’s background and the evolving modern notions of Eros and eroticism. The Italian sociologist proposes to replace the category of “deviance” with another one, “radical aesthetic.” Sociologists have noted that different fields of human

activity are socially constructed through a process of “aestheticization.” Boundaries between once rigidly separated fields—including those between religion and eroticism—have started collapsing in modernity. Therefore, artistic, social, and erotic spheres interact with each other in a radically new way. The “aestheticization” of eroticism and sexuality was radically redefined in the 1960s.

According to Introvigne, three main “heretic” sources (in the sense of alternative to social mainstream) were responsible for this redefinition of the erotic sphere: Eastern spirituality (with special reference to India); Western esotericism; and modernist art. In the words of the author,

Drawing on Eastern spiritualities, Western esotericism, and modernist art, the revolution of the 1960s built a radical aesthetics, where the boundaries between art, religion, everyday life, and eroticism started to collapse (9).

This revolutionary (radical-aesthetic) approach to eroticism, according to Introvigne, is the background against which MISA emerged. The *Weltanschauung* of the movement and its founder Gregorian Bivolaru (b. 1952) is literally rooted in these sources. However, if for what concerns Eastern spiritualities the movement focuses mostly on Tantra, for Western esotericism and modernist art the leaders of the movement are selective in the choice of their sources. Thus, it can be affirmed that to break the boundaries between art, religion, and daily life, MISA relies mostly on Tantra.

MISA conceives “sexuality” as “inferior,” or connected to a dimension of “violent, sharp, vulgar” pleasure (80). On the contrary, “eroticism” refers to a superior experience, capable in its higher expressions of “divinizing” the practitioners. Introvigne notes that this has illustrious precedents in the history of “sacred eroticism.” In MISA, a specific practice distinguishes eroticism from sexuality: erotic continence.

The underlying conception is a theory of correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm. Like other movements, MISA refers to the paraphrase of the second verse of the cryptic Hermetic text *The Emerald Tablet*, “as above, so below.” It also quotes Romanian historian of religions, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), with whom Bivolaru corresponded in his formative years, who stressed that in different religious and cultural systems a correspondence exists between spirit, light, and the male semen. While, on the one hand, the use of semen for procreative purposes is connected to a microcosmic dimension, on the other hand the practice of sacred eroticism—centered on continence and

orgasms without ejaculation—, which might lead to the divinization of the entire body of the practitioner, is connected to the macrocosmic dimension.

Introvigne notes that Chinese Taoist erotic alchemy was popularized in the West only in later years, and Bivolaru's main source for his sacred eroticism are the Tantra, a series of non-systematic books written in India by Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain authors, between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Tantra conceive “almost all material realities as potential resources or means” (12) to achieve enlightenment. According to this tradition, erotic continence is also one of the paths to enlightenment. Introvigne stresses the crucial role that British orientalist Arthur Avalon (pseud. of Sir John George Woodroffe, 1865–1936) played in the popularization of Tantra and their content in the West amidst both an academic audience and an esoteric one.

Although other practices related to sacred eroticism were known since the late Middle Ages—not to mention those drawn on Gnostic, Middle Eastern, and Chinese sources—the Western esoteric traditions kept them concealed because of the negative attitudes towards eroticism prevailing in the Western society. In his reconstruction of how teachings on erotic continence resurfaced since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Introvigne also includes John Humphrey Noyes (1811–1886) and the community he founded at Oneida (New York) in 1848, feminists Alice Stockham (1833–1912) and Ida Craddock (1857–1902)—who respectively developed the *Karezza* method (a series of sexual techniques not finalized nor focused on ejaculation), and a series of sexual/erotic teachings, which inspired a Church of Yoga—, American Rosicrucian author Pascal Beverley Randolph (1825–1875), whose sex magical techniques (including continence) were mainly proposed to married couples, and Spiritualist and Freemason Georges Le Clément de Saint-Marcq (1865–1956), who shocked European cultural and esoteric milieus with a pamphlet (*L'Eucharistie*, 1906) where he suggested that the authentic secret of the Eucharist in the Catholic Mass was not the body and blood of Jesus Christ—it was his sperm.

Three main traditions, Introvigne argues, consolidated sacred eroticism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first tradition was the OTO (Ordo Templi Orientis, “Order of Oriental Templars”), which was founded by Carl Kellner (1851–1905) and Theodor Reuss (1855–1923), and whose main branch came under the control (till his death) of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). Based on some knowledge of Tantra (more exactly, of the so-called “Tantrism”), the exponents of the OTO

developed sacred eroticism operations of their own, different from MISA as ejaculation was not excluded, which played a central part in their religious system of *Thelema* (i.e. “Will”).

The second tradition revolves around the figure of Italian hermeticist, Giuliano Kremmerz (pseud. of Ciro Formisano, 1861–1930). In 1898, he founded La Fratellanza Terapeutica Magica di Miriam (The Therapeutic Magic Brotherhood of Miriam). Although the history of the whole order is still shrouded in darkness—notwithstanding some recent brilliant contributions towards its reconstruction—*some* followers of Kremmerz came to believe that a system of sex magical operations had been elaborated by their master. The system of at least one of these “post-Kremmerzian schools” consisted of different degrees, which were associated with magical erotic operations (including ejaculation) performed in astrologically determined days.

The third tradition relates to one of the former associates of Aleister Crowley, Arnaldo Krumm-Heller (1876–1949), who moved to Latin America and further developed theories related to sacred eroticism. His Columbian disciple Samael Aun Weor (V́ctor Manuel G3mez Rodŕguez, 1917–1977) founded in 1950 a Universal Gnostic Church. Weor’s Gnostic movement and doctrine relies on erotic continence only.

To these three historical traditions, Introvigne adds a fourth, the Czech movement Guru Jára Path. Renown as professional rock climber and instructor, astrologer and spiritual teacher, Guru Jára (born Jaroslav Dobeš in 1971) established his “Path” in post-Communist Czechoslovakia in 1996. Since the 2000s, he and his group have been under investigation by local authorities for possible sexual abuses by Guru Jára of female members of his group. Although in the Guru Jára Path, astrology and meditation are at least as important as eroticism, local media and authorities focused on sexual elements only. Besides the legal problems of the group (which have been exhaustively reconstructed and analyzed by Introvigne elsewhere), the Italian scholar mentions the Crowleyan and Tantric roots of the Guru Jára Path, and the presence of techniques based on continence, including in the controversial ritual of “unhooking,” where Jára engaged in a ritualistic union with female followers, without ejaculation, to remove the “hooks” left by previous unsatisfactory sexual relationships.

The case of the Guru Jára Path is introduced by Introvigne as a *trait d'union* between a longer tradition of sacred eroticism in Western esotericism and MISA. Together with differences, Introvigne notes similarities between the Czech and the Romanian group. Both teach a variety of different techniques, but only sacred eroticism has attracted the hostile attention of anti-cultists, the police, and the media. Both have been persecuted in post-Communist contexts.

The three main sources responsible for the aesthetical redefinition of modern eroticism, according to Introvigne, are found in the MISA movement. Bivolaru “developed an interest in Eastern spiritualities and yoga by reading texts by Mircea Eliade, and even corresponding with him” (25), and he started teaching yoga in Bucharest in the 1970s, notwithstanding the hostility of the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918–1989). After they founded MISA (i.e. the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute) in the 1990s—in the immediate post-Ceaușescu years—Bivolaru and his friends were able to quickly develop the movement internationally. Introvigne stresses how “a positive appreciation of eroticism as a way to the divine” (25) was already present in Bivolaru’s early yoga teachings, and its liberating power was appreciated by thousands of young Romanians in the post-Communist years.

Although the main source and inspiration of MISA is Tantrism—with some “echoes of the Kashmiri Tantric sage Abhinavagupta (ca. 950–1016)” (28)—, Introvigne insists it is not the only one, and Bivolaru relies on multiple sources, including esoteric Christianity.

Introvigne, who has a special interest in how new religious movements influenced (and were influenced by) modern art, devotes several pages to MISA’s notion of “objective art,” where, together with other influences, he finds echoes of the ideas of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866?–1949). Introvigne quotes the words of one of the leading yoga teachers of the movement, Mihai Stoian, who regards art as “a direct method to awaken the soul” (29). According to MISA teachings “objective art comes from divine consciousness” (29). This means that the more artists are focused on their ego and personal perceptions, the less their art will be “objective,” or spiritual. The higher their awareness, the better the art produced by the artists.

The conception that underlies meditative, ritualistic, and artistic aspects of the MISA movement concerns, once again, the connection between microcosm and macrocosm. In this specific case, artistic production relies on the “law of

resonance.” True art works through the transmission of vibrations from the source to the receiver. In order to *resonate*, it is necessary for “the source” and “the receiver” to be similar. Whenever a group of people contemplate a work of art in “a state of unison,” the “individual aesthetic experience” of each person resonates into the consciousness of all members of the group (30). According to this law of resonance, objective art is a form of initiation per se, which connects and resonates with “similar” spiritual people and “frequencies.”

As opposite to objective art, MISA believes that “vulgar” art has spiritually catastrophic effects. Here, Introvigne introduces the controversial theme of MISA’s “conspirituality,” a word introduced by some scholars of esotericism to designate a “conspiratorist” spirituality. Drawing on an early anti-Masonic tradition, Bivolaru teaches that a deviant branch of Freemasonry, the Illuminati, is at work to corrupt humanity through vulgarity, a degraded sexuality, and the persecution of those who teach higher eroticism. MISA believes that the legal problems of Bivolaru, which Introvigne reconstructs in great details, also derive from a conspiracy by the Illuminati. The latter are beyond pornography as well, while the attempts by some MISA students to enter the underworld of adult movies and shows tried to produce, rather than pornography, a representation (at times paradoxical) of esoteric eroticism (always excluding ejaculation). Introvigne also notes recent developments, and MISA’s “no-vax” position based on the idea that anti-COVID vaccines may also be promoted as part of the Illuminati’s totalitarian attempts to impose more surveillance and control, which goes together with an appreciation of Donald Trump, presented as one of the few opponents of the Illuminati among modern politicians.

That true eroticism should not be confused with sexuality remains, however, the main teaching of MISA. It teaches that God has different attributes—such as Love, Justice, Compassion, and so on. As summarized by Introvigne, “MISA teaches that Godly Attributes are not just metaphors” (59). Godly Attributes are “subtle energies, which present a certain frequency of vibration that never changes” (59). These Godly Attributes are not only present in different religious systems (i.e., Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), but are also recognizable by men and women, since they are “created in the image and likeness of God” (59). According to the law of resonance, it is possible to capture and accumulate the energy of the different Godly Attributes in our fields. According to a crucial passage of MISA’s teachings,

The capturing of this subtle energy manifests by the emergence of a powerful specific inner state, which makes it possible to feel, know and fully experience the enigmatic reality of a certain Godly Attribute. Then we continue to have access to that Godly Attribute and even gradually deepen this Godly Reality, as long as the occult resonance process is maintained in excellent or even optimal conditions (59–60).

Furthermore, Introvigne stresses that the only limitations to access Godly Attributes come from our ego. Once again, the more we are aware of the way the macrocosm works and resonates, the more we can have access to this energetic and divinized cosmos.

To reach this “powerful specific inner state” (59), different options are available. In addition to meditation, some practices and rituals connected to sacred eroticism are used by MISA to achieve this state. “Pure Eros” for MISA is a Godly Attribute. Therefore, techniques related to “sacred eroticism” represent a way to resonate with the Godly Attribute of Pure Eros. According to Bivolaru—who refers, in turn, to Plato (427?–347? BCE), Plotinus (ca. 204–270 CE), Apuleius (ca. 124–170 CE), and to the notion of Kama in Hinduism to show how this dimension of love implies a practical initiatory path—, Pure Eros energy can be mobilized, accumulated, and “directed” by mean of yogic techniques. The practice of raising the awareness of Pure Eros in his microcosmic dimension implies a denial of other “contradictory energies” (64), namely the sexual ones. Sexual energies are part of an “inferior type of energy” (65) that strengthens the ego and awakens “inferior, instinctual” dimensions (65). As Introvigne summarizes, for Bivolaru

Sexual excitement or arousal is directed towards procreation through the sequence that in males includes erection and orgasm with ejaculation. Erotic excitement is “affective, eminently erotic, predominantly sensual and elevated, spontaneously oriented towards relaxation and joy” (65).

Sexual excitement and energies are not suitable for the process of occult resonance. Again, “Lovemaking is acceptable only when the corresponding process of occult resonance combines the subtle sublime energies of Godly Love and Pure Eros” (69). This implies that intimate relationships with a sexual rather than erotic orientation are completely forbidden in MISA (with some temporary exceptions allowed for the sole purpose of procreation).

One cannot stress enough how important for MISA is the difference between the sexual and erotic dimensions. Eroticism, in MISA’s teachings, implies much more than mere intercourse between men and women. Tantrism in turn, MISA



insists, is not only about eroticism. The movement offers 2,100 courses, of which less than 100 refer to sacred eroticism. It also teaches that continence is not an easy path. For male initiates, two years of training are required to become an “excellent continent” (74). During their intimate encounters,

In an extremely short time, much shorter for men than for women, lovers are confronted with a choice: reach a higher level of consciousness, or surrender to unconsciousness and ejaculation (74).

In addition, erotic continence per se is not enough. It is necessary, for the initiates, to exclude the broader field of “sexual experience” from their lives.

In this volume, Introvigne shows how the conception of radical aesthetic applies to MISA movement. Introvigne’s analysis operate on two levels. On the one hand, he exhaustively reconstructs the legal and media slander and persecutions of Bivolaru and MISA. He regards the accusations as false, and based on a misperception and misrepresentation of MISA’s sacred eroticism. On the other hand, the Italian scholar considers the effective role of erotic-oriented practices in the same movement.

How deeply Romanian and other authorities who persecuted Bivolaru misunderstood the whole idea of sacred eroticism is astonishing. Beyond the false accusations of an alleged sexual relationship between Bivolaru and a minor Romanian MISA student (which the latter denied) lies a total lack of understanding of the transcendent component of MISA’s eroticism. Nor has there been any effort by the opponents to consider how erotic elements are present in other religious traditions. However, the whole history of sacred eroticism shows how the connection between eroticism and religion and/or spirituality was often misperceived and misrepresented.

The book offers an exhaustive analysis of the MISA movement, its history, doctrine, and practices, along with crucial insights on the history of sacred eroticism, as well as on its later developments, incarnations, and problems in contemporary society. Scholars in the fields of Western esotericism studies and history of religions will find compelling passages and considerations about the connection between the dimensions of “Eros” and “Sacred.” Sociologists and others interested in new religious movements will find there an in-depth analysis of a unique, original case study.