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Archeosophical Icon Painting and Iconognosis

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ABSTRACT: Tommaso Palamidessi, the founder of Archeosophy, regarded art, and specifically the icon, as a support for inner elevation and meditation, and the subject of a theurgic practice. His doctrinal corpus, together with its operative techniques, is presented in *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura*, posthumously published in a reduced version in 1986 and in its complete form in 2012, through a private edition in four volumes. This text presents the geometrical figures to be used in the proportions, the action of colors on the psyche, the techniques of visualization and of “colored” respiration, the blessing formulas for the painting materials, and the theurgical consecration of the board. The text, which originated from a paranormal experience Palamidessi had in 1971, can be defined as a veritable manual of esoteric theory and artistic technique, aimed at initiating the novice into the preparation of the sacred icon, to its theurgic consecration, and to meditation on it. The icon painting practice of Palamidessi becomes thus “iconognosis:” a form of ascesis and an operative technique capable of producing a spiritual transmutation of the artist, and of transforming the icon into a “theophanic mirror” that manifests the divine presence.

KEYWORDS: Archeosophy, Tommaso Palamidessi, Esotericism and the Arts, Iconognosis, Icons and Meditation.

Introduction

The influences of Western esotericism in the world of art, especially in the first half of the 20th century, are well-known. They have been the subject of academic studies for more than fifty years, as demonstrated by important exhibitions such as the seminal *The Spiritual in Art* (1986: Tuchman 1986); *Traces du Sacré* (2008: Alizart, Loisy, and Lampe 2008), which was able to gather almost two hundred artists of international fame; and the Venice Guggenheim’s *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity* (2022: Subelytė and Zamani 2022).

Particularly relevant and studied are the influences of Theosophy on abstract art (Bauduin 2013) through Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), without forgetting the amazing story of Hilma af Klint (1862–1944). While Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibblings (1903–1976) insisted that abstract art really started with the ideas on “thought-forms” of Theosophists Annie Besant (1847–1933) and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1847–1934) (Robsjohn-Gibblings 1947), modernist art can hardly be understood without considering the important influences of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and even of Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918).

In fact, the links between esoteric and artistic discourse are so deep and obvious that today they no longer need to be justified. They should only be explained. In searching for an explanation, Marco Pasi proposes four principal modes in which esotericism can find its expression in modern and contemporary art. The first mode is through the representation and use in the artistic process of metaphysical or esoteric symbols. The second derives from the fact that an artistic object, being the result of a manipulation of the material, can be interpreted as a talisman or an object of power. The third mode sees in the artistic work a means to induce extraordinary experiences. Finally, the fourth mode regards the artistic work as a result of a spiritual or mystical experience (Pasi 2015).

The four modes indicated by Pasi are all implicitly included in the “artistic ascesis” proposed by Tommaso Palamidessi (1915–1983). The founder of the Archeosofica School spent many years painting icons, and later synthesized his experience in a text which is now regarded as a classic in this field (Palamidessi 2015 [1971]). It also constitutes the base and a guide for the numerous Archeosophical icon painting courses offered in Italy, Germany, Austria, and Portugal.

In fact, the Archeosophical icon painting practice can be considered an “iconognosis.” Palamidessi believed that iconognosis rested on three principles. First, the icon is an artistic-scientific work that uses non-arbitrary colors and symbols of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Second, the Archeosophical icon is a theurgical work, prepared specifically for liturgical or hierurgical rites through a special process and a ritual of consecration. Third, the icon painting work corresponds to a specific “artistic ascesis,” whose purpose is the spiritual transmutation of the artist, who condenses in the icon the testimony of a mystical experience or of an initiatory self-realization.

An Experience as Monk-Icon Painter

The life of Tommaso Palamidessi is characterised by its eclecticism. His work focuses on the individuals in their psychic, spiritual, creative, religious, and artistic features. Therefore, it is not surprising that Palamidessi already exhibited an interest for the aesthetic dimension in the early 1960s, when he practised sculpture, under the master Guarino Roscioli (1895–1978), and painting (Baroni 2011, 90).

In this period, the interests of Palamidessi were already focused on the rediscovery of the early Church Fathers of Christianity, and the project of what would become the Archeosofica School (Corradetti 2022, 10). In these years, Palamidessi wrote for the magazine *La tribuna illustrata*, where his column included essays devoted to the divulgation of themes and symbols of the esoteric and spiritual traditions. It is in some of these articles that we find his first references to painting. In one of his periodic visits to the shrine at La Verna, where he was completing his preparation for joining the Franciscan Third Order (Lullo 2020), Palamidessi met the painter Antonio De Vivo (1915–1982), who had been knighted by the Italian Republic for his artistic achievements. Palamidessi called him an “ascetic painter,” and a lifelong friendship started (Palamidessi 1962).

In the *Tribuna illustrata* articles, the metaphysical dimension of painting is already outlined. Indeed, artistic creation is seen as a “revelation of a superior reality.” The artists’ “mediumistic nature, suspended between the world of demons and that of angels” makes them receptive to “influences both from below and from above” (Palamidessi 1963, 34). Artists are thus able to “immerse themselves in the Nature and re-enter into themselves, after having absorbed and captured the archetypal values, so as to express them through the filter of their personality” (Palamidessi 1962, 34).

However, as it often happens with Palamidessi, the turning point for the elaboration of an esoteric theme was born from a spiritual or a parapsychological experience he personally lived. In this case, the event occurred during a period of intense activity on the theme of icon painting, which had started at least in October 1970.

In his eighteenth Archeosophy booklet published in the same year 1970, *Esperienza Misterica del Santo Graal*, Palamidessi had already devoted numerous

pages to the artistic ascesis and the iconognosis (Palamidessi 1970, 27–32), a sign of his intense reflection on the subject. Probably between the end of 1970 and the end of 1971 Palamidessi painted his two icons we know of, one depicting “Saint Antipas” and the other “Saint Francis Instructing the Wolf.” Palamidessi himself referred to the first icon, which depicts the martyred bishop Antipas of Pergamon (?–92 CE), whom the Orthodox tradition identifies with the martyr Antipas mentioned in *Revelation* 2:13 (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 32). The existence of the second one has been confirmed to me by the current leader of Archeosophy, Alessandro Benassai.

On September 8, 1971 Palamidessi started drafting his treatise *L’ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura* (Palamidessi 2015 [1971]). On the previous Sunday, he had lectured on the subject at the Pisa branch of the Associazione Archeosofica. The paranormal phenomenon happened on Thursday, November 11, 1971, at 1.30 p.m., in his villa of Morlupo, a village near Rome. Palamidessi experienced his life as a “novice” icon painter in a “large Christian Russian Orthodox monastery.”

The details of the geographical and temporal context are lacking. The reference to the episode as a memory of a “past life” is not explicit, even if in some way the story, reported in details in *Tecniche di risveglio iniziatico* (Palamidessi 1975, 34–8), can be understood as such.

The account is particularly important because it includes all the core features of Archeosophical icon painting. They include the hierurgical and ascetic use of the icon painting technique operated through “symbolic and consecrated colors, and thus charged with a mysterious force;” the epiclesis and the descent of the Divine Presence operated through a precise ritual made of consecrations, “fumigations,” and numerous invocations to the “Most Holy Virgin and the Celestial Son;” experimenting with colors as a metaphysical experience facilitated by specific respirations, visualizations, and ad hoc positions; the choice of precise geometrical proportions for the “sacred board of lime tree, planed and scraped in such a way as to render it convex;” and finally, the choice of auspicious times and of a special ascetic dietetics (Palamidessi 1975, 37).

The treatise L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura

The principal text of Palamidessi on icon painting is *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura*, which can be defined as a veritable manual of “esoteric theory and artistic technique” (Baroni 2011, 174). It is aimed at initiating the novice to the preparation of the sacred icon, to its theurgical consecration, and to meditation on it. Palamidessi started the drafting of the text, which would eventually become his twenty-seventh booklet on Archeosophy, in 1971. However, it was only in 1986 that the book was posthumously edited and published by his daughter Silvestra Palamidessi (1948–1996) with the title *L'ìcòna, i colori e l'ascesi artistica* (Palamidessi 1986). Subsequently, after Alessandro Benassai acquired the original manuscript, the text was newly edited and published in four volumes, as the twenty-seventh booklet of Archeosophy, in a private edition and with the original title, i.e., *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura* (Palamidessi 2015 [1971]).

The version edited by Benassai, although less homogeneous and editorially honed than the previous one, includes numerous previously unpublished parts, some of which had been left by the author only as notes in an incomplete form, and original designs by Palamidessi. It is now considered the most complete text, and is the one used by practitioners of Archeosophical icon painting. The text is divided in four volumes on the basis of a thematic division. The first deals with the sacred and spiritual dimension of art, and with the theological and scientific foundations of icon painting. The second is devoted to color, which in addition to its symbolic aspect is also analysed in its practical realization, starting from the raw materials. The third volume is the most technical, as it presents the entire realization of the icon, from the preparation of its board to the design with its proportions, up to the technical details of the icon painting process. The fourth is entirely devoted to the artistic ascesis as a whole, and offers meditative and ritual suggestions for the preparation and consecration of the icon.

Painting as a Way to Ascesis

For Palamidessi, any activity offers the opportunity for ascesis and self-overcoming. The artistic activity is no exception. Artistic ascesis, as the subtitle of

L'ìcòna, i colori e l'ascesi artistica indicated, is “a Way towards self-overcoming and a divine consciousness in Art” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971]).

More specifically, Palamidessi believed that art is a powerful transformative instrument. It can lead to either elevation or degradation, depending on the sensibility of the artist. Art is, on the one hand, a “representation of the outer reality of the things belonging to the mineral, vegetable, animal, and human world, transfigured into Beauty by the genius of the artist.” On the other hand, it is the “representation of the inner reality that is found in the outer reality” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 2). This inner representation depends on the subjectivity of the artist, who can be receptive “prevalently to the good, or to the bad.” If the work of art does not correspond to the “revelation of a superior reality,” if artists do not seek to “penetrate the inner reality of the things so as to ascend to the attributes of God,” then for Palamidessi they are “artists of the bad and the ugly” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 3).

The artistic ascesis is a way of living an art “not left adrift but steered by the Cosmic Subjectivity of the Christ” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 4). The artistic ascesis is therefore regarded by Palamidessi as a ladder that allows the artists, initiated into sanctity, to resonate and vibrate in harmony with “the divine uncreated energies, with the spirits of light, with the Communion of the Saints, with the Most Holy Virgin,” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 11) and to fulfil their priesthood by realizing in the works of art a theophanic sacrament.

Theological Framework: The Veneration of the Holy Images

A special role in the artistic work is played by the icon, which for Palamidessi is “a precious instrument of the special sacred art that helps the ascesis.” Its symbolic colors and pictorial canons constitute an “aesthetic science for the self-overcoming of oneself and the perfect imitation of the Christ” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 3). However, before moving on to the operative practice, Palamidessi consecrates almost an entire volume to clarify the doctrinal and theological context in which to set one’s own artistic ascesis. The evident reason for this doctrinal caution lies in the numerous controversies that had plagued icon painting movements of the past.

Artistic work, as noted by Pasi, is the result of a manipulation of the material, which as such can be interpreted by the esoterically inclined artists as a talisman or an object of power (Pasi 2015, 102). This is even more true in the case of the icon. In this case the painting, first purified and exorcised, then blessed and sanctified according to appropriate rituals, becomes a ritual instrument, and is considered to be a vehicle of the Divine Presence. The boundary between magic and theurgy, between idolatry and iconoduly, between Eucharistic transubstantiation and consecration through the icons, may appear to be subtle. Doctrinal errors and ambiguous interpretations led to the well-known iconoclastic movements, whose principal impulse came with the emperor Leo III the Isaurian (675–741), to whom Palamidessi devotes several pages (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 9–12).

Thus, the aim of the first volume of *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura* is that of making the theological and scientific bases of the theurgy of the icon as clear as possible. Practical and operational directives will follow in the fourth volume. The approach of Palamidessi is inspired by that of Paul (Pavel) Evdokimov (1901–1970), whose text, quoted by Palamidessi, had just been published in a French edition (Evdokimov 1970). In the case of the icons, the divine action, which “enhypostatizes,” i.e., “absorbs and integrates them in its spiritual body,” does not concern the material species of the board and tempera colors but the “likeness” of the icon itself (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 15).

Whilst in the Catholic and Orthodox theology of the Eucharist, the transubstantiation operates a transformation of the substance of the species, the icon does not contain any nature, does not attract nor imprison anything, but everything that is fixed on the board irradiates there the Name-Hypostasis (Evdokimov 1970). For both Palamidessi and Evdokimov, the Divine Presence does not use the icon as a “place of incarnation” but rather finds there “the centre of an energetic irradiation” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 15). Palamidessi had already clarified this position in 1970, that is, before his specific reflections on icon painting, when dealing with the study of the Grail:

Keep well in mind, the icon is not consubstantial with what it wishes to represent, but is immersed in a suprasensible light, and for this quality the icon of the Grail leads to the Grail (Palamidessi 1970, 31, underlined in original).

The insistence of Palamidessi on this point is justified by the fact that the distinction between a Divine Presence through “substance” and a Divine Presence through

“irradiation” emphasizes the theological difference between the two concepts. It answers possible accusations of pantheism and idolatry, and establishes the conditions justifying the veneration of the holy images, and therefore the doctrinal foundations for the icon painting work.

The Scientific Theory of the Icon

In the 2015 edition of *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura*, next to the theological foundation of icon painting there is an interesting chapter with the title “La teoria scientifica dell’Icona” (The Scientific Theory of the Icon: Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 21). This chapter supplements the theological foundation of the icons and their process of painting them with a scientific one. This fully fits in Palamidessi’s program of Archeosophy as an “experimental metaphysics” (see Corradetti and Lullo 2020), given that “faith, science, ascetics, and theology make the individual holy and cosmic” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 26). In this case, Palamidessi wants to evidence a “psycho-ionic” link between photographed, painted, and original images. In this sense, he quotes the parapsychological experiments and studies of Albert Leprince (1840–1914: Leprince 1941) and his friend Giuseppe Calligaris (1876–1944), and the case of Ted Serios (1918–2006: Eisenbud 1967).

In Palamidessi’s scientific theory, the study of the icon as a “sacral mirror,” whose analogy was not coincidental, re-emerges. Whereas an ordinary mirror shows our own image, the “mirror-icon” is a symbol of the Divine Spirit. The soul that looks at the mirror-icon “sees the shames it brings with it,” and by rejecting them “takes as a model the Holy Spirit and imitates it—unifies with the Spirit” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 23).

The concave and convex curvatures of the icon also have a precise hierurgical and liturgical value. In fact, the icon receives “the cardio-encephalic telepathic wave, not only of an electromagnetic nature, but of a spiritual one, and reflects it in an intense way to the focus of the mirror-icon, inundating the devotees with blessing and love” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 23). Thus, a concave curvature is more adapt for the personal and hierurgical practice of the single devotee, whilst a convex icon will be more adapt for the liturgical or public rites. For Palamidessi, the analogy between icon and mirror is not merely symbolic. The “optical-psycho-spiritual” phenomenon of the mirror is so much real and relevant for icon painting that Palamidessi provides in the third volume a formula for the calculation of the focal distance of the icon, starting from the curvature radius of the board.

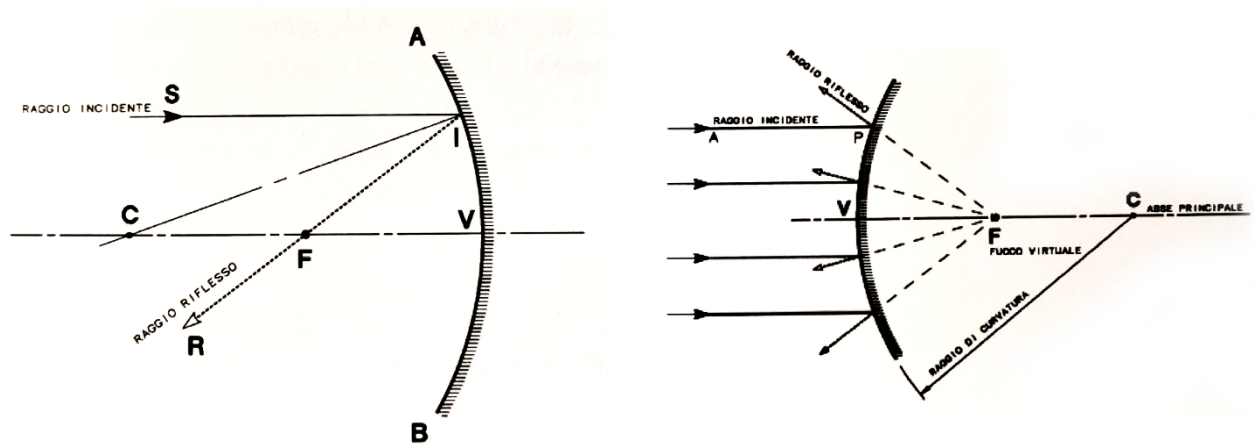


Figure 1. Focal distance in relation to the concavity or convexity of the icon. Point C indicates the circumference center, while F indicates the effective or virtual focus of the icon (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], III, 3-4).

Technical Aspects of the Archeosophical Icon Painting

When Palamidessi refers to icon painting as an “aesthetic science,” he clearly means that the pictorial canons, the use of colors, the path to the icon’s completion, and the theurgical process of consecration are not arbitrary. Instructions should be followed in each detail in order to obtain the desired ascetic results. Thus, in the third volume of *L’ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura*, he describes in great detail how to put the Archeosophists in the best technical conditions for the making of their icons. He explains how to make a paintbrush, and a palette for the colors, and adds practical suggestions for the egg, glue, and gum tempera.

From a purely technical point of view, the Archeosophical icon painting does not deviate from the traditional model codified by Dionysius of Fournia (ca. 1670–1745), a Mount Athos monk of the 18th century and the author of *Ερμηνεία της ζωγραφικής* (The Painter’s Manual). This text, translated into French in 1845 by Paul Durand (1806–1882) with the title *Manuel d’iconographie chrétienne grecque et latine* ([Dyonisius of Fournia] 1845), is mentioned by Palamidessi (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], III, 12), together with the classic *Trattato della pittura* or *Libro dell’Arte* by Cennino Cennini (1370–1440: Cennini 1821), a pupil of Giotto di Bondone (1267–1337). However, Palamidessi was mostly focused on the study of the numerical and geometrical canons that preside over the icon, a field he contributed to by introducing some new and noteworthy elements.

The dimensions of the icon and the anatomical proportions of the characters represented are not arbitrary. They should be selected according to a sacred symbolism of numbers and geometrical forms. For example, they should correspond to the 3:4:5 sacred triangle in the case of the half-bust, or 1:3 when a whole figure is represented. In each case, Palamidessi supplies symbolic geometrical schemes, which should be “internalized and meditated on for a long time in their dual meaning” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], III, 21).

The proportions of the busts and the faces follow the classical canons of Dionysius of Fournia and Cennino Cennini popularized by Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968: Panofsky 1955). Indeed, Palamidessi quotes an Italian translation of Panofsky’s book on the meaning of visual arts (Panofsky 1962). Even more important for Palamidessi is the use of the golden number through the construction of the five-pointed star or pentagram, known as “the dynamic sign of Nature and of Humans” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 35). He recommends the use of such a geometrical form to give “a cosmic dimension” to the faces of the saints (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Proportions of the icon of “James, the Brother of Christ.” Autograph design of Tommaso Palamidessi (in Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 35).

The Importance of Colors in the Archeosophical Icons

Chromatic symbolism and geometrical canons are the two principal vectors of the “aesthetic science” that presides over the realization of the sacred icon. For Palamidessi, the effectiveness of an icon at an ascetic and liturgical level depends on these two fundamental factors. In particular, color is distinguished by him in an “outer color,” that is, a color intended externally for the eye, and an “inner color,” which refers to “clairvoyant colors” coming “from the subjectivity” of the person. The work on the icon through the outer colors is a means to internalize and change the inner colors, or the colors “of a psychic nature,” which have a precise function “for creating a contact with the Grail as an experience of Light” (Palamidessi 1970, 29).

Palamidessi explores in depth the sacred, religious, and esoteric symbolism of colors (Godwin 2017), inspired by *Des couleurs symboliques*, a text written in 1837 by Baron Frédéric de Portal (1804–1876: de Portal 1837). Meditations on colors and their internalization are indispensable tools for the icon painter. Palamidessi supplies examples of meditations on colors through rhythmic respiration according to the times 6:3:6:3, and visualization of the colors associated with the repetition of some sentences—specific short prayers for each color:

Gold and Yellow: Sun of Glory, Divine Life, illuminate my heart.

Red: Red fire of the Divine Love, blaze inside me.

White: Whiteness of the Eternal Light, clothe my soul.

Azure: Azure Sapience, Wisdom of God, cover me with your mantle.

Green: Green of Resurrection and Hope, regenerate my spirit (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 18).

Palamidessi specifies that through such meditations the results of the “resonance” with the subject of the icon will become even more powerful.

To breathe the vital energy and to rhythm the breathing according to the glowing gold signifies to experiment the Divinity and its superabundance. To rhythm the breathing and to visualize the intense azure is the same as breathing the celestial truth, whereas the pale azure leads to the unity and to the celestial character of the one nature (Palamidessi 1970, 30).

The Theurgy of the Icon

The Archeosophical icon is more than a work of art of a religious character. It is a real theurgical work, for which Palamidessi supplies a detailed operative and ritual practice. It

involves a preliminary preparation period including a retreat and several days of ascetic exercises. He supplies meticulous indications and formulae of consecration and prayer for each phase of the day and for the realization of the icon. He begins with the purification and incensing of the still white board, so that with the help of the Divine Grace it becomes a “support worthy to receive the sacred images.” Follows the consecration of water mixed with salt, ashes coming from a blessed olive tree, and some drops of wine. The water, blessed through the use of a formula that “calls for great purity of heart and mind” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 19), should then be used for the preparation of the colors.

The meditative and ascetic operations follow one another during the whole process of making the icon. The ascetic painter will not consecrate the icons until they are completed. This is the very center of the icon-painting theurgical operations, the “culminating and decisive” moment in which the icon becomes a “temporal mirror of the eternity” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 36). For at this moment the Archeosophists, in the instant of the invocation, should be at the zenith of their ascetic preparation and inner purity, so that “their words are not useless or, worse, blasphemous” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 36). The benediction of the icon is performed at dawn after a whole night of vigil and prayer. At the culmination of an intense prayer, with the hands stretched on the icon, the painter proceeds with the formula of consecration addressed directly to the Divine Uni-Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Archeosophical Icon Painting and Iconognosis

The Archeosophical icon painting process is the starting point of meditation and concentration that will lead to the “iconognosis,” i.e., to the discovery of what lies behind the image. For Palamidessi, this is “the most advanced form of ascesis through the symbol,” “part of the theosis by means of the symbol,” and the perfection of the ascetic way of the “integral or esoteric Christianity” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 6).

The icon is considered by Palamidessi to be on a par with a mandala, that is, a “castle of meditation,” a “magic circle,” a powerful means on which to fix the physical look and “the eye of the mind so as to isolate oneself from the profane world and to enter into the sacred world.” The meditation on the sacred image, from the beginning of its preparation to its completion, directs the will of salvation of the devotee because “this image animates, dynamizes, becomes charged with fluid, and works deep and healthy transformations in our consciousness” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 10).

The meditation on the icon leads to the contemplation of the archetypal reality and of the mystery which is found behind it. That is why the “Divine Trinity” of Andrei Rublev (1360?–1427?) expresses the “trisolar splendor of what Saint Gregory Palamas [ca. 1296–1359] indicated as the Light of Tabor, the Light contemplated by the Saints, and the Light of the second future: three Lights that are always the same Light” (Palamidessi 1970, 30). In the end, “The icon of the Grail leads to the Grail” (Palamidessi 1970, 39).

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Archeosophical Music and Melurgy

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ABSTRACT: Starting from 1975, Tommaso Palamidessi, founder of the “Archeosofica” School, devoted an important part of his work to the aesthetic and metaphysical dimension of the arts. He wrote on Sophianic theology, iconography, singing, and melurgy. In this article, we present the sources of the Archeosophical theory of music in the texts of Palamidessi, followed by some musicological and technical elements characteristic of the “Archeosophical melurgy.”

KEYWORDS: Archeosophy, Archeosophical Melurgy, Melurgy, Tommaso Palamidessi, Esotericism and Music.

Introduction

A significant part of the teachings of Tommaso Palamidessi (1915–1983) is devoted to the aesthetic experience and its role as a driving force in the individual ascetic and transmuting work. For the founder of the Archeosofica School, art is a precious tool for the ascetic who masters the “aesthetic science for the self-overcoming of oneself and the perfect imitation of the Christ” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 5).

For this reason, numerous titles devoted to painting, music, poetry, and dance were already present in the original editorial program of Archeosofica, dating back to 1968 (Cresti 2020). It is however from 1975 on that Palamidessi

devoted himself intensively to the drafting of his texts dedicated to the arts, with *L'ìcòna, i colori e l'ascesi artistica* (Palamidessi 1986), *Canto e arte del cantare santificante* (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975a]), and lastly *Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica* (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c]), all posthumously published.

Also of this period are the musical compositions of Palamidessi, among which the *Melodia in Re*. It is worth noting that the Archeosophical music developed by Palamidessi is not a purely theoretical construction, since in 1999 the Coro Santa Cecilia di Firenze was founded by Alessandro Benassai with the intention of developing the canons of Archeosophical music. It is still active today, together with the Accademia Musicale Archeosofica, which in 2021 had around a hundred active members, including students, teachers, and musicians.

In this article, after a presentation of the primary texts and sources, we will analyze some musicological and technical elements characteristic of the “melurgia archeosofica,” i.e., the Archeosophical melurgy.

The First Musical References in the Works of Palamidessi

In Europe, the dialogue between music and esotericism had its symbolic beginning in the first decade of the 19th century (Godwin 1995, 49), when it received a strong impulse through the works of Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1767–1825), Charles Fourier (1772–1837), and Józef Maria Hoëné-Wroński (1776–1853). These were quickly followed up by Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (1842–1909), with his influential work and notable musical expertise, and Paul-François-Gaspard Lacuria (1808–1890), in whom Palamidessi recognized “a vast theological, musical, esoteric and Christic preparation of a high level” (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 45).

The early years of the 20th century witnessed a flourishing of the aesthetic and artistic dimension in esotericism, with the widespread action of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), the Theosophical references of Vassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), and the musical experiments of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866–1949) and Thomas de Hartmann (1885–1956) (Petsche 2015). A sign of the ever-growing interest that music acquired in the European esoteric circles of the first half of the 20th century can be seen in the special edition of *Le Voile d'Isis* magazine (April

1928) entitled “La Musique dans ses rapports avec l’ésotérisme,” which collected a sizeable number of articles with the purpose of presenting an overall picture of the subject (*Le Voile d’Isis* 1928).

At the same time, on a less esoteric level but just as important for our investigation, the Vatican Commission directed by Dom Joseph Pothier, O.S.B. (1835–1923), a Benedictine from the Abbey of Solesmes, worked unceasingly for all the first half of the 20th century to recover and promote the Gregorian chant. The result of this work was a series of publications that went from the *Kyriale* of 1905 to the *Antiphonale Romanum* of 1912, then continued under the auspices of the Abbey of Solesmes up to the present day (Combe 2003).

While clearly distancing itself from the Gregorian chant in the inspirational spirit and sound effects, nevertheless the Archeosophical music shares with it many technical elements, such as the absence of chromatic alterations, and the use of free rhythm and the ecclesiastical modes. Palamidessi himself often quoted Dom Gregorio María Suñol, O.S.B. (1879–1946), a disciple of Pothier and the author of a well-known manual on the Gregorian chant (Suñol 1905).

Even if Palamidessi actively devoted himself to melurgy and the writing of texts of Archeosophical music only after May 1974, already in his texts on yoga the use of music is envisaged as an adjuvant to meditation. For example, in *La potenza erotica di Kundalini yoga* we read:

The pronunciation of the OM must be broken down into three phonetic moments: A – U – M, precisely: an open A which blends, merges with U and fades, according to a do-mi-sol program, into a nasal M ending with a mouth tight (Palamidessi 1949, 41).

A virtually identical meditation process is suggested in *Elementi della Tradizione Kabbalistica*, a writing of some thirty years later, where the Tibetan Aum is replaced by the Hebraic Amen:

During the meditation you can visualize the three Hebraic letters Alef, Mem, and Nun as living fire. Hebraic being the language of Christ and of the prophets. Sung or recited mentally the Amen is intoned on the musical notes Do-Mi-Sol (Palamidessi n.d. [1982], 70).

Starting from 1968, Palamidessi’s idea of the use of music for ascetic and theurgic purposes was already structured in a way that was coherent with the future developments and texts of the years 1974–75. In 1968, Booklet no. 29 appeared in the Archeosofica editorial program. It should have had as title //

canto, la poesia, la melurgia, la danza e la catarsi, but it was never published during Palamidessi's lifetime. It was edited posthumously into five separate texts: *Canto e l'arte del cantare santificante* (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975a]); *Elementi di grammatica musicale archeosofica*, in two volumes (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b]); *Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica* (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c]); and *Poesia e metrica o arte del poetare per il lavoro ascetico* (Palamidessi 1975b).

In April and May of the same year 1968, the first direct references to music and singing as ascetic and theurgic means, which might be useful for the awakening of the force centers, appeared in two articles in the magazine *La tribuna illustrata* (Palamidessi 1968a, 1968b). Particularly relevant is the first article of the “Piccolo dizionario delle Scienze Ermetiche” in *La tribuna illustrata* of 21 April 1968:

The mystics make use of music because certain notes and modes of the diatonic scale operate on the body and on the consciousness of the religious persons, and bring them closer to God. Singing, from the point of view of the occult science, would act on the thyroid and on the nervous system. The psychic and spiritual activity would therefore be stimulated by music. In particular, certain musical themes in Fa major would produce a sense of peace, of joy, and contemplation. Melodies in Do major would awaken the purity and energy to a high religious level. The Eastern Church has a long tradition about how music may help for catharsis or purification (Palamidessi 1968a, 35).

In these two articles, published twenty days apart from each other, we already find all the technical, ascetic, and metaphysical themes of Archeosophical music, which will be developed from 1975 on. Here, we meet references to the natural diatonic scale, that is, without chromatic alterations, and to the use of modes defined as “liturgical and theurgical;” to the action of music on the thyroid and the nervous system; to the use of singing to “awaken each of the seven human occult centers;” to music as an instrument held in high regard by the “greatest Masters of antiquity;” and to the Eastern Church as a repository of a long musical tradition for catharsis.

The spiritual dimension of music appears in the writings of Palamidessi as early as 1970. It is already well-defined when in the conclusion to Booklet 18 of Archeosophy, entitled *Esperienza Misterica del Santo Graal*, he refers to choral singing and to a musical asceticism capable of facilitating the ascension of the consciousness up to the Grail.

What should we say of music? When does it correspond to pictorial themes? We mean the music and the choral singing developed according to established liturgical and theurgic modes, which are very close to the archaic Byzantine harmony. The purified Ego can rise from one cosmic plane to the next until God, provided that the musical themes have been composed with the wisdom of the musical ascetics. Therefore, the notes and the colors must be bound skillfully together with the most suitable traditional symbols so as to facilitate the soft release of the consciousness, purified in Christ and coherent with the archetype of the Temple, in order for the physical body to climb unto the Grail with the glorious body of the Resurrection in the state of perennial Wakefulness, and to re-enter with the same softness and lucidity in the same physical body (Palamidessi 1970, 45).

Before 1968, we are not aware of musical references as articulate as the previous ones in the writings of Palamidessi, and it is difficult to reconstruct the phases of his thought. However, in our opinion it is relevant to report a spiritual experience narrated by Palamidessi himself in *Canto e arte del cantare santificante*, which must refer to the years immediately prior to 1960, when he was a regular visitor of the Franciscan monastery of La Verna, waiting to become a tertiary of the same Franciscan Order (Lullo 2020).

But for those who more than others intuit and perceive spiritually the presence of God in the All, the singing, the religious singing heard in the night on the heights near the monastery produce the wonderful and sublime sensation of leaving oneself and entering into a whirl of colors and harmonies. So it happened to me years ago on the mount of La Verna, in hearing from afar among the gusts of wind the singing of the Franciscans at Matins (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975a], 1).

This experience must surely have been striking, and it cannot be excluded that it was the basis of the growing attention paid by Palamidessi to music. Even if we do not know exactly the origin of the first interest of Palamidessi for music, we do know in a precise way what was the catalyzing event that took him to drafting the *Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica*. It is Palamidessi himself who makes reference to it in *Le basi dell'Astrologia Iniziatica personale* when dealing with how to ascetically exploit the planetary returns of Saturn, Jupiter and Mercury.

The preparation, although it was cursory [...], yielded surprising results: impetuous and scorching came the Wind Bearer of Light, Love, Hope with Sophia, the created Wisdom. On May 14 and 22 of the same year 1974 in Rome, the two Sophian apparitions and revelations were fixed, as far as it was permitted to communicate to others, in two summaries in verse. From those moments, the inspirations and insights followed one another relentlessly and gave the energy to write some important works: *Le basi della*

teologia sofianica; Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica; L'ascesi artistica, i colori e la pittura (Palamidessi 1975a, 44).

The Sophianic experiences of 1974 are accurately described by Palamidessi in two poems entitled *La Vergine Sofia* and *Crocifissi in quattro*, which with *La Donna del Trimundio* constitute an important part of the book *Le basi della teologia sofianica* (Corradetti 2022). They served as the catalyzing effect leading Palamidessi to finalize his writings about arts dealing with music and iconography.

Reference Texts for the Archeosophical Music

Between 1974 and 1975, Palamidessi produced the principal technical and doctrinal corpus of Archeosophical music, which however would only be published posthumously in private editions at the beginning of the 2000s. These texts, which constitute the fundamental bibliography for anyone who wants to approach Archeosophical music, are *Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica* (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c]), *Canto e arte del cantare santificante* (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975a]), and *Elementi di grammatica musicale archeosofica* in 2 volumes (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b]).

Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica is the most interesting text from the point of view of its ascetic solutions and doctrinal depth. In this text, Palamidessi discusses the spiritual and metaphysical importance of music, introducing the “musical Archeosophical tradition.” It also defines the concept of “melurgy,” and presents the cosmic octave in its relationships with the human octave and the “Mystery of the Eighth Day.” Moreover, in the same text Palamidessi offers the musical and chromatic correspondences for the awakening of the force centers, and classifies the melurgic and psychosomatic effects of the eight Archeosophical musical modes, together with some particularly important chords needed for musical harmony.

While in *Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica* the esoteric and spiritual bases of Archeosophical music are set out, in the other two writings Palamidessi introduces its practical and technical features. *Canto e arte del cantare santificante* is a manual presenting practical exercises of vocalization and breathing to improve the voice, and correct flaws and defects of pronunciation so

as to obtain a perfect phonation. In the two volumes of *Elementi di grammatica musicale archeosofica*, the author analyzes the technical bases of the Archeosophical composition. He presents the “eight Archeosophical modes” together with indications on the instrumental execution of the Archeosophical pieces. Finally, the text ends with a classification of an extensive number of classical pieces with respect to their psychic effects.

Along with these theoretical-practical texts, it is necessary to consider as part of the musical production of Palamidessi the compositions: an orchestral one entitled *Nella casa del Padre*, which has been lost, and *Melodia in Re*, composed in the first authentic mode.

Technical Elements

The technical elements of Archeosophical music are presented by Palamidessi mostly in *Elementi di grammatica musicale archeosofica*. Few but important points distinguish them significantly from the classical and modern religious music and draw them closer to the Gregorian chant, although more from a technical than a stylistic point of view. The text of reference for Palamidessi is here *Método completo de canto gregoriano* by Dom Suñol (Suñol 1905). Palamidessi emphasizes five main technical elements.

Use of the natural diatonic scale without alterations: in accordance with the Gregorian chant, Palamidessi does deal with chromatic alterations in his writings. However, he considers optimal, for his own spiritual aims and for tuning in with the “subtle psychic centers,” only the natural diatonic scale without chromatic alterations. Such a choice is combined with the strict use of the eight musical modes, which in fact are used without alterations. More specifically, Palamidessi insists on the use of the natural diatonic scale with the just intonation (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b], I, 30), with the following ratios between the musical notes:

1	9/8	5/4	4/3	3/2	5/3	15/8	2
Do	Re	Mi	Fa	Sol	La	Si	Do

Tuning of the La at 440 Hz: though maintaining unchanged the relative ratios, the frequency of the notes can vary significantly depending on the tuning. It is therefore extremely important to fix unequivocally their vibratory frequency, so as to ensure the reproducibility of the desired acoustic effect. In fact, different tunings produce different aesthetic impressions, and therefore different artistic and psychic effects. The reference for the identification of a specific tuning became in the 19th century the “central La,” which underwent several variations during the course of the centuries. Renowned are the Baroque tuning at 414Hz, and that of the first compositions of Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759) at 422.5Hz, in contrast to a tuning fork of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) resonant at 455.4Hz. Palamidessi mentions the organ of Trinity Church in Cambridge, with a central La at 395Hz (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b], II, 23). As late as the 20th century, it was still possible to encounter diverse tunings, of which the most influential were the French at 435Hz, and what was accepted and became ISO standard in 1955, at 440Hz. In *Elementi di grammatica musicale archeosofica* Palamidessi consecrates a chapter to the tuning used for the religious-ascetic music experiments, specifying that it had to be La at 440Hz.

Use of the eight Archeosophical musical modes: for the formulation of Archeosophical music, Palamidessi embraced the use of the eight liturgical modes, which had been the base of musical composition from the 9th until the 17th century. In the 9th century, the ecclesiastical modes consisting of a series of eight ascending diatonic scales arose from the practical necessity of supplying a guide for liturgical singing. Each of these gravitated around a fundamental sound called *ripercussio*, which is situated at an interval of fifth or sixth above the *finalis* in the “authentic” modes, or at an interval of third or fourth in those called “plagal.” Palamidessi utilizes the eight liturgical modes as the base of his eight Archeosophical modes, divided into four “authentic” modes and four “derivative” ones, which substitute the plagal (see Annex A). While maintaining the same formal definition in terms of tonic and dominant, the Archeosophical modes distinguish themselves from the liturgical traditions for the use of such notes. In the Archeosophical modes, the tonic and dominant are conceived as two fundamental centers of gravity of the melody, which represent the sense of repose and that of movement. However, the dominant is not seen as the “principle of melodic movement” but as “a diatonic note, on which the melody is placed in preference,” that is, what “the ancient Christian psalmody called the *tenor*”

(Palamidessi n.d. [post 1975b], I, 42). The choice of the Archeosophical mode, and therefore of the tonic and of the dominant of the composition, constitute for Palamidessi a crucial key for producing, through the musical-chromatic-psychic correspondences, the awakening and spiritual effect of the melody. Palamidessi is particularly explicit on this point, stating that,

We also note that to utilize the rapports of syntony among the musical notes and the psychic centres, the musical compositions must not leave the eight modes (four authentic and four derivative) dealt with in this booklet (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b], II, 23).

The only surviving composition of Palamidessi is entitled *Melodia in Re* and is in the first authentic mode, thus with tonic Re and dominant in La.

Use of free rhythm and chironomy: Archeosophical music calls for “the faithful execution of the single groups of notes without using the fixed rhythmic sequences.” To achieve this aim, the interpreters “must know to perfection the composition of the single rhythmic groups, the exact syllabic accentuation, and the division, so as to bind the execution with fluidity and logical continuity, avoiding any rigid cadence and rhythm” (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b], II, 9). Being without a rigid rhythm, the Archeosophical music guarantees a faithful reproduction through the use of the “chironomic line,” which consists of a graphic sign above the notes that evidences in natural mode the *arsis* and the *thesis* of the musical phrasing (see an example in Annex B).

This visible expression of the rhythm is called “rule given by the hand,” or chironomy. It has been in use since the time of Christ, because it is spontaneous and natural. The chironomy reproduces and indicates the raising and the lowering of the melodic line, and prescribes the rhythm and the dynamic nuances unequivocally. It must prove to be simultaneously rhythmic, melodic, and agogic. More exactly, it must ideally signify six factors of musical expression (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b], II, 7).

Use of the leading note: the seventh degree of the scale, or “leading note,” was often avoided in the Gregorian chant due to the imperfection value attributed to it. Palamidessi, even though not totally rejecting the use of such a degree of the scale, dedicates to it a whole chapter, suggesting what compositional artifices may be necessary to obviate its use (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b], I, 43). The absence of the leading note was a way “to silence all the disordered human passions, and express all the sentiments of those who want to enter into the temple of the Great Architect of the Universe and prostrate themselves in adoration” (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 61).

The Spiritual Dimension of Music

An important element to understand Archeosophical music is the part played by the spiritual dimension in the whole work of Palamidessi. For him, music is not only a useful instrument to predispose the soul for a religious emotion but a complete ascetic path, capable of introducing into a divine experience.

Based on our observations and experiments, hearing a musical piece is not only a sensorial or acoustic phenomenon. It is not only an aesthetic and ethical experimentation, because in the humans, equipped with ears, there is a psychosomatic and psycho-spiritual and then spiritual-divine process. It can become, following a particular methodology, the setting off to the relative unification with the uncaused Cause of the Created. It is a unification in a harmonic synthesis of the different aspects of the human personality (physical, emotive, mental, spiritual), both conscious or unconscious. It uses the numerous psychological techniques of liberation, guided and helped by the One who can do everything because He is the uncreated foundation of the creation of the Cosmos and of humans (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 13).

The concept of a psychic and spiritual action of music, capable of elevating “the purified Ego [...] from plane to cosmic plane up until God” is already found in the first Archeosophical writings of Palamidessi (Palamidessi 1970, 45). To make explicit such an ascetic function of music it is nevertheless necessary that the notes and colors are “skillfully linked together” according to an esoteric science capable of catalyzing the sanctifying action of the music: the Archeosophical melurgy.

Archeosophical Melurgy

Besides the grammatical and compositional technical indications of Archeosophical music, Palamidessi provides an ample treatise on the norms and correspondences necessary to regulate the action of music on the inner nature of men and women. It is in this sense that Palamidessi claims that melurgy is both “art and science,” and operates for the harmony of the microcosm with the macrocosm, and at the same time with the Christ.

The melurgy is the action of the music on the soul as anthro-po-phonic natural diatonic scale: vibratory action, which from physical is transformed in the soul itself into musical consciousness, seeking a syntony with the Creator Verb, the Christ. The melurgy is also art and science of the melody, but fundamentally considered inside the law of the microcosmic and macrocosmic correspondences (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 29).

For Palamidessi, through the wise use of the correspondences between colors, sounds, virtues, and force centers, by applying the grammatical compositional rules of sacred music, it is possible to compose musical pieces that are not merely arbitrary or subjective, but have a precise effect on the psyche of those who perform them and, secondarily, also of those who listen to them. Already in the first musical experiments of Palamidessi, we can see in his music a lever for the awakening of the psychic centers with a powerful action on those who perform it.

A striking example is the article in the *Tribuna Illustrata* of 13 May 1968, which constitutes the first known document in which Palamidessi expresses in a synthetic but complete way the action of music for spiritual purposes, that is, for liturgical, theurgical, and ascetic purposes with the aim of awakening the consciousness.

The Magic of Singing

The highest Masters of antiquity, from Plato [ca. 427–47 BCE] to Boethius [477–524], from Pythagoras [ca. 570–495 BCE] to Martianus Capella [360–428], have taken into high consideration singing and also how to sing. And liturgy and theurgy have as their purpose to evoke the entities, the creative and plasmating spiritual forces. Also the vocalization, the type of melody performed on a single vowel (often O-A), has its importance for the purposes of awakening each of the seven occult centers, especially if the singing is carried out through the five vowels arranged in a sequence. A, E, I, O, U can only be sung according to a certain order to create the harmony of the body and the soul. Clement of Alexandria [ca. 150–215], Diodorus of Sicily [ca. 90–30 BCE], Origen [185–253], Saint Irenaeus [130–202], and the Gnostics speak of the Grand Priest who in Israel pronounced the name of God in certain circumstances in the most absolute secrecy. The vocalization for singing was meant to enter into a relationship with the divinity (Palamidessi 1968b, 32).

Even though Palamidessi refers to his experience when listening to the singing of the Franciscans of La Verna (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975a], 1) the entire Archeosophical musical corpus seems to imply a melurgic action in those who perform the musical pieces more than in those who listen to them. The texts are conceived to enable anyone to compose and then perform instrumentally and vocally their musical pieces, while there are no explicit indications on how to improve the quality of listening, nor specific ascetic exercises. This has a precise sense in the economy of the Archeosophical thought on music, because for Palamidessi “to sing is to pray” (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 65).

At the center of the musical reflections of Palamidessi lies the key of the chromatic-musical-psychic correspondences, which are presented in his *Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica*. As is well-known, the correspondences between colors and musical notes were first established by Isaac Newton (1643–1727) in his *Opticks* (Newton 1704). In his treatise, Newton divides the chromatic spectrum into seven frequencies, in correspondence with the seven musical notes: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet (Newton 1704). To these musical correspondences Palamidessi added the spiritual ones of Lacuria (Lacuria 1899 [1844], 196). Palamidessi embraced them, lauding their “esoteric and christic” preparation. In the *Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica* we encounter a simplified version of the scheme of correspondences of Lacuria (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 45).

1	2	3	4	5–6	7
LIFE	LIBERTY	HARMONY	SANCTITY	WISDOM JUSTICE	ETERNITY
RED	ORANGE	YELLOW	GREEN	AZURE-INDIGO	VIOLET
Do	Re	Mi	Fa	Sol-La	Si

In Palamidessi’ scheme, references to the Three Persons of the Trinity, i. e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which in Lacuria corresponded to the notes Do, Mi, and Sol respectively, are missing. Probably Palamidessi omitted such correspondences on purpose, to avoid interpretations contrary to his often stated doctrine of the “uncreated divine energies” or “divine lights.” They belong to the uncreated order of the emanations and do not participate in the uncreated divine essence, which refers only to the Persons of the Trinity.

To the correspondences of Lacuria, Palamidessi adds the correspondences “of the highest importance” between the notes, colors, and psychic centers of the inner Human Being (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 49).

PSYCHIC CENTER	COLOR	MUSICAL NOTE
1 st Basal Psychic Center	Red	Do
2 nd Genital Psychic Center	Orange	Re
3 rd Omphalic Psychic Center	Yellow	Mi
4 th Cardiac Psychic Center	Green	Fa
5 th Throat Psychic Center	Blue	Sol
6 th Frontal Psychic Center	Indigo	La
7 th Coronal Psychic Center	Violet	Si

These correspondences are fundamental for awakening the seven psychic centers which live latent in humans (Corradetti and Lullo 2020). When a note is played, it “determines a resonance” with these force centers. The awakening can thus be achieved through the use of appropriate melodies, which according to the Archeosophical principles are most suitable for each case. In the end, musical action can be integrated with pictorial action, through the use of colors corresponding to each note and center (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 49).

Within this context, the use of Archeosophical modes and artistic and compositional capacity is fundamental. For Palamidessi, the correspondences cannot be utilized in a mechanical form detached from a process of artistic elaboration. The key of the correspondences should be utilized for the choice of the most appropriate Archeosophical mode, with tonic or dominant notes, which can be the beginning of an artistic process.

Although there is a psychological correspondence to the psycho-acoustic influence of the notes, nevertheless the notes, dominant and tonic, of the respective psychic center, have to be listened to as inserted in a chord and a melody (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 54).

For this purpose, the symbolic meanings of the seven musical notes are widened, and applied to their use of tonic and dominant in Archeosophical modes. A set of psychic, somatic, intellective, moral, and mystic correspondences should guide the composer in the choice of the most appropriate musical mode, and in the correct utilization of the centers of gravity of the melody.

DO: expression of heat and force. Factor of vitality. Activates the blood circulation and stimulates the functionality of the digestive tracts. Heals from rheumatism. Of use against bronchitis, sexual impotence, and paralysis. Stimulates the skin. Stimulates the active devotion, the true giving of oneself, and therefore the sacrifice.

TONIC OR DOMINANT IN RE: To dominate pride, ambition.

TONIC OR DOMINANT IN FA: Total regeneration of the consciousness, charity, and hope. If humans are not born anew, they cannot see the Kingdom of Heavens. Exhortation to follow the healthy Christian doctrine. Musicality that helps the neophytes (small plants) to gain their victory over the passions. Wisdom. Courtesy. Tolerance. Sympathy.

TONIC OR DOMINANT IN LA: Love for Sapience.

TONIC OR DOMINANT IN SOL: Truth and wisdom. Initiation to the truth of the eternal life. Chastity, fidelity, loyalty, spiritual elevation. Transmutation of the consciousness. Divine truth. Immortality. Mission to initiate humans to the truth of the

eternal life. Meeting with the Holy Spirit. Religious thought, emotional feelings for the celestial things.

TONIC AND DOMINANT IN MI: Triumph of the Revelation and of the divine love. Syntony with the Verb, the Christ, the spiritual Sun. Lets one discover the Light of the Humans. The Science of God. Love and Wisdom of God, food and drink of the regenerated. Intellective power. Easy intellectual development.

TONIC OR DOMINANT IN SI: Passion and death so as to imitate the Redeemer. Stripping away of the human nature and re-dressing with that of God. Personal sacrifice in order to save the others so that it leads them to the Father through the Son. Aspiration to the martyrdom for the Christian faith and the call for this sacrifice. Mystic marriage with Christ through his metaphysical Church. Initiatic effort so as to transmute one's own nature while we are on this earth. Very elevated religious feelings (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 54–5).

Cosmogonic and Metaphysical Features of Archeosophical Music

In the economy of the musical thought of Palamidessi, the cosmogonic aspect of music plays a crucial role. Music, as the preferred expression of the Creator Verb, is at the origin of the world's creation. For this, all the parts of the spiritual, psychic, and material creation rest on the “laws of the Octave or Musical Scales” (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 45).

The music is intimately linked to the creation of the world, in whatever way it has happened, because the foundation of the creation is the motion, and so is the sound. The Absolute has created the universe, that is, the material world, the mental world, the spiritual world, in short, that which exists, through the time, the space, and the causality. Between the Absolute and the Universe the time, the space, and the causality are interposed, which constitute the essence itself of the metaphysical sound (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 21).

Using a terminology reminiscent in many points of the doctrine of Gurdjieff, mediated by Pyotr Demianovich Ouspenskii (1878–1947), Palamidessi identifies a “ray of the Creation” as a projection of life having its center in the Absolute, which is the basis of the “law of the Cosmic Octave.” The “Great Cosmic Octave,” activated by the Verb, is the ray of the creation that emanates from the mind of the Absolute, and to which the initiate has to tune in (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 35).

More specifically, Palamidessi distinguishes between three typologies of octaves belonging to three distinct orders of existence: the human octave, also

called “psychic musical octave,” from which it follows that the human soul “is a number in movement,” an “Aeolian harp which sings under the breath of the Spirit of God;” the “Great Cosmic Octave,” which gave origin to the creation and is activated by the Verb; and, lastly, the “Divine Octave,” related to the inner life of God (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 41).

The human person in her interiority is a musical octave that, in its capacity of resonating with the Cosmic Octave tuned to the Divine Octave, can participate in the inner life of God (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 41).

For Palamidessi, when they are on their way to the psychic musical octave, humans are as discontinuous as the musical spectrum made of tones and semitones, where the semitones represent deviations that divert from the chosen path. Palamidessi specifies that semitones can be either “of perdition” or “salvific.” In the same way, the musical octaves can be either “descendants” or “ascendants.” In the latter case, the scale is called the “Ladder of Paradise,” and identifies a path allowing human souls to ascend to the Creator. There is an obvious, if implicit, reference to Church Father John Climacus (579–649).

Humans have in themselves the salvific or perdition semitones. It is worthwhile to reflect on the question of the natural semitones MI-FA and SI-DO because the aspirant Archeosopher must create a melody agreeable to the Creator. The awareness of the discontinuity and of the deviation of the forces is a providential phenomenon, whose purpose is keeping the individuals vigilant over themselves so as to overcome the temptations of taking deviant paths, which may be fascinating but make us into cacophonies (disagreeable sounds combined in simultaneity or succession), which in turn make us into outcasts in the presence of God (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975c], 41).

Conclusions

Although reference texts on Archeosophical music are few and have been published in a partially incomplete posthumous form, they are nevertheless sufficient to provide clear guidelines which, while taking up some traditional canons of the Gregorian chant, transcend them at a technical level, and enliven them at a symbolic and melurgical level. The result is a type of music that is both traditional and experimental at the same time. It reinterprets traditional canons in an original way and therefore, in its sonic results, is difficult to assimilate into previous musical traditions.

A clear example of the Archeosophical musical style can be found in the *Melodia in Re* by Palamidessi himself. Unfortunately, it is with sadness that we must acknowledge the loss of the orchestral composition of Palamidessi, *Nella casa del Padre*. We have multiple and independent accounts that it existed, but it was not found either in the Benassai nor in the Riva archives.

Nevertheless, the fact that under the guidance of Alessandro Benassai, composer and conductor of the Coro Santa Cecilia di Firenze, the Accademia Musicale Archeosofica has managed to give continuity to its courses and hold numerous national and international events for more than twenty years, is a significant sign of the original content of the “Archeosophical melurgy” created by Palamidessi that we have shortly presented in this article.

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ANNEX A

PRIMO MODO AUTENTICO Dorico

SECONDO MODO (DERIVATO) Ippodrico

TERZO MODO AUTENTICO Frigio

QUARTO MODO (DERIVATO) Ippodrico

QUINTO MODO AUTENTICO Lidio

SESTO MODO (DERIVATO) Ippodrico

SETTIMO MODO AUTENTICO Mixolidio

OTTAVO MODO (DERIVATO) Ippodrico

Notes on Palamidessi's eight Archeosopical modes (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b], I, 38–9).

ANNEX B



Example of chironomic line realized by Palamidessi (Palamidessi n.d. [post-1975b], II, 23).

Archeosophy, the Arts, and Poetry

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ABSTRACT: The article presents a short biography of Tommaso Palamidessi and the main doctrines of the esoteric school he founded, Archeosophy. It then explores the importance of the arts as part of Palamidessi's path to asceticism and initiation. While other studies have focused on the visual arts and music within Archeosophy, this article discusses Palamidessi's ideas about poetry as a necessary part of the initiatory experience of the Archeosophists. Based on an analysis of Palamidessi's short book *Poetry and Metrics*, his theories about different forms of poetry and their connection with the sacred science of numbers are presented and commented.

KEYWORDS: Tommaso Palamidessi, Archeosophy, Poetry and Esotericism, Esoteric Movements in Italy, Initiatic Order Lotus+Cross.

Introduction

That the arts are an esoteric path to human perfection is certainly a principle of Archeosophy, an esoteric doctrine and movement based on the teachings of Italian spiritual teacher Tommaso Palamidessi (1915–1983). Archeosophy has been the subject matter of a 2009 doctoral dissertation in French at Paris' École Pratique des Hautes Études by Francesco Baroni, reworked in 2011 as a book in Italian (Baroni 2009, 2011). There are a few scholarly articles on Archeosophy in French (Baroni 2010) and in Italian (Zoccatelli 2020b; Di Marzio 2020). Some Archeosophists have also contributed scholarly articles to *The Journal of CESNUR* (Corradetti and Lullo 2020; Cresti 2020; Lullo 2020), two of which are in English (Corradetti 2022; Cresti and Corradetti 2022).

In general, however, apart from some references in encyclopedias, not much exists in English about this important component of Italian esotericism. In this

paper, I will thus first offer an overview of Palamidessi's biography and Archeosophy's main teachings. Since in this same issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* two other articles are published on Palamidessi's ideas about the visual arts (by Daniele Corradetti) and music (by Francesco Cresti and Daniele Corradetti), I will focus here on a third art that is also discussed in Archeosophy's esoteric teachings, poetry.

Tommaso Palamidessi: A Short Biography

Tommaso Palamidessi was born in Pisa, Tuscany, on February 16, 1915. His father was an army officer, Carlo Palamidessi (1878–1946), and his mother a Sicilian poet and novelist, Luigia Tagliata (1886–1971). At age five, Palamidessi moved from Tuscany to his mother's region, Sicily, living first in Catania and then, from 1931, in Syracuse. He also crossed the Mediterranean Sea and, as a teenager, visited Libya and Tunisia in 1928 (Baroni 2009, 2011; Lullo 2020, which are the main sources for this paragraph).

Palamidessi later described his youth as a time of intense spiritual experiences, who made him a reclusive and unhappy child. His aunt was a nun in the Sicilian monastery of Pozzallo, where, as he reported, he prayed intensely since a very young age. But he also believed in reincarnation, and as a teenager started remembering past lives, including as Italian Renaissance astrologer and philosopher Gerolamo Cardano (1501–1576).

In 1932, his family moved to Turin, at that time one of Italy's capitals of esotericism and occultism. Palamidessi was fascinated by astrology and, by the end of the decade, had started working as a professional astrologer. His main interest was how astrology can contribute to healing. In 1940, he published on this subject his first two books, *Il corso degli astri e le malattie dell'uomo* (The Course of the Stars and Human Diseases) and *La medicina e gli influssi siderali* (Medicine and Astral Influences) (Palamidessi 1940a, 1940b). In 1940–41, he worked in a private hospital in Castelfranco Veneto, in the Venetian region, where he tested his theories on healing.

Back in Turin, he founded there in 1941 his own publishing house, Edizioni Palamidessi, which debuted in 1941 with his largest and most important book about astrology, *Astrologia mondiale* (World Astrology: Palamidessi 1941). In

two books published in 1943, he claimed astrology can contribute to an early diagnosis of cancer (Palamidessi 1943a) and predict earthquakes, a recurring problem in Italy (Palamidessi 1943b).

Turin is home to the second largest Egyptian Museum in the world, after Cairo, which also offers courses of Egyptology. Palamidessi attended one of them in 1941, and acquired a basic knowledge of the ancient Egyptian characters. He explored different features of Turin's esoteric scene, participating in Spiritualist seances and becoming a member of the Theosophical Society, the Martinist Order, and the wing of Italian Freemasonry more open to religion, the Grand Lodge of Italy. He also read the main works of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925).

In 1947, he married in Turin Rosa Francesca Bordino (1916–1999), who will have an important part in the development of his esoteric orders. In 1948, both their daughter Silvestra (1948–1996) and a new publishing house founded by Palamidessi, Grande Opera (Great Work), were born. In the 1940s, Palamidessi developed an interest in yoga, publishing several volumes about yoga and Tantrism (Palamidessi 1945, 1948, 1949a, 1949b). At the end of 1948, he opened in Turin one of the first Italian schools of yoga, Scuola Yoga.

He also studied alchemy and the Rosicrucian tradition. After having considered a project of a Scuola Italiana di Iniziazione Hermetica (Italian School of Hermetic Initiations), he founded on May 4, 1948, the Ordine Iniziatico Loto+Croce (Initiatic Order Lotus+Cross), which he led under the name of Grand Master Rajkunda until his death.

Palamidessi, however, had never abandoned Christianity. In 1952, he experienced a renewed “turn” to Christianity. He decided to withdraw some of his books on Tantrism, claiming that these techniques are “dangerous” (Palamidessi 1970, 23) and should be practiced only to the extent they are compatible with Christianity (Palamidessi 2010, 55). In 1957, he visited Mount Athos in Greece and in 1960 in La Verna, Tuscany, he became a member of the Franciscan Third Secular Order. Meanwhile, he had moved to Rome in 1953 and to nearby Morlupo in 1958, where the ceremonies of the Lotus+Cross order were held (Baroni 2011, 87–8).

From the 1960s, Palamidessi devoted a substantial amount of his time to traveling, visiting North and South America, the Middle East, the Far East, India, Ethiopia, as well as the Soviet Union and some of its satellite countries. He also

managed to travel to China and visited Tibet twice, which was uncommon for Europeans at that time.

While he continued leading the Lotus+Cross order, on September 29, 1968, Palamidessi founded a new organization, the Archeosofica School, and he legally incorporated an Associazione Archeosofica in 1973. His followers regard a mystical experience he had on April 7, 1966, in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, where he witnessed extraordinary phenomena, as the final, decisive step leading to the unveiling of the school to the world. He introduced “Archeosophy” as a synthesis of his teachings, presented in 51 “Quaderni” (Notebooks) for the members, written between 1968 and 1983. From 1971 to 1982, he also published a journal, *Il Messaggio archeosofico* (The Archeosophical Message). In 1975, Palamidessi published *Tecniche di risveglio iniziatico* (Techniques of Initiation and Awakening: Palamidessi 1975a), his last main book. He died in Rome on April 29, 1983.

As it often happens in esoteric orders, controversies erupted about the master’s succession, involving his wife Rosa and daughter Silvestra, and his closest disciple Alessandro Benassai, born in 1940. Before Rosa’s death in 1999, the controversies were solved, and Benassai was recognized as the president of Associazione Archeosofica, whose headquarters were moved to Tuscany in 1983, initially to Florence, then to Siena and finally to Pistoia. Already during Palamidessi’s lifetime, Tuscany was an important center for Archeosophy, which gradually expanded to several Italian cities and some foreign countries as well.

Archeosophy, according to Palamidessi, is a doctrine or a science. The Archeosofica School, as the name indicates, is a school or academy. It is not a religion, and is open to members of all religions interested in learning certain principles and techniques, and even to atheists (Cresti 2020, 111).

Palamidessi always insisted that the teachings of the Archeosofica School are open and free. It is not necessary to become members of any organization or association to receive them. However, for those who want to cooperate in spreading the Archeosophical teachings, an Associazione Archeosofica was legally incorporated in 1973. It currently includes 27 branches in Italy and 3 in Germany (Berlin, Cologne, and Düsseldorf), although members are also present in Portugal, France, and Brazil, with a global membership around 1,000 (Cresti 2020, 114).

As internal *ekklesia*, the Lotus+Cross order offers to the initiates a priesthood, which is rooted in the Christian doctrine of the common priesthood of all believers, and a more intense and demanding spiritual experience of Archeosophy (Zoccatelli 2020a). The order appears as an internal, more esoteric circle of the Archeosofica School. Some 20% of the school members are initiated into the Lotus+Cross order (Di Marzio 2020, 58). The order is organized in twelve degrees, plus one reserved for the Grand Master, appointed for life by his predecessor. The first Grand Master was Palamidessi and the current one is Benassai, who is also president of the Archeosophical Association (Cresti 2020, 115–16).

What Is Archeosophy?

The doctrine of Archeosophy is presented, in its definitive form, in the 51 Notebooks. Members, however, also read other works by Palamidessi and, while presenting his doctrine, its development through the years and the crucial “turn to Christianity” in 1952 should be considered.

According to Palamidessi, God sent his son, the eternal Avatar, to incarnate on Earth several times as Rama, Krishna, Jesus. A future Messiah may appear in the future, but in all cases, it is the same Divine Person who incarnates to lead humans to Divinity. In the lineage of the Avatars, *ekklesiae* (churches) develop throughout history. *Ekklesiae* consist of an external and an internal (esoteric) body. One of these esoteric bodies was the Rosicrucian Order, which however ended up in decline. Hence the need of a new esoteric center, the Lotus+Cross order, whose wider external circle is the Archeosofica School (Zoccatelli 2020a).

The lotus mentioned in the name of the order is a clear reference to the wisdom of the East, which however is accepted selectively by Palamidessi, as long as it does not contradict Christianity. The lotus in the Eastern religions is also a symbol of reincarnation. According to Palamidessi, the doctrine of reincarnation is not incompatible with Christianity, and in fact was always taught in Christian esoteric schools. Archeosophical teachings include specific techniques on how to remember the students’ own past lives (Palamidessi 1968).

In his early works, Palamidessi taught traditional Tantric techniques about the awakening of the kundalini. Some of these techniques are based on sexuality and

on male continence, i.e. orgasm without ejaculation (Palamidessi 1948). Palamidessi regarded these practices as valuable but “dangerous” (Palamidessi 1970). He believed that all forms of external and internal alchemy should always be accompanied by, and subordinated to, Christian prayer and meditation in the shape of “cardiognosis,” the gnosis of the heart (Lullo 2020, 13–4). The reference to male continence does not mean that women are less important than men in Archeosophy. On the contrary, Palamidessi believed that women will save the modern world and that we are entering, as prophesied by Joachim of Fiore (1135?–1202), in the Age of the Holy Spirit, where the female aspect of God will be revealed (Lullo 2020, 16).

Archeosophy is presented as “the most comprehensive interpretation of Christianity” (Palamidessi 1979, 8), and a revival of Alexandria’s Didaskaleion as it flourished at the time of Origen (ca. 184–253), who according to Palamidessi had been another of his previous incarnations. This revival, however, is not a mere return to the early Christian centuries, which would be both impossible and inappropriate in an era dominated by science. Since the 1940s, Palamidessi was among the first to use the expression “Age of Aquarius,” based on his understanding of astrology. The Age of Pisces, he taught, was the age of mysticism, while the Age of Aquarius, which started in 1789, is the age of science. However, science is not opposed to spirituality, as all ages are part of a progressive revelation of God (Corradetti and Lullo 2020, 35–6).

Archeosophy’s techniques are aimed at a full grasp of this “more comprehensive Christianity.” They also prepare for death. *Il libro cristiano dei morti* (The Christian Book of the Dead) is among Palamidessi’s works that were published after his death (Palamidessi 1985, 2010; Baroni 2010; Cresti and Corradetti 2022). It is a practical guide for the dying, who are also taught about what happens immediately after death. The dead will reincarnate, although the most perfected souls will eventually escape the cycle of reincarnations. Heaven, hell and purgatory are status of consciousness and, as such, temporary (Lullo 2020, 22–3). However, the very evil may experience a “second death” at the end of this world, or even before: their individual soul will disappear as such by merging into the Universal Spirit (Zoccatelli 2020a).

The techniques and rituals taught by Archeosophy encompass the whole spectrum of Western esotericism, from alchemy to numerology, from breathing exercises to astrology. Corradetti and Lullo have evidenced three techniques as

particularly important: chakra meditation, the “eucharistia lucernaris” ritual, and “cardiognosis” (Corradetti and Lullo 2020).

The notion of chakras had been popularized by the Theosophical Society, of which Palamidessi was a member. In the period 1945–1952, he elaborated a classification of twelve chakras, which is different from the most common Theosophical system. After 1952, the theory of the chakras was reinterpreted through the lenses of Christian mysticism. He mentioned 24 spiritual centers: seven physical, seven astral, and seven psychical. They should be activated in order to conquer the seven main vices and convert them into seven virtues. These virtues should be cultivated in the daily life of the devotees, but Archeosophy also offers a meditation technique. It starts with prayers written by Palamidessi, and proceeds through breathing and visualization exercises, and concludes by focusing on the divine name corresponding to the chakra to be awakened. These divine names correspond to the Sefirot of the Kabbalah.

The ritual of “eucharistia lucernaris” (eucharist of the light) is included in a daily routine of spiritual exercises, and is performed at sunset, either individually or with other devotees. Three drapes, respectively black, white, and red are placed on a table, together with a tripod holding a candle or a glass with olive oil and a wick. After a prayer to the Trinity, all lights are switched off and a woman (if present), or otherwise a man, lights on the candle with a blessing. After a sign of the cross, all will perform breathing exercises, focusing first on the external flame and then on the internal flame burning in the heart of each devotee.

The cardiognosis (prayer of the heart) is a form of hesychasm, a technique that Palamidessi learned during his visit to Mount Athos. It is a form of “continuous prayer” where a short formula is repeated in correspondence with breathing exercises (Palamidessi 1969). Palamidessi recommended different formulae as prayers to Christ and the Holy Wisdom, Sophia, and a variety of breathing techniques (Corradetti and Lullo 2020, 38–50).

These are just three among a large variety of techniques and rituals taught by Archeosophy, which readers of the Notebooks would learn through a training that lasts for several years.

Archeosophy and the Arts

Visual arts, music, and poetry all include for Palamidessi an esoteric dimension. Among Palamidessi's works published posthumously, more than one deal with these subjects. In *L'icona, i colori e l'ascesi artistica* (Icon, colors, and artistic ascesis, 1986), based on Palamidessi's reminiscence of a past life as a monk working as iconographer, he proposes something called "iconognosis," which is a way of reaching the Divine both by contemplating sacred images and by painting a "personal icon" (Palamidessi 1986).

Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica (A Treatise of Archeosophical Music and Melurgy) is among Palamidessi's posthumous works dealing with music as a spiritual and mystical experience (Palamidessi 1975d). In 1999, guided by these teachings, Alessandro Benassai established the Choir of Sacred Music "Saint Cecilia" in Florence (Lullo 2020, 23–6).

In general, Palamidessi taught that an "aesthetic sense" exists in all human beings:

The aesthetic sense is possessed by primitive men as well as civilized ones. It survives even intelligence itself: in fact, even idiots and psychiatric patients can create works of art (Palamidessi 1971, 2).

However, the modern industrial and materialistic society often prevents the aesthetic sense from flourishing into art. This is a condition Archeosophist should try to overcome.

If the aesthetic activity remains in the virtual or potential state in most human beings, it is because of the industrial and technological civilization, which removes the creative freedom from every single worker and intellectual. It is the task of the artists who are followers of Archeosophy to propose to society new ways of life, where the exploitation of humans by humans performed by individual business owners or by the State as the sole entrepreneur, necessary as it is [to modern economy], would not take away from the individual the experience of aesthetic joy (Palamidessi 1971, 3).

For Palamidessi, art is much more than aesthetic pleasure. It is a way to the divine through beauty. In fact, producing beauty is impossible without an effort to reach the divine.

If the work of art does not correspond to the revelation of a superior reality, if the artists do not try to penetrate the inner reality of things in order to reach the attributes of God, then they are artists of the ugly and the bad. Art is high and perfect in a superlative sense when it not only satisfies the physical needs of the aesthetic sense, the laws of formal

beauty, the faithful representation of external reality and life, the emotional needs of humankind, but it expresses the inner spiritual truth, the hidden reality of things. This is the deeper reality, the joy of God the Creator expressed in the world, its beauty and attractiveness, and the manifestation of the divine force and energy in the creation of the phenomenal world. Artists must see in the whole world, in the life, and in the human beings the beauty of God, loving what they have come to see and feeling in this love and in this beauty a pure bliss that elevates them to God (Palamidessi 1971, 4–5).

Palamidessi does not deny that to create immortal works of beauty one needs to be a specially gifted artist. However, he also insists, for example when discussing the “personal icon,” that through contemplation and prayer everybody can produce works of art that will perhaps not be regarded as masterpieces by critics, yet would help the amateur artists in their path to initiation and their communication with the beauty of God.

The Experiences of 1974

Palamidessi reported that its main teachings on poetry derived from experiences he went through in 1974. Feeling in “urgent need of a bath of light” (Palamidessi 1975b, 67) and at a specific astrological time, he performed a theurgic rite and received as a result revelations on art and poetry.

Observing the ephemerides to look for an effective Luration, I realized that within a few days of the Sun’s Entrance into Aries there would be a conjunction between the Sun and the Moon, on March 23 of that 1974, at 9.24 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time, and a few days later, on April 2, the Moon would be at Perigee, that is, at its closest proximity to Earth. In fact, the Luration was already accelerating, a sign that it was getting closer to Earth, not to mention that on March 21, with the Sun’s Entry into Aries, my Jupiter was back on natal position at 2° 57’ Pisces, conjunct to natal Mercury and with Mercury and the Moon transiting. Added to all this was the cyclic return of Saturn at 28° 13’ Gemini in trigon to natal Jupiter in its cyclic return (Palamidessi 1975b, 67).

The timing “could not have been better, even if troubled by some secondary dissonance” (Palamidessi 1975b, 67).

The cyclic return of Jupiter and Mercury coincided with the natal stars Fomalhaut at 2° 40’ Pisces (in the throat of the Southern Pisces), nature of Venus and Mercury, of first magnitude, whose influence is mighty for good fortune and spiritual studies. This star, when in conjunction with Jupiter, indicates a high position in the esoteric fraternities, an occult priesthood. This star was also joined by Sodalmeik at 2° 10’ of the Sign of Pisces, on the shoulder of the “Water Bearer,” nature of Saturn and Mercury, third magnitude,

general influence highly favorable to psychism, philosophy and occult sciences (Palamidessi 1975b, 68).

Therefore, Palamidessi prepared for

theurgic rites, a deep meditation to receive a message, and help from the Cosmogonic Entities of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mercury. The preparation, although it was cursory (it must last 40 days: silence, partial and vegetarian fasting, rhythmic breathing [...], Eucharistic Communion), yielded surprising results: impetuous and scorching came the Wind Bearer of Light, Love, Hope with Sophia, the created Wisdom. On May 14 and 22 of the same year 1974 in Rome, the two Sophian apparitions and revelations were fixed, as far as it was permitted to communicate to others, in two summaries in verse. From those moments, the inspirations and insights followed one another relentlessly and gave the energy to write some important works (Palamidessi 1975b, 68–9).

These works included the treatise on poetry (Palamidessi 1975c), as confirmed by Palamidessi's disciples in interviews with the undersigned.

Palamidessi's Teachings on Poetry

Just as everybody, or almost everybody, can become a painter of icons, everybody can also become a poet. In his work *Poetry and Metrics, or the Art of Creating Poetry for the Ascetic Work: Theory and Practice*, Palamidessi connects poetry with grammar, one of the disciplines of the medieval Trivium, which also included logic and rhetoric. The Trivium and the Quadrivium (including in turn arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) comprised the seven liberal arts that were at the core of medieval education.

Palamidessi insisted that “grammar” in the Middle Ages had a broader sense than it had in the 20th century. Grammar

was defined as the gateway to all the Arts, because without its contribution the knowledge of the Sciences is impossible. It is both the Science and the Art of Language, the principal means of communication, whether spoken or written, which exists among humans. As a Science it reveals the elements of which it is composed and of course the general principles that form its laws. As an Art, it explains their different ways and practices, which vary according to geography and history. (...) Words are signs of thought, and grammar teaches how to express and understand them exactly (Palamidessi 1975c, 1).

The importance of grammar (in the medieval sense) cannot be overestimated. Only through grammar can we be sure that what we say corresponds to what we

think and want to communicate. Grammar “realizes the perfect unity between thought and language” (Palamidessi 1975c, 1).

While Palamidessi presents here a notion of the medieval grammar shared by most scholars of the Middle Ages (see e.g. Marrou 1969), what is more surprising is his statement that grammar not only includes the rules of poetry but, correctly understood, leads all its students to poetry.

When it [grammar] is well understood, it leads to poetic language, aesthetically perfect, which, when listened to and understood, becomes an inner propulsive force (Palamidessi 1975c, 2).

Palamidessi insists that producing poetry is both natural and needed in order to progress on the spiritual path. Prose is not enough.

One can write well in prose, but poetry also takes on a sense of refined, elevated speech. Prose, on the other hand, is mostly low speech. In fact, even modest connoisseurs of grammar, when they express their opinions [on bad poetry], would say: these verses are not poetry, but prose (Palamidessi 1975c, 2).

Had the works of Homer, the Psalms, or Dante’s (1265–1321) *Divine Comedy* be written in prose, they would not have had the same strength, Palamidessi argues.

If it is natural to sing, it is also natural to produce poetry:

It was always spontaneous, instinctive in a high sense, to express the songs with poetic, rhythmic, or metric words. This phenomenon does not happen only when poets want to set their verses into music, and composers want to give words to their music. Flowery, rhythmic, poetic speech is on the lips of the prophet and the charismatic, as if the Spirit of God filling the souls chosen to communicate a message to humans were a divine poetic power, rich in symbolism and mysteries (Palamidessi 1975c, 2).

At the core of Palamidessi’s discussion of poetry is the idea that it is not only natural but it is *necessary* for those on the spiritual path of initiation

to become poets in order to glorify God also through the elevated language of love between our soul and Him. The reader [of the short book *Poetry and Metrics*] who prays, sings, and plays, must also know how to be a poet and compose Hymns and Canticles. Producing poetry is necessary because it is found when the mystic sings praying to the Lord, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, and her Angels (Palamidessi 1975c, 3).

This does not mean that poetry may be a totally spontaneous activity. It “also requires knowledge of metrics for the finishing touches of perfection of the poetic composition” (Palamidessi 1975c, 3).

In *Poetry and Metrics*, Palamidessi then offers no less than thirty pages of classifications of the different poetic forms, verses, and rhymes. These pages may easily appear as pedantic. However they are not a mere summary of what can be found in manuals of poetry and metrics. Take for example the definition of “hymn.” Palamidessi duly notes that hymns are usually based “on the quantitative or rhythmic system.” However he also adds that,

The Hymn is a lyrical song in verse, expressing courage, love and incitement to holy works. [...] The Hymn represents the affective and lyrical element, therefore a prayer and a well determined song, a complete text of poetry and melody regulated by prosodic and rhythmic laws. The Hymn must be considered a poetic song, a prayer that benefits the edification of the community (Palamidessi 1975c, 4–5).

In fact, Palamidessi explains, these comments refer to Jewish and Christian hymns, who are essentially prayers, while Greek and Roman hymns were a sort of “carols to the Gods” (Palamidessi 1975c, 5). This discussion of the hymn confirms that, while discussing form and metrics, Palamidessi considers them as inseparable from the sacred function of poetry.

Its description and classification of metrics is not an exact reproduction of any pre-existing manual, but includes original elements. For Palamidessi,

Metrics or the way of making poetic verse is the science that explains:

- 1) how to recognize and make verse;
- 2) to put verses in order and arrange them into stanzas;
- 3) to order the stanzas into poetic compositions.

Therefore, the main elements on which versification or metrics are based are:

- 1) The verse, defined a series of words dependent on three laws:
 - (a) the rhythm, that is, the position of the rhythmic accents;
 - (b) the number of syllables;
 - (c) the rhyme, when there is one.

Verses are defined, for example, as the quinary, the septenary, the hendecasyllable, etc..

- 2) The stanza, defined as a set of several verses arranged in a specific order, forming a rhythmic period, repeated several times.

Stanzas include, for example, the triplet, the sestina, the octave, etc.

- 3) The poetic composition, defined as a group of stanzas ordered according to certain patterns.

Poetic compositions include, for example, the sonnet, the hymn, etc. (Palamidessi 1975c, 6–7).

Again, Palamidessi is not trying to be original. He wants to convey to his readers the idea that they are learning all these lengthy classifications and rules for the purpose of producing poetry as part of a spiritual and esoteric path. For example, he recommends to mix septenaries and hendecasyllables “because of their unique ability to harmonize,” giving as examples the play *Aminta* by Italian 16th-century poet Torquato Tasso (1544–1595), and one of the most famous poems in the history of Italian literature, “La quiete dopo la tempesta” (Quiet after the storm), composed in 1829 by Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837: Palamidessi 1975c, 19).

Palamidessi also offers a thorough discussion of rhyme. He notes that,

Today there is a tendency to poet without rhyme for a deliberate libertarian decision. Rhymes are difficult, and one does not always have them ready in the memory or in the rhyming dictionary. In the twentieth century the presence of rhyme is rare because there is a desire to free poetry from schemes and rules of all kinds. It tends to the easiest free verse, where even the number of syllables is not respected. Musicality is expressed through the intimate sound of freely arranged periods and single words. There is still no lack of poets who know and want to rhyme. Personally, I sometimes rhyme, but I often make free and loose verse, that is, not rhymed (Palamidessi 1975c, 22).

Skipping the rhyme, Palamidessi notes, is not a modern invention. Two classics of Italian poetry, “*Dei sepolcri*” (Sepulchers, written in 1806 and published in 1807) by Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827), and the satirical “*Il giorno*” (The Day, 1763), by Giuseppe Parini (1729–1799) do not include rhyme, although they respect the consistent number of syllables in each verse and use hendecasyllables.

Having confessed that he does not use the rhyme often, and noted that “rhyming is not strictly necessary,” Palamidessi still maintains that rhyme conveys feelings of “harmony” (Palamidessi 1975c, 23), which may be spiritually uplifting and should not be dismissed lightly. This is also true for the stanzas, which are also part of a “glorious tradition.”

The growing need for freedom in the modern age prompted writers to repudiate preordained stanza systems. Freedom or laziness? Everything in the creation is under a melodic and harmonic law, and freedom must be understood as subject to order (Palamidessi 1975c, 30).

On the other hand, Palamidessi notes that there are no general rules, and most depends on what effect one wants to achieve. He includes in *Poetry and Metrics* a discussion of librettos intended for operas. Here, rhyming couplets in the form

AA–BB are often used to convey a sense of urgency, as it was done in previous centuries when composing epic or chivalric poems. Chained rhymes (ABA–BCB) are also very good for dramatic effects and were used by Dante. Palamidessi believes they would be theoretically effective for operas, but “they are too constraining for the composers” and are rarely used. According to those who had read it before it was lost, one example was the opera version of Count Ugolino’s story in Dante’s *Comedy* by Vincenzo Galilei (1520–1591), better known as the father of scientist Galileo Galilei (1564–1642: Palamidessi 1975c, 29). The reference to this lost and obscure work confirms that Palamidessi had an encyclopedic knowledge of Italian operas.

One of the most important parts of *Poetry and Metrics* is Palamidessi’s discussion of the relationship between poetry and numbers. This part of the short book discusses theories by historian of religious music Margherita Fürst-Wulle (1893–1982), whom Palamidessi and his wife met personally in Rome, where she lived in Rome after World War II. She was a lecturer at the Waldensian Faculty of Theology, the director of the choir of the German Protestant Church of Rome, and the founder and director of the choir of the Waldensian Church located in Piazza Cavour.

Palamidessi’s point is that “the symbolism of numbers” and the symbolic meaning of poetry were not separated in ancient times (Palamidessi 1975c, 35). Fürst-Wulle was a great scholar of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750). In a passage quoted by Palamidessi of her 1967 book *Il canto cristiano nella storia della musica occidentale* (Christian Chant in the History of Western Music), the German-Italian scholar wrote that,

It is interesting to have some insight into the very ancient science of symbolic numbers, which Bach used with such easiness in his musical works. For our generation, numbers serve exclusively to indicate quantities. In other times, however, they were understood also as representations of material things, of concepts, of characters, of immaterial and spiritual realities (...). The most frequent numbers used by sacred symbolism go from 1 to 10–12, of which 7 and 3 have also entered the common language, where they have lost their primitive meaning. These numbers appear singularly, but also united through addition ($1+1+1=3$ =God, the Trinity), multiplication ($3\times3=9$ =the Faith; $3\times4=12$ =the Church), cubed ($3\times3\times3=27$ =the “highest Faith”). The paired or reinforced symbols powerfully heighten the idea of origin (Fürst-Wulle 1967, 309–10).

That composers use numbers is not an original observation; however, what interests Palamidessi in Fürst-Wulle’s discussion of Bach is that numbers are not

only at work in his composition technique, but are used symbolically to refer to spiritual realities. For examples, in several Alleluias by Bach the composers use 27 bars. This is not needed for any technical purpose, yet Bach wants the bars to be 27 because the number 9 represents Faith, and the tripled number 9, i.e., 27, represents the “joy in the faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (Fürst-Wulle 1967, 208).

Here, Palamidessi notes that Bach refers to Martin Luther (1483–1546), who was originally an Augustinian friar, and that the symbolism and power of numbers was already known to Augustine of Hippo (354–430) according to the studies of Henri de Lubac (1896–1991: Palamidessi 1975c, 36).

Palamidessi enthusiastically writes that,

Undoubtedly, Fürst-Wulle has discovered precisely one of the greatest secrets of the ancient ecclesial Tradition: the metaphysical value of the Sacred Numbers, the revealed Word of God, and the poetic-musical inspiration (Palamidessi 1975c, 36).

In fact, if they are not connected with musical technique but allude to spiritual realities, these numbers may also be used in poetry. For instance, just as it happens with the bars in Bach’s Alleluias, a stanza may include 27 verses, or a poem may consist of 27 stanzas, symbolizing the joy of the faith.

Palamidessi concludes *Poetry and Metrics* with three poems, whose Italian texts and English translations are presented here below as Appendixes 1, 2, and 3. The first is in free verses, the second and third experiment with different models of rhyme. The first two poems have a devotional Christian content, the third is a meditation on the hidden symbolism of the numbers 7 and 8.

The poems confirm that there is nothing mechanic in the suggestions Palamidessi offers to his students about poetry. Ultimately poetry, just as music and painting icons, is a form of asceticism and gnosis, and a necessary part of the demanding path of the initiate.

Appendix 1

Ti chiamo e t'invoco

1

Vieni Gesù, t'aspetto
visita il cuore mio
Tu sai che son malato
ma sempre a Te fedele.

2

La mente mia illumina
la forza tua infondi
dammi la grazia eterna
e più non indugiare.

3

Il Padre tuo rivelami
in tutto il suo splendore
Luce, corazza ed elmo indossami,
ti prego, o mio Signore!

4

Dal Cielo presto scendano
su questa mente tormentata
e debole, i sette preziosi doni
non giudicarmi inutile, ma tuo figliol.

5

Vieni Gesù, t'aspetto;
la mente e il cuore visita
Tu sai che son malato

ma sempre a Te fedel.

6

Bussate e aprirò;

chiamate ed io verrò.

Così ti chiamo e imploro

Ardente e pien d'amor.

I Call You, I Invoke You

1

Come Jesus, I wait for you

Visit my heart

You know that I am sick

But always faithful to You.

2

Enlighten my mind

Give me your strength

Give me eternal grace

And delay no longer.

3

Reveal to me your Father

In all his splendor

Light, armor, and helmet put on me

I pray thee, O my Lord!

4

From Heaven soon descend

On this tormented and weak mind

The seven precious gifts

Do not judge me useless, but your son.

5

Come Jesus, I wait for you

Visit my heart

You know that I am sick

But always faithful to You.

6

Knock and I will open

Call and I will come

Thus I call and implore You

With a burning heart full of love.

June 6, 1975.

Appendix 2

Lodate Dio

Alleluia, alleluia!

È risorto il Signore

l'Eterno Increato del mondo Creatore.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Preghiamo tutti insieme

perché solo in Lui troviamo la speme.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

È l'ora solenne, di guerra e di pace

dei Figli di Dio nei qual si compiace.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Cantiamo tutti in coro le glorie del Verbo
cantiam tutti in coro con cuore superbo.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Il mondo sprofonda pagando il suo fio,
ma noi vincerem con la Luce di Dio.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Gesù, t'aspettiamo veglianti e sicuri,
conservandoci intatti con cuori assai puri.

Praise God

Hallelujah, hallelujah!

The Lord is risen

The Eternal Uncreated Creator of the world.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Let us pray together

For in Him alone do we find hope

Alleluia, Alleluia!

It is the solemn hour of war and peace
of the Sons of God in whom He is pleased

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Let us all sing in chorus the glories of the Word

Let us all sing in chorus with a proud heart

Alleluia, Alleluia!

The world is sinking paying its dues

But we shall overcome through the Light of God

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Jesus, we wait for you, watchful and sure,

Keeping ourselves intact, keeping our hearts pure.

Rome, June 9, 1975.

Appendix 3

Le sette porte

Il sonno è finito
mi sono svegliato
varcare le porte
affrontare la morte
spezzare i suggelli
volare come uccelli,
questa è la mèta
di chi è un atleta.
Son sette le porte
di sostanza assai forte.
Dal sette all'otto
son già l'aquilotto
e più in alto sul mare
mi devo librare
se Dio con l'aiuto mi vuole salvare.
Son sette le rose di sette colori
che devo mutare di dentro e di fuori.
Aiutami, o Dio, Trinità mia perfetta,
è sera ed è tempo di fretta.
Soccorri anche Tu, Regina dei Cieli

bellissima e pura, ammantata di veli.

The Seven Doors

The sleep is over
I woke up
To cross the doors
To face death
To break the seals
To fly like birds
This is the goal
Of those who are athletes.
There are seven doors
Of very strong substance.
From seven to eight
I am already the eaglet
And higher over the sea
I must now soar
If God with his help
Wants to save me.
There are seven roses of seven colors
That I must change inside and out.
Help me, O God, my perfect Trinity,
It's evening and it's time to hurry.
Help me too, Queen of Heaven,
Beautiful and pure, covered with veils.

Rome, June 12, 1975.

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The Swedish Asylum Case of Gregorian Bivolaru, 2005

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ABSTRACT: An important precedent was established by the Supreme Court of Sweden on October 21, 2005, when it stated that “cult” leaders accused of common crimes not directly related to religion cannot expect a fair trial in countries where an obvious prejudice against their religious beliefs and practices exist. They may thus be eligible for asylum abroad. Extradition was denied in the case of Gregorian Bivolaru, the leader of MISA (Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute), who was wanted by Romania for sexual abuse and human trafficking. The decision opened the way to asylum in Sweden, which was granted two months thereafter. The article analyzes the Swedish case, and discusses its relevance as a precedent whose principles may be applied in other countries as well.

KEYWORDS: Gregorian Bivolaru, MISA, Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, Cult Leaders and Sexual Abuse, Religion-Based Asylum Claims.

Introduction

On December 31, 2005, Gregorian Bivolaru, the founder and leader of MISA, the Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, was granted asylum in Sweden. This followed a decision of October 21, 2005, of the Supreme Court of Sweden denying a request of extradition to Romania (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005; I also rely on files on the case made available to me by CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions).

In this paper, I will reconstruct the events of 2005 in Sweden, which are an important precedent for asylum cases involving leaders and members of controversial new religious movements.

Indeed, I have quoted several times the Swedish Bivolaru case during the work I performed some years ago in support of religion-based requests of asylum by

Chinese refugees of The Church of Almighty God, which has been called “the most persecuted religious movement in China” (Introvigne 2020) together with Falun Gong.

Chinese embassies have been increasingly active in writing to courts of law and exerting other forms of pressure in an endeavor to persuade national authorities in democratic countries that such asylum requests should be denied (Introvigne, Richardson, and Šorytè 2021). Their political aim is easy to understand. Each time asylum is granted to Chinese citizens, based on the fact that they are persecuted because of their religion, foreign courts of law confirm that religious persecution is a fact in China.

To prevent this, Chinese embassies insist that members of The Church of Almighty God—and of other persecuted movements, including Falun Gong—are not arrested and sentenced because of their faith, but because they commit crimes indicated as such in the Chinese Criminal Code (Introvigne and Šorytè 2021). These arguments are partially true and partially false.

They are partially true because, once a religious movement is included in the list of those prohibited by the government, any activity on its behalf is a crime punished by Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code. China has enacted regulations explaining how Article 300 should be interpreted (see Introvigne, Richardson, and Šorytè 2019). For example, attending prayer meetings of a banned movement, trying to convert friends and relatives to it, and even keeping at home a certain quantity of religious books or videos published by the group, are all activities defined as crimes under Chinese law. Thus, if one follows the logic of the Chinese system, for the mere fact of being active in their religion, these asylum seekers have “committed crimes.” Of course, these would not be crimes in normal democratic countries, and would be regarded as common forms of exercise of religious liberty.

The arguments used by the Chinese embassies are also partially false, however, because in the case of The Church of Almighty God they claim that members of the group also commit common crimes, including even homicides. It is alleged, for example, that in 2014 missionaries of The Church of Almighty God killed a woman in a McDonald’s diner in the city of Zhaoyuan, in the Shandong province, just because she told them she was not interested in their religion. The woman was really killed, but by members of a different religious movement not connected by The Church of Almighty God, as demonstrated by foreign scholars (Dunn

2015, 204; Introvigne 2017; Introvigne and Bromley 2017), and, to their credit, even by Chinese journalists who worked for government-controlled media (*The Beijing News* 2014; Xiao and Zhang 2014). While the McDonald's murder, at any rate, cannot be personally attributed to the asylum seekers—those who committed it were arrested and sentenced, and two of them were executed—, refugees are often accused of lesser crimes, based on the false claim that members of The Church of Almighty God routinely engage in violence against religious opponents. Why they do not do it when they come to Europe, where penalties would be less severe than in China, is never really explained.

It is in supporting the Chinese refugees against these charges that I encountered the Bivolaru decision of 2005. It nicely establishes the principle that, when you are a leader or a member of a persecuted religious movement, accusations of common crimes against you should not be easily believed, and you cannot expect a fair trial.

Background: The Case of M.D.

Some of the teachings of MISA are about sacred eroticism (Introvigne 2022). Teachings putting together eroticism and religion always cause great scandal and opposition, and MISA is no exception. Anti-cultists and the Romanian Orthodox Church launched in the early 2000s a virulent campaign against Bivolaru and MISA (Tanase 2005, 278–79), claiming that underage girls were sexually abused within the group, and students were also exploited and put to work for the movement without salary, which supported an accusation of human trafficking.

On March 18, 2004, heavily armed police officers and military of the special forces, accompanied by the media, entered at the same time, 7 a.m., sixteen MISA ashrams throughout Romania, and private homes of MISA students. The media were told, and repeated, that it was the largest anti-drug operation in the history of Romania, as the authorities expected to find in the MISA ashrams large quantities of drugs, as well as evidence of sexual abuse of minors. Several devotees were detained, and subsequently Bivolaru was also arrested (Introvigne 2022, 31).

Not a single illegal drug was found during the raids, and the accusations of sexual abuse of minors also quickly collapsed. Several years later, in the case of

Amarandei and others v. Romania of April 26, 2016, the European Court of Human Rights castigated Romania for the raid, stating that it was based on insufficient evidence and conducted with disproportionate violence. Romania had to pay damages to the victims (European Court of Human Rights 2016).

In the end, the Romanian prosecutors had to admit that they cannot accuse Bivolaru of improper sexual relationship with minors either—except, they said, in one case. They claimed that one 17-year-old girl, M.D., had admitted to a sexual relation with Bivolaru. In Romania, the legal age of consent was 15, but the law punished sexual relations between teachers and their students, and Bivolaru was regarded as the yoga teacher of M.D.

M.D. claimed that the police had terrorized her and compelled her to sign a deposition accusing Bivolaru that in fact she had never rendered, and the MISA leader was found not guilty in first and second degree. However, in 2013, these verdicts were reversed by the Supreme Court and Bivolaru was sentenced to the unusually heavy jail penalty of six years. Equally unusual was that, because of this comparatively minor crime—M.D. was almost 18, and the alleged relation would at any rate have been consensual—, Bivolaru was placed on the Europol's list of most wanted fugitives, as by that time he was no longer in Romania (Introvigne 2022, 32).

The Hearings at the Sweden Supreme Court, October 11–12, 2005

In 2005, Bivolaru was liberated from jail awaiting trial and moved to Sweden, where he was arrested following a request by the Romanian authorities. On March 24, 2005, he requested asylum in Sweden on the basis of religious persecution in Romania. In April, Romania answered with one or rather two subsequent requests of extradition. The second request was formed in secrecy, and doubts were raised about its legality (see Romanian media quoted in GregorianBivolaru.net 2005a).

The Chief Public Prosecutor of Sweden referred the matter directly to the Supreme Court, which conducted a trial on October 11 and 12, 2005. Gregorian Bivolaru was first heard. He told the Justices that he was the victim of religious and political persecution. He denied even having had a sexual relationship with M.D. He also described the continuous harassment of MISA in Romania by certain media and politicians, and how even his home had been set on fire. He

asked why, if he had become rich by exploiting his followers as the Romanian prosecutors claimed, his properties were modest and there was not much money on his bank accounts. He also insisted that MISA devotees are free to support, or not to support, the ashrams by performing volunteer work there. This is similar to volunteer work performed in many other religious organizations, he said, and has nothing to do with human trafficking.

The first witness introduced by the defense was Karl Erik Nylund, a Lutheran pastor and the author of several books critical of “cults” (called “sekt” in Swedish). Unlike mainline scholars of new religious movements, who do not use the word “cult” (“sekt”), Nylund believes that “cults” exist. His definition of a “manipulative cult” is that it is characterized by “four As”:

Aggression – punishment of the members criticizing the leader or the movement.

Aversion – criticism and persecution of the people outside the group such as parents for instance.

Alienation – closed circuit inside the cult, as a geographical or ideological group. The cult becomes the new family.

Absolute truth – only exists within the cult, and the leader/leaders are entitled to the absolute right of interpreting the truth (Nylund 2005: the English translation has “sect,” which I took the liberty of changing into “cult”).

In fact, Nylund believes that if at least three of the four As are present, the group is a “cult.” Having interviewed several members of MISA, and Bivolaru himself, Nylund concluded that none of the “four As” is found in the movement, which therefore is not a “cult.” In the written report he gave to the Supreme Court, Nylund wrote that in MISA

I found nothing of the first two A-s (Aggression and Aversion). With regard to the ashram life, only a part of the persons live there and the activities are not of the closed-circuit type. The courses are accessible to anyone from the outside. Anyone may attend the courses. Therefore we ARE NOT talking about alienation. Some of those who are more dedicated might have a minimum contact with the outside world; however, leaders actively seek to oppose this form of alienation, by encouraging them to return to their work and family. Gregorian Bivolaru DOES NOT claim to be in undeniable possession of the absolute truth. Together with other people, he is a spiritual guide and is convinced he is a man with a mission in the society... Therefore in the MISA case, we can find none of the criteria defining manipulative cults (Nylund 2005, capitals in the original).

Nylund even added that some features of a “cult” are rather found in the groups opposing MISA and persecuting it in Romania. As a Lutheran critic of “cults”

himself, he expressed understanding for the criticism of MISA by the Romanian Orthodox Church. However, he said, it is an entirely different matter when this criticism escalated into collusion with politicians who have dubious agendas, persecution, and violence.

Nylund then examined the charges of human trafficking and sexual abuse. He noted that in MISA ashrams, “All people take part at the household activities from the ashram, such as cleaning, house and garden maintenance, house shopping, for instance.” He compared the rules of a MISA ashram to those of a student dormitory in a college. The difference with a dormitory, however, is that what in secular term is called “volunteer work” for MISA students is “karma yoga,” a spiritual activity (Nylund 2005).

Accusing Bivolaru of “human trafficking” through compelling students to work without salary, Nylund said,

simply is a misunderstanding of what karma yoga means... The issue at stake here is that of voluntary work, as a manner of self-perfection and attainment of the truth. Many of the people living in an ashram do not have the money to pay for their stay, and through karma yoga they have the opportunity to attend the ashram activities. The MISA followers state that karma yoga is a form of meditation that elevates those practicing it out of doubts and alienation, and this can turn the world we live in into a better place (Nylund 2005).

As for the accusations of sexual abuse, Nylund observed that his review of the Romanian documents demonstrated that the authorities had not grasped the meaning and role of eroticism in MISA’s teachings. They had reduced their lengthy discussions of Tantric yoga to “pornography” only.

Nylund concluded that,

Following the interviews I conducted with several Romanians from the diaspora, I have strong doubts with regard to the fact that Gregorian Bivolaru could be allowed a fair trial in his own country. As I could see by myself, the charges against him are obviously untruthful, and this is why they are the very evidence of the persecutions he is subjected to. Also, I do not believe that Gregorian Bivolaru would stand any chance for survival in a Romanian prison (Nylund 2005).

The next witness was Costel Bîrlădeanu, a MISA student. He was an important witness because, as the Court noted, he had been summoned by the prosecution in the Romanian case about human trafficking. In Sweden, he testified that, “I was never forced to do any work and Gregorian Bivolaru has nothing to do with the ashrams management.” He explained he had a regular job in Romania and had

never considered giving it up to live permanently in the ashram. Bîrlădeanu also described the hostility he experienced from some family members (two uncles), who refused to talk to him as long as he would remain a MISA student, and gave a vivid account of police abuses during the 2004 raids.

The second day of the hearings, October 12, 2005, had at its center the testimony of M.D. As reported in the Supreme Court's decision, she testified that,

She lived in Bucharest in the same house—which was not an ashram—with a female friend who had a relationship with Gregorian Bivolaru. M.D. herself has never had any sexual relationship with him. Gregorian Bivolaru has never been her teacher; she respects him because he has written many books and is a great person. She has participated in a trip abroad together with Gregorian Bivolaru, but this was a group excursion for approx. 18 persons. She has never received any gifts from Gregorian Bivolaru. She has never been exposed to any compulsion within MISA, nor does she know of anybody else who has (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 4).

The girl then proceeded to tell what happened on March 18, 2004, the day of the police raid.

In the morning of March 18, 2004, when she was about to leave her bed, some fifteen persons dressed in black broke into the house through a window. She thought they were thieves. She was frightened, and ran thinly dressed into her girlfriend's room where she tried to hide. In a minute, black-dressed men got into the room and aimed weapons at them. They were ordered to lay down on the floor where she was left thinly dressed for half an hour. When she tried to rise she was kicked in her chest. After many hours, during which the search of the premises went on, she was brought to a place unknown to her, which, as she was told later, belonged to the Prosecution Authority. There, she was humiliated and forced—as dictated by the interrogation officers supported by a female psychologist, who pulled her hair from behind when she refused to obey what she was ordered, and with armed guards at the door—to write an accusation against Gregorian Bivolaru. She was also forced to swallow some tablets of an unknown kind (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 4–5).

M.D. told the Swedish Justices that her interrogation lasted for 4–5 hours and what she signed under duress “is not in any respect connected with the reality.” The subsequent day, she consulted a lawyer, who accompanied her to the Prosecutor's office where she tried to recant the statement she had been compelled to sign. She signed a new statement that, as far as she knew, “disappeared” from the file or was never included there.

Asked whether she took yoga classes at MISA, M.D. replied that yes, she did, but her teacher was an instructor called C.T. rather than Bivolaru. She was also confronted with the fact that the police had seized in an apartment a notebook where she fantasized about sexual activities with “G.” These were just fantasies, she explained, and at any rate “G.” was a boy of her age she was fond of, not Gregorian Bivolaru.

The Romanian arguments for the extradition were then presented to the Supreme Court. The key point was that, since Sweden had signed a treaty of extradition with Romania, it should trust the Romanian authorities to base their requests of extradition on proved facts. It was also mentioned that Romania was at that time a candidate to membership in the European Union (it will become a member in 2007), and during the process of accession it was acknowledged that the country had an independent and effective enough judicial system.

Gregorian Bivolaru was then interrogated a second time. He confirmed that when he had visited the house where M.D. lived, it was to meet or pick up his girlfriend, who shared the apartment with M.D., rather than M.D. herself. He reiterated that charges against him had been fabricated in an attempt to “destroy me and this yoga school.” He added:

In case I am extradited, the Romanian authorities will be able to say that the Swedish authorities considered me guilty as well, and subsequently they will arrest the other defendants in the case, who are also not guilty (GregorianBivolaru.net 2005b).

Bivolaru’s solicitor, Nicolas Larsson, concluded that the hearings had conclusively proved that the case against Bivolaru was a fabrication, and that he had no chance of receiving a fair trial in Romania. He asked that Bivolaru be immediately released, although the Court explained this was not technically possible until a verdict on the extradition would be rendered.

The Supreme Court Decision, October 21, 2005

The Swedish Supreme Court announced its decision on October 21, 2005. The decision first summarized Bivolaru’s concerns about the risks he would run if extradited to Romania. He told the Court that prominent Romanian politicians had warned him that “unless [he] dissolved MISA, he would be crushed mentally and physically with all means” (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 3). On the other hand, the Court noted that a valid treaty of extradition was in force between

Romania and Sweden, and a decision issued in Romania should, as a consequence, be accepted in Sweden “unless it is, in specific cases, evident that the decision is obviously incorrect” (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 4), or it can be feared that the defendants will not receive a fair trial in their country of origin or will be at risk of persecution and violence.

Romania, the Court reported, argued that the warrant of arrest of May 31, 2004, against Bivolaru was not “incorrect” because it was based, for the accuse of human trafficking, on the interrogations of students who worked at the ashrams without a salary and, for the case of sexual abuse of M.D., on the girl’s first statement. It is true, the Romanian authorities admitted, that M.D. later tried to withdraw her statement; but they “assumed that this has been done upon pressure from persons around Gregorian Bivolaru” (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 4). Romania, the Court added, has also mentioned a third reason why Bivolaru’s arrest was ordered and he should be extradited, i.e., that his liberty “disturb[ed] the public order” in Romania (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 8).

On the first point, human trafficking, the Court referred to the expert testimony of Pastor Nylund to state that the activities carried out by MISA students in the ashrams should be interpreted in the context of the movement’s beliefs. One of the students interrogated by the Romanian Prosecutor was Costel Bârlădeanu, and his name was mentioned in the documents filed by Romania in support of the request for extradition. Yet, the same Bârlădeanu appeared as a witness in the Swedish case, and confirmed that the work done by students in the ashram was volunteer and they did not feel exploited. The Swedish Supreme Court concluded that “it appears improbable that Gregorian Bivolaru has been guilty of trafficking in human beings” (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 7).

As for the case of M.D., the Justices stated that, when she testified in Sweden, she “has made a trustworthy impression.” They concluded that “the apprehension and questioning of M.D. took place in such forms and ways as to cause serious misgivings” (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 5).

The third point made by Romania, that Bivolaru’s liberty was a threat to Romanian “public order,” was regarded by the Swedish Supreme Court as crucial, not for granting extradition, however, but for denying it. The Swedish Court reported that according to Romania the public order argument supporting the extradition of Bivolaru derived from

the fact that the well-known public reaction, when people had become informed that serious criminal acts had been committed against certain under-age individuals, has caused a certain social tension justifying a drastically preventive action [i.e., arrest and detention] to be taken against Gregorian Bivolaru (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 8).

The Romanian side had also mentioned

a speech in the Romanian Parliament in which Gregorian Bivolaru was referred to as Satan, psychopath, wretch, terrorist and villain, followed by a request to the public prosecutor to arrest him immediately (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 8–9).

Another

important reason for immediate arrest was emphasized [by Romania], that parents of children whose life Gregorian Bivolaru would have destroyed would have had justice done otherwise, for example by lynching him (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 9).

These circumstances, the Swedish Justices observed, did not in any way support the request for extradition—but supplied excellent arguments to deny it. Although media campaigns against Bivolaru had started before, the outrage against Bivolaru and the allegations that minors were being abused had been created by the same authorities who were now trying to use them to justify his arrest. After the raid of March 18, 1994,

the immediate TV transmission of the apprehension [of MISA students and Bivolaru] and the subsequent press campaign were based on information from the preliminary investigation intentionally made available by the authorities for the purpose of creating an opinion generally against Gregorian Bivolaru (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 8).

In other words, the Romanian authorities first leaked information to the media depicting Bivolaru as a monster, then claimed that, since the public opinion regarded him as a monster, he should be kept in jail to prevent disorders.

The Supreme Court noted that, its doubts notwithstanding, it might have been difficult to prove conclusively that the Romanian arrest warrant was “obviously incorrect” on the two charges of human trafficking and abuse of M.D.

However, these points according to the Swedish Justices were superseded by the fact that Romania’s own argument about the “public order” situation around Gregorian Bivolaru conclusively proved that “due to his religious conception Gregorian Bivolaru runs the risk of being exposed to pursuits of evil character after an extradition” (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 9).

The climate described by Romania itself virtually guaranteed that any trial of Bivolaru in that country would not be fair, and the Romanian authorities stated that he might even be lynched.

For this reason, extradition was refused, and Bivolaru was liberated. The Supreme Court's decision opened the way to the grant of asylum to Bivolaru in Sweden, which followed on December 31, 1995 (GregorianBivolaru.net 2006).

Aftermath

As a refugee, Gregorian Bivolaru lived quietly in Sweden from 2005 on, although Romania kept him in the list of Europol's most wanted fugitives. In 2016, he visited France, a country where the anti-cult movement is specially influential, and was arrested and extradited to Romania, against Swedish protests (Introvigne 2022, 33). Although the legal issue remains controversial, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2021 that it was in France's power to decide to extradite to Romania a Romanian citizen who had obtained asylum in another European Union country, i.e., Sweden (European Court of Human Rights 2021).

Bivolaru, thus, went from France to a Romanian jail on July 22, 2016, where he started serving his term for the case of M.D. As for the human trafficking issue, Romanian courts will declare him not guilty in first instance in 2020 (Tribunalul Cluj 2020), and on appeal in 2021 (Curtea de Apel Cluj 2021). He was freed on parole and allowed to legally return to Sweden in 2017.

Shortly thereafter, Finland, a country Bivolaru had never visited, issued a warrant for arrest against him for the economic exploitation and sexual abuse abroad of Finnish students who had attended MISA retreats in France. Not having been able to arrest Bivolaru, Finland once again put him in the Europol list of most wanted fugitives.

The facts of the matter in the Finnish case are quite convoluted and obscure, as mentioned in Massimo Introvigne's recent book on MISA (Introvigne 2022, 34–5). Irrespective of subsequent developments, however, the Swedish Supreme Court denial of extradition of October 21, 2005, remains an important precedent and a model decision. It establishes the principle that leaders or members of controversial new religious movements slandered by the authorities

and the media as “cults,” even when they are accused of common crimes, cannot expect a fair trial in their countries. As such, they are entitled to asylum abroad.

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Research Notes

Emic Conference Papers on the Tai Ji Men Case

On June 16, 2022, during the annual conference of CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, held at Université Laval, Quebec City, Canada, Session 6 was devoted to “Discrimination of Religious and Spiritual Minorities and the Tai Ji Men Case.” On June 23, 2022, during the annual conference of the EUARE, the European Academy of Religion, Session 0295 discussed “New Religious and Spiritual Movements, Discrimination, and Democracy in Taiwan.” Several dizi (disciples) of Tai Ji Men were among the speakers, offered their emic perspectives, and debated with the academic scholars who participated in the conferences or served as co-panelists. Their papers are collected in this issue of The Journal of CESNUR.

“Calling a Stag a Horse”: Words, Subversion, and the Tai Ji Men Case

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ABSTRACT: In 207 BCE, a corrupt Chinese Prime Minister called Zhao Gao declared that a stag he presented to the Second Qin Emperor was indeed a horse, and had the courtiers who refused to call the stag a horse executed. The paper analyzes the origin and the meaning of the story, and its importance in Chinese culture. It then argues that the stag-as-horse story functioned as a template and helped Tai Ji Men *dizi* (disciples) reconstruct what they perceived as injustice vested on them during their conflict with Taiwan’s authorities.

KEYWORDS: “Calling a Stag a Horse,” Sima Qian, Zhao Gao, Qin Dynasty, Tai Ji Men, Tai Ji Men Case.

Introduction

The Records of the Grand Historian is a historical and literary masterpiece about ancient China, written by Sima Qian (145–86 BCE) who finished it around

94 BCE. This monumental compilation includes the *Annals of Qin Shi Huang* (259–210 BCE), the founder of the Qin dynasty and the First Emperor of a unified China. It is in these *Annals* that we find a well-known and thought-provoking narrative titled “Calling a Stag a Horse.”

This story has become proverbial, and part of Chinese mindset throughout the centuries. My paper reconstructs the origins and context of the story and discusses its meaning. It then argues that it functioned as a template for the Tai Ji Men *dizi* (disciples) who, confronted with what they perceived as gross injustice vested on them in Taiwan, interpreted their problems as a reenactment of the well-known stag-as-horse story, which also gave to their drama a universal and even cosmic significance.

“Calling a Stag a Horse”: The Story

Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BCE) was the founder of the Qin dynasty and the First Emperor of a unified China. Following his death in 210 BCE, one of his sons, Ying Huhai or Qin Her Shi (231?–207 BCE), succeeded to the throne as the Second Emperor. According to Sima Qian, Zhao Gao (?–207 BCE), a court eunuch who became his Prime Minister, was deceitful by nature and plotted to usurp the throne. He feared that the other ministers in the court would not support him, so he devised a method to determine who was on his side.

This is how Sima Qian related the incident:

Zhao Gao was contemplating treason but was afraid the other officials would not heed his commands, so he decided to test them first. He brought a deer and presented it to the Second Emperor but called it a horse. The Second Emperor laughed and said, “Is the chancellor perhaps mistaken, calling a deer a horse?” Then the emperor questioned those around him. Some remained silent, while some, hoping to ingratiate themselves with Zhao Gao, said it was a horse, and others said it was a deer. Zhao Gao secretly arranged for all those who said it was a deer to be brought before the law and had them executed instantly. Thereafter the officials were all terrified of Zhao Gao (Sima Qian 1993, 70).

If we believe Sima Qian, we can conclude that the incident took place in 207 BCE. This was one year after Zhao Gao had get rid of his predecessor as Prime Minister, Li Si (280–208 BCE). Zhao falsely accused Li of treason, and had him tortured until he confessed and was executed together with his family.

The stag-as-horse story signals the tyrannical apex of Zhao’s career. Soon thereafter, Zhao compelled Emperor Qin Her Shi to commit suicide and installed in his place Ziying (?–206 BCE). According to different accounts, he was either Qin Her Shi’s nephew, or his cousin, or another relative—but Zhao believed he would be only a puppet in his hands. However, Ziying eventually rebelled against Zhao, killed him, and exterminated his family.

By that time, rebels had caused the ruin of the Qin empire. Ziying ruled only for forty-six days. The Qin dynasty had lasted only fifteen years, making it the shortest in Chinese history. Zhao Gao, who purposefully confounded truth with deception, fooled the emperor, and persecuted honest court officials, is regarded as one of the key reasons for the Qin’s quick demise.

Many Chinese only know one incident of the Qin dynasty history: the one involving the stag that was called a horse. “To point a stag and call it a horse” (*zhi lu wei ma*) has become an idiomatic expression in Chinese. Zhang Longxi, a leading scholar of Chinese cultural studies, who teaches in Hong Kong and at Harvard, explains its meaning as follows:

a set phrase that indicates not so much a mistake in naming but bullying, coercion, and intimidation, a deliberate confusion or willful misinterpretation that knows itself to be wrong but is forced upon others as an authoritative reading on the basis of sheer power and domination. Whoever calls a stag a horse does so knowingly as an exercise of manipulation, a display of unchallengeable power, but the phrase also connotes arrogance and wickedness, and always carries a sense of condemnation (Zhang 2005, 112).

The same scholar reports that some contemporary academics have interpreted the stag-as-horse story as evidencing the arbitrariness of names. In this sense, Zhao Gao would have been an early exponent of modern theories about the “arbitrary nature of linguistic signs” (Zhang 2005, 114).

However, Zhang does not believe that this is the real meaning of the story, or the one Sima Qian wanted to convey. Parenthetically, Zhang notes that in ancient Chinese the names for a stag and a horse were not so arbitrary

Both *lu* (deer, stag) and *ma* (horse), especially in their ancient written forms, are characters with strong pictographic elements that to some extent make these signs and their referents form a less arbitrary relation than that between the English words and their meanings (Zhang 2005, 113).

But this is less important than Sima Qian’s intention in reporting the incident.

“What the story shows, Zhang writes, is emphatically not how naming can be arbitrary, but how such arbitrariness implies the abuse of power” (Zhang 2005, 113). Sima Qian wanted to emphasize that

Zhao Gao having his way at court in front of the emperor was scandalous, but it was so not because no one ever recognized the glaring misnomer, but because of the misnomer’s significant political background. Here the identification of the animal brought before the emperor and the political context for the identification offer a telling example of the important relations between text and the context, interpretation and politics or ideology. Such relations immensely complicate the apparently simple situation of calling a stag a stag and remind us of the presence of crucial extra-textual factors that have a definitive influence on how a particular text, an object, or an event is to be interpreted. This notorious episode is perhaps a particularly strange and unusual case where the control of meaning and interpretation is obviously heavy-handed, openly displayed, bordering on madness and the farcical (Zhang 2005, 112–13).

Western scholars call what happened at the Qin court a “catachresis,” or calling one thing (or animal) with the name of a different thing. A catachresis may be a mistake but in the case of Zhao Gao it was evidence of immorality and abuse. As Zhang also notes,

the differentiation of the names of animals, provide readers [of Sima Qian] the basis to see through and condemn Zhao Gao’s willful misinterpretation and evil scheme, the basis for a sense of right and wrong, for moral judgment and political stance. Without that basis for the literal sense of words, there can be no ground for appropriate moral response and thus effective political action (Zhang 2005, 113).

There is also a deeper meaning of the story. In the Chinese Confucian tradition (although “Confucian” is now a contested term) maintaining the correct names for all things in Heaven and earth is an essential feature both of cosmic order and social stability. Tampering with these names is technically subversive.

There are parallels in Western traditions and literature as well. Willfully changing the names of things is regarded as evil and destructive. So, what Zhao Gao does is evil, and does not go unpunished. Within one year after the stag-as-horse incident, the Qin dynasty collapses, and the seemingly omnipotent Zhao is killed with all his family. By violating the proper order of names, Zhao messed with dark forces he was ultimately unable to control.

One story based on the same principles in the West concerns Humpty Dumpty, a character of popular English nursery rhymes, commonly represented as an anthropomorphic egg. However, today many remember Humpty Dumpty

not because of the nursery rhymes but as a character who plays a role similar to Zhao Gao in the stag-as-horse story in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). This was a novel written by English mathematician and Anglican deacon, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832–1898), better known by his pen name Lewis Carroll, as a sequel to his famous *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice encounters Humpty-Dumpty, and the two have a strange dialogue.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all” (Carroll 1871, 124).

This literary reference proves that questions about the meaning of the words, and language and the abuse of power, are universal. Humpty Dumpty behaves exactly like Zhao Gao. He knows that the words do have a meaning. True, this meaning is conventional but, once adopted, the convention is essential to preserve society. However, Humpty Dumpty, just like Zhao Gao, tries to substitute social harmony and morality with brutal power. He claims that words only have the changing meaning those in power attribute to them. The political question, Humpty Dumpty and Zhao Gao believe, is not what is true or false but who has the power to define what the words “true” and “false” mean.

In an essay he wrote this year 2022, the Italian scholar of Anglo-American political thought and journalist Marco Respinti traced back the arrogant philosophy of Humpty Dumpty to Nominalism, a philosophical current of the 11th and 12th centuries (Respinti 2022). Nominalists insisted that words did not have a “real” meaning, only the meaning those in power attributed to them. In fact, Respinti argued, the connection between Nominalism and modern confusions about truth and falsehood had already been noticed by American intellectual

Richard M. Weaver (1910–1963) in his 1948 book *Ideas Have Consequences* (Weaver 1948).

Respinti was proposing a comparison between the story of Humpty Dumpty and the Tai Ji Men case in Taiwan. He wrote that the story of Humpty Dumpty is

in fact the story of Tai Ji Men. For a quarter of a century, Tai Ji Men suffered the Humpty-Dumpty-like tyranny over words perpetrated by some rogue bureaucrats. Not believing in truth and in the power of words to have truthful meanings, they managed to persecute an entire spiritual movement for crimes that, as courts of law repeatedly said, it had never committed. They were probably motivated both by vulgar personal interest and ideological hate.

This staggering persecution, which caused and cause deep human suffering, was and is committed in a democratic country where, in theory, human rights, liberty, equality and fraternity reign. It was and is committed by some branches of the government of Taiwan; by bureaucrats who, while describing themselves as friends of democracy, liberty, equality, and fraternity, in fact emptied these words of their real meanings.

Here our true tale of Tai Ji Men reveals itself as a paradigmatic and paramount testimony. Either Humpty Dumpty and the bureaucrats that persecute Tai Ji Men are right, and words have only the meaning that powerful “masters” impose, or the opposite is true and words have universal meaning because they express reality and truth.

But if the Humpty-Dumpty-like bureaucrats that persecute Tai Ji Men are right, all becomes possible, even the most spectacular injustice. There would be no ground to conclude that the persecution of Tai Ji Men on false claims, or any other evil, is wrong. We should all accept and praise persecution, as part of the triumph of the relativistic absolutism of self-perceptions that we seem to enjoy (Respinti 2022).

If the Tai Ji Men case is a re-enactment of the philosophy of Humpty Dumpty, as Respinti argued, it is also a remake of Zhao Chao’s stag-as-horse story. I would also argue that the latter incident, which is so much part of Chinese tradition and culture, offered to the *dizi* of Tai Ji Men a template to interpret their own experience.

There is a rich literature on the Tai Ji Men case (see Jacobsen 2020; *Bitter Winter* 2021; Chen, Huang, and Wu 2021; Tsai 2021, 2022; Chen 2022) and I would not summarize it here. I would however point out the stag-as-horse scheme at work in it through one main example.

At the heart at the tax case of Tai Ji Men are the so-called red envelopes (see Chao et al. 2021). They are part of an ancient Chinese tradition. *Dizi* express their gratitude and appreciation to their *Shifu* (Grand Master) by giving him gifts

included in red envelopes in certain occasions. The content of the red envelopes has always been called “gift,” not only in the Tai Ji Men movement but in countless organizations teaching martial arts and self-cultivation. However, a prosecutor and some bureaucrats decided to call this content of the red envelopes “tuition fee” for an imaginary “cram school,” i.e., a school where students are normally prepared for exams or otherwise imparted a certain learning through short courses.

Here, the linguistic game of Zhao Gao was played twice. First, the expression “red envelopes,” which has a traditional and clear meaning, was subverted and received a different meaning. Second, the word “gifts” was substituted with the different word “tuition fees.”

This was not a mistake. We now know that the prosecutor of the Tai Ji Men case induced a tax collector to lie (see Bovolenta 2021), and the results of a survey were falsified to support this linguistic shift (Chao et al. 2021, 99–103). The aim was to impose arbitrary and ill-founded taxes since a cram school’s tuition fees are taxable while gifts from disciples to master are not.

The prosecutor, who was eventually contradicted by the highest courts in Taiwan, which stated that there was no cram school, no tuition fees and no tax evasion (Chao et al. 2021, 128–29), and the tax bureaucrats who nonetheless maintained the tax bills were playing their Zhao Gao stag-as-horse game. It was also perceived as such by the Tai Ji Men *dizi*.

The comparison with the Zhao Gao incident is important because it shows what was and is at stake in the Tai Ji Men case. Tax bureaucrats receive bonuses on their tax bills and money is one of their motivations. However, ultimately the question is political, and is about human rights. As for Zhao Gao’s calling a stag a horse, calling gifts tuition fees was a test of power. Who defines the meaning of the words is the essential question in the Tai Ji Men case as well.

The bureaucrats do not want to surrender this power. The Tai Ji Men *dizi* perceive the arbitrary redefinition of words as a subversion of democracy and social harmony, and a violation of their human rights.

In the history reported by Sima Qian, Zhao Gao did not correct his mistakes, went from bad to worse, and ultimately caused the dynasty’s and his own ruin. However, this is not typical of the stories told by the Chinese classics. More often,

they leave the possibility that those in power correct their mistakes open. Tzu Kung (520–456 BCE), a disciple of Confucius, reportedly said,

The gentleman's errors are like an eclipse of the sun and moon in that when he errs the whole world sees him doing so and when he reforms the whole world looks up to him (Lau 2002, 19–21).

These cultural precedents also live in the minds and hearts of the Tai Ji Men *dizi*. They hope that gentlemen will appear, and mistakes will be rectified.

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Religious Freedom Issues in Post-Authoritarian Democracies: Taiwan and the Tai Ji Men Case

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ABSTRACT: The government of Taiwan uses religious liberty as a tool to promote itself and seek international allies. As part of this strategy, an Ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, Christian scholar Pusin Tali, has been appointed. He has emphasized that, to be credible, Taiwan's efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief should also address domestic issues. These include transitional justice after the authoritarian and post-authoritarian periods, and tax problems. The Ambassador-at-large himself mentioned the Tai Ji Men case as an example of domestic issues that need to be urgently solved.

KEYWORDS: Freedom of Religion or Belief in Taiwan, Pusin Tali, Transitional Justice in Taiwan, Tai Ji Men, Tai Ji Men Case.

The Politics of Religious Freedom in Taiwan

The government of President Tsai Ing-Wen vigorously promotes religious freedom in its international and national defense policies. President Tsai is committed to projecting a positive picture of democratic Taiwan, which defends religious freedom and upholds human rights, as opposed to authoritarian China.

This strategy is motivated by both domestic and international concerns. Domestically, the outcome of Taiwan's presidential elections in 2020, in which Tsai was elected for a second term, was influenced by the repression of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, which arose in Hong Kong in 2019. The Democratic Progressive Party, which supported the Hong Kong protesters and adopted a tougher stance on China, eventually won the elections in Taiwan.

Internationally, it is well-known that the United Nations does not recognize Taiwan as a member. Only fourteen countries in the world recognize Taiwan diplomatically. Taiwan is claimed by China as its own. Its precarious position in the international community led the British newspaper *The Economist* to publish in May 2021 a shocking piece claiming that Taiwan is the most hazardous country on Earth and citing the potential of external war (*The Economist* 2021). As a result of these circumstances, the Taiwanese government is looking for new avenues to find allies within the international community to defend national security.

The main ally of Taiwan is the United States. Although there are nuances between Republican and Democrat administrations, the United States government regards the promotion of religious freedom around the world as a cornerstone of both its foreign policy and its international rhetorical discourse.

Samantha Power, Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), stated at the 2021 International Religious Freedom Summit that,

The fight for international religious freedom is not just a reflection of who we are as Americans, but is of strategic national interest to the United States and a key foreign policy objective (Power 2021).

She further stated that countries that encourage religious freedom and protect religious minorities have more stable democracies and communities that are more likely to develop equitably and prosperously.

This is not rhetoric only, Power insisted, as these claims find support in empirical studies. She quoted a Pew study, according to which GDP growth rates in nations with less restrictions and hostility to religion expanded at twice the rate of those with significantly more restrictions. Countries that stigmatize or repress religious minorities, or restrict religious freedom, are more likely to experience instability and conflict (Grim 2019).

Under the Tsai administration, the government of Taiwan has tried to position itself as an ally of the United States in the fight for international religious freedom as well.

In 2021, Hsiao Bi-Khim, Taiwan's representative to the United States, spoke at the already mentioned International Religious Freedom Summit 2021, and insisted on Taiwan's role and efforts in supporting religious freedom. The very

title of her speech, “Taiwan: A Leading Voice for Religious Freedom,” emphasized Taiwan’s ambition to be perceived as a key partner in global efforts for freedom of religion or belief (Yang 2021).

The United States have an Ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. In 2019, Taiwan decided that it should also have an Ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, and President Tsai appointed Dr. Pusin Tali, a Christian and the President of Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary, to this position. Taiwan has also donated to the International Religious Freedom Fund.

The Path to Democracy and Transitional Justice

I am not suggesting that Taiwan’s position on religious liberty is insincere. The efforts of Dr. Pusin Tali, which continues in his position, have been acknowledged internationally.

To his credit, Dr. Pusin Tali stated that as Ambassador-at-large for religious freedom he believes that his mandate also includes considering domestic problems in Taiwan. He understands that Taiwan’s credibility in the international arena depends on its ability to solve its own internal issues of freedom of religion or belief. He explicitly mentioned the Tai Ji Men case, on which a large international literature now exists, as an example of Taiwan’s domestic problems and an issue that urgently needs to be solved (Tali 2022).

The Tai Ji Men case, whose details have been presented by several scholars (see Jacobsen 2020; *Bitter Winter* 2021; Chen, Huang, and Wu 2021; Tsai 2021, 2022; Chen 2022), can only be understood within the broader context of Taiwan’s transition from an authoritarian regime to a full-blown democracy.

This process was started in the 1980s, and was conducted through constitutional modifications and parliamentary reforms, rather than popular upheavals, large-scale bloodshed, military coups, or foreign invasions. As a result, it was given the title “Quiet Revolution.”

In July 1987, Taiwan ended its 38-year Martial Law period, and lifted the ban on press and party affiliation. In May 1991, the “Temporary provisions effective during the period of communist rebellion” were repealed. In May 1992, article 100 of the Criminal Law was amended to remove restrictions on freedom of thought, academic freedom, and freedom of speech, as well as provisions on

prosecuting “conspiracy criminals” and “thought criminals,” which were used during the Martial Law period to repress dissent.

The Legislative Yuan, i.e., the Parliament, was democratically elected in December 1992. During the Martial Law period, the authorities used the ruling party Kuomintang, the government, and the military to supervise three wireless TV stations. In 1995, a fourth, independent network finally received a wireless TV station license. In March 1996, the first direct election of the President took place.

All this indicates that, in the process of democratic transformation, Taiwan has opted for a gradual reform rather than a revolution. This strategy had advantages, but also disadvantages.

The President elected in 1996, Lee Teng-Hui (1923–2020), emerged from an election generally regarded as fair enough. Yet, he was not elected for the first time. He was reelected. After the 1996 elections, the President and the party in power were the same as before. This indicates that despite the democratic transition, the ruling party that had presided over the authoritarian system remained in power to administer democratic Taiwan.

It is difficult for the same ruling party to seriously investigate its previous breaches of human rights. It is also impossible to morally deny its own past. One problem that has been studied by both domestic and foreign scholars who have examined Taiwan’s path to democracy is transitional justice (Caldwell 2018; Shattuck 2019; Tsai 2021, 2022).

Transitional justice is the work of restoring justice after the political oppression by authoritarian and dictatorial systems, as well as healing the social divisions caused by past oppression after a society has undergone a democratic transition. These works should include: 1) the victims of physical abuse and deprivation of liberty and life, or their families, should be rehabilitated and indemnified; 2) those responsible for human rights violations must face legal and moral consequences; 3) the truth of past political persecution, as well as its history, must be revealed in its totality.

Problems of transitional justice have been studied in contexts other than Taiwan, for example in post-Communist Eastern Europe (Horne and Stan 2018; Šorytė 2022). The case of Taiwan is, however, peculiar. For decades, the same party that had been responsible for the human rights abuses continued to hold

either the Presidency, or the parliamentary majority, or both. The skepticism of the Taiwanese citizens that this party could really investigate and punish itself was not surprising.

President Tsai is from a different party, and made transitional justice a key point of her electoral campaigns. However, as scholars and international observers have noted (Caldwell 2018; Shattuck 2019; Tsai 2021, 2022), there is still a reluctance in Taiwan to confront the authoritarian and post-authoritarian past and grant full transitional justice to the victims of repression.

Bureaucratic Continuity and Religious Repression

One problem explaining why achieving transitional justice in Taiwan is so difficult is that, in the passage from the authoritarian to the democratic regime, the civil service system and the bureaucracy largely remained the same. They maintained a weak sense of the human rights and the rule of law, and the old habit of obeying those in authority rather than the law.

New democracies are frequently brittle and unsteady. The military, judicial, and administrative systems’ “help” and “cooperation” are frequently enlisted to protect the social order. Following the 1996 elections, Taiwan witnessed a series of heinous major murder cases, including the murder of a girl at the Air Force Command Headquarters of the Ministry of National Defense, and the assassinations of politician Liu Bang-You (1942–1996), feminist activist and politician Peng Wan-Ru (1949–1996), and others. These major incidents have not been resolved to this date, and in 1996 they put enormous pressure on the ruling authorities.

To divert public attention away from the protests, the ruling party administration carried out a political cleansing and “religious crackdown” at the end of 1996. Six religious and spiritual groups were denounced as guilty of fraud and tax evasion and raided. Not coincidentally, these were movements perceived by the ruling party as not having supported his candidate, the one who eventually won, in the presidential election (Introvigne 2022).

The 1996 purge is at the origin of Tai Ji Men case. Despite the fact that Tai Ji Men did not endorse a particular candidate in the presidential election, it was nonetheless raided and its leader, his wife, and two *dizi* (disciples) arrested. They

were finally declared innocent of all charges in three degrees of judgement, up to Taiwan's Supreme Court, and even received national compensation for the past unjust detention.

However, Tai Ji Men had to confront a pillar of the bureaucratic continuity between the authoritarian and the democratic era: the tax administration. It ignored the verdict of the Supreme Court, which had explicitly stated that Tai Ji Men was not guilty of tax evasion, and continued to issue ill-founded tax bills (Chao et al. 2021).

In Taiwan, the fiscal and taxation agencies have a long history of acting to purge dissidents. For decades, the imposition of taxes has been the ruling party's strongest weapon for packaging the illicit with the legitimate. Even after the transition to a democratic regime, the tax system has remained largely unchanged. The tax bureaucrats were an integral part of the authoritarian machine to persecute dissidents, yet they escaped punishment, another evidence that transitional justice has not been fully implemented.

The problem is not one of transitional justice only. The attitude of the tax agencies has maintained features of the authoritarian era to this very day. According to the Ministry of Justice, there were 14.31 million new cases of unpaid taxes and government fees pending enforcement in 2020. This translates to 0.73 cases of unpaid taxes and government fees per person. One can ask whether Taiwan is the world capital of tax evasion and Taiwanese citizens, who are known in general as law-abiding, have decided that there is one area of the law they stubbornly refuse to comply with, taxes. Another alternative is that there are systemic problems in the tax administration, leading to unjust or wrongful accusations of tax evasion.

Taiwan's Ministry of Finance itself estimated that the over-collected taxes would exceed Taiwanese \$400 billion (approximately US\$14.38 billion) in 2021. Over the past eight years, the over-collected taxes have reached more than Taiwanese \$1.0743 trillion (approximately US\$38.6 billion). The government has argued that the over-collected taxes have been instrumental to repay the national debt. However, the over-collection of taxes reflects the infringement of the citizens' property rights by the public power (Huang and others 2021).

There have been many spectacular cases of unjust taxation. The tax officials' pursuit of the bonuses they receive and pocket for the tax bills they enforce, and

the failure of the tax relief system, have led to a variety of tax chaos, causing what has been called Taiwan's tax disaster, a sharp increase in the number of the so called "tax slaves," an increase in the national debt instead of a decrease, and considerable unnecessary suffering.

The most recent Tax Collection Act, which was revised in December 2021, provides citizens with a short 15-year term to get a refund if government entities overtax them. Even if the administrative agency has been patently wrong, a refund request after 15 years can no longer be filed. Furthermore, the whistleblower bonus is now enshrined in the law and encourages tax delation. The foregoing examples clearly show that Taiwanese taxpayers' human rights are still inadequately protected.

Conclusion

In terms of institutions, Taiwan became a free and democratic country at the end of the 20th century. This achievement has been internationally applauded. However, it has been more than thirty years since the Martial Law was lifted, and problems still remain for Taiwan's path towards becoming a mature and free democratic country. The Transitional Justice Commission in Taiwan was not formally founded until 2018, and it defined authoritarianism as the era from 1945 to 1992. This means that it only deals with persecution cases that occurred before 1992. However, many government abuses occurred during the democratic transition process, i.e., after 1992, including the religious crackdown of 1996. These post-1992 injustices should also be confronted, least they come back to Taiwanese society with a vengeance (Tsai 2021).

Following the commencement of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Taiwan Strait situation drew the attention of the world community. The Tsai Ing-Wen government used both the war in Ukraine and religious freedom as rallying points for breaking through diplomatic barriers and finding allies. There is significant domestic and international support for the Tsai administration's commitment to both helping Ukraine and promoting global religious freedom. These are indeed laudable goals. However, as Ambassador-at-large Pulin Tali stated, the pursuit of freedom of religion or belief can only start at home. He strongly urged the government to keep rogue bureaucrats in check, respect the decisions of Taiwan's Supreme Court, and find a political solution for the Tai Ji Men case

(Tali 2022). Many international scholars and human rights activists wholeheartedly agree with his comments.

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A Tale of Two Countries: What Taiwan Can Learn from Canada

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ABSTRACT: The paper compares attitudes in Canada and Taiwan with respect to human rights. It discusses a major Canadian national crisis, the controversy about the abuses in Indian Residential Schools, where First Nation children were forcibly enrolled pursuant to a law enacted in 1894. This crisis demonstrates that human rights abuses can also happen while democracy is otherwise functioning and fair elections are regularly held. After a consciousness of the abuses emerge, transitional justice should be applied even with respect to violations of human rights perpetrated in a time of democracy. The lessons Canadian learned during the Indian Residential Schools crisis may be useful in Taiwan and for the case of Tai Ji Men, whose *dizi* (disciples) took their protest to Canada as well.

KEYWORDS: Indian Residential Schools in Canada, Transitional Justice, Transitional Justice in Taiwan, Tai Ji Men, Tai Ji Men Case.

Introduction

A variety of perspectives have been presented on the Tai Ji Men case, and I realize it is difficult to add something that has not already been said by others. What I would like to offer is a Canadian perspective. I am a Tai Ji Men *dizi* (disciple) from Vancouver, a mother of two, and a consultant for the physical and mental health of immigrant and refugee families.

I would first comment on what I consider some essential features of the Canadian experience of human rights, then offer some comparisons with the Tai Ji Men case, and finally discuss how Canadian *dizi* react to the problems of their brothers and sisters in Taiwan. Canada has been recognized as one of the best countries to live in for seven years in a row (*U.S. News & World Report* 2022),

but I am still proud to be a democratic and free Taiwanese, although I will also mention some specific problems of Taiwan.

When I came to Canada, I hoped to give to my children a more diverse educational vision and environment, so they can have a better outlook of the world and become open-minded and macro-minded global citizens. My study and life experience have made me realize deeply the importance of a country's political and social context for its citizens. The policy direction of a government and the way it treats its people are the cornerstones of a democratic nation's maturity, and an important indicator of whether it will educate loving and responsible global citizens.

Although I will mention Canada's own problems, I found it a country that values human rights, respects freedom of religion, and is multicultural and inclusive. I found the spirit of human rights and freedom at work in everything, from school education to the government's reactions to domestic and international human rights crises. I will explain my understanding of the Canadian ethos by discussing first a personal experience and then one of the major national crises of the last few years.

A Soccer Mom's Story

First, let me share a story. My little one very much likes to play soccer. She took her favorite soccer ball to school for practice, but it was kicked into the bush by other naughty classmates and punctured.

When he was told about it, the principal did not ignore the incident. He decided to deal with it immediately, communicate with each child, appease my crying daughter, and ask the classmates to apologize. The principal gave to my daughter a soccer ball the next day and personally played soccer with her and the classmates.

This may look like a small matter to be mentioned in a scholarly article, but it does offer the opportunity for a deeper consideration on the Canadian ethos. I come from East Asia, where perhaps the incident would have been handled differently. I am not suggesting it would have been ignored. Probably those responsible would have been punished. What I found very Canadian was the

principal's attempt to defuse the tension and pay attention to the feeling of each child.

The Indian Residential Schools Crisis

On a much broader scale, I saw this ethos at work in the national crisis determined by revelations about mass graves found near so-called Indian Residential Schools. What triggered the crisis was the discovery in 2021 (Hamilton 2021) and 2022 of remains of children buried in unmarked graves at Indian Residential Schools. Between May and June 2021 first the remnants of some 200 children were found in Kamloops, British Columbia, then 104 in Brandon, Manitoba, 751 in Marieval, Saskatchewan, and another 182 in Cranbrook, also in British Columbia. In July, remains of another 180 children were found in Cupertino Island, British Columbia. Searches and findings continued in 2022, and remains of more than 400 children have been found, the largest numbers in Grouard, Alberta (169: Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archeology 2022) and Pine Falls, Manitoba (190: Unger 2022). These findings caused a sensation, and the case quickly became international.

Some background is needed (Milloy 1999; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015–16). After early local experiments, to which First Nation families had participated more or less voluntarily, the Indian Residential Schools program became national and mandatory in 1894. The law made it compulsory that all First Nation children aged 7 to 16 should leave their families and be taken to Christian boarding schools. Roman Catholics priests and nuns managed 60% of these churches, while 40% were operated by Protestants.

In 1948, the law was amended and attending the Indian Residential Schools was no longer mandatory. However, First Nation families who still sent their children there were rewarded with money and other benefits. The program managed by the Christian churches continued until 1969. In fact, even after 1969 the government, which had taken over from the churches, continued to operate some of the schools. The last ones were closed in 1997. It is estimated that overall some 150,000 First Nation students attended the boarding schools.

Even before they were finally closed, a movement started in the 1960s denouncing instances of physical and sexual abuse that had occurred at the

boarding schools. Legal actions followed, and the government settled with First Nation representatives in 2006 (Miller 2017). As part of the settlement, the government agreed to set up and fund a Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. In 2015, the Commission published a detailed report on the schools' history (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015–16).

The report shows that, although instances of physical and sexual abuse might have occurred, the worst problem was systemic. The Commission called the whole project a “cultural genocide.” First Nation children were not allowed to use their languages or learn about their culture, and those who were not Christians were quickly and perhaps forcibly “converted” to Christianity.

In truth, this “cultural genocide” did not only affect First Nation children. According to Canadian scholars Susan Palmer and Shane Dussault, children of the Russian immigrant sect known as the Doukhobors were also taken from their parents and forcibly placed in residential schools. They were not allowed to speak Russian, and the project was clearly aimed at separating them from their religion (Palmer and Dussault 2020).

As for the Indian Residential Schools, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission appeared to have achieved a national soul-searching and some measure of appeasement. However, the discovery of the mass graves created a new crisis.

I do not want to enter into the many different aspects of the mass graves issue. Scholars and activists have expressed different opinions on what exactly caused the death of the students buried in the previously unknown graves. Some believe they largely died of tuberculosis and influenza. Some of their Christian teachers died too. On the other hand, it is possible that many children did not receive proper medical care, and it cannot be ruled out that some died as a consequence of harsh corporal punishments or other forms of abuse. There is evidence that some students committed suicide (Hamilton 2021). Whatever the interpretation of the mass graves, there is a general consensus that First Nation children were the victims of different forms of abuse, and their culture was silenced and denied.

The mass graves discovery understandably caused strong emotions and protests against the Christian churches. Some serious and even paradoxical incidents happened. For example, in Calgary, Alberta, protesters set fire to a Protestant church. The paradox lied in the fact that this was a Vietnamese ethnic

church, built with great efforts and sacrifice by Boat People who had escaped Vietnam and come to Canada as refugees. It was not surprising that First Nation and other activists wanted to protest the role of Christians in the Indian Residential Schools abuses. However, they ended up assaulting another community, the Vietnamese refugees, which was certainly not responsible for the boarding schools and had suffered itself discrimination and abuse (Introvigne 2021).

Finally last year the Canadian government designated September 30 as the annual National Truth and Reconciliation Day. It is a national holiday, also known as Orange Shirt Day, and commemorates children who were abused in the Indian Residential Schools. It is also an opportunity to meditate on cultural genocide and racism. It was an important milestone for Canadians and for their reconciliation process, which cannot happen without an official apology.

Lessons for Taiwan

There are several lessons in the Indian Residential School crisis that I would like to use for a comparison with the situation of Taiwan. Canada has always been a democracy, yet it has human rights abuses in its past. While throughout its history Canada has welcome immigrants from different countries and ethnicity, its beautiful history of respecting different cultures in the past did not extend to the First Nation peoples or to other groups labeled as marginal or uncivilized—or as religious “cults,” as the Doukhobors’ story shows.

Thus, even Canada has a problem of transitional justice. The notion of transitional justice refers to the healing of past human rights abuses by indemnifying the victims, punishing the perpetrators, and telling the historical truth to the citizens. Normally, problems of transitional justice manifest themselves when a non-democratic regime is replaced by a democratic one, as it happened recently in the countries of Eastern Europe that were once part of the Soviet bloc. Some Latin American countries also passed from dictatorships to democratic regimes, and indeed international law on transitional justice was born with reference to that part of the world (Šorytė 2022).

The Indian Residential School crisis shows that there can be a need for transitional justice even within a history of democracy, when a country realizes

that certain human rights were not properly understood and had been violated in the past. This point is extremely important. Democracy provides the best environment for human rights but does not offer an absolute guarantee that they will be respected. While abuses were occurring in the Indian Residential Schools, Canada was a democracy and elections were regularly held. Yet, not only the human rights of the First Nation children were violated but there was no public perception of the seriousness of the abuse.

Unlike Canada, Taiwan was once governed by a non-democratic regime. Nobody doubts that this was the case during the Martial Law era, i.e., until 1987. The government now acknowledges that human rights abuses also happened in the so-called post-authoritarian era, until 1992, and transitional justice should also apply to the period between 1987 and 1992.

As others who have discussed the Tai Ji Men case have observed, however, there were serious abuses even after 1992 (Tsai 2021, 2022). Yes, the first free elections for all seats in the Legislative Yuan were held in Taiwan in 1992, and the first elections where the President was directly elected in 1996. Yet, after the presidential elections, there was the December 1996 crackdown on religious and spiritual movements that were perceived as not having supported the candidate who won. It also affected Tai Ji Men (although it had not taken political sides) and was the start of the Tai Ji Men case (Introvigne 2022).

Just as in the Canadian case, free elections in Taiwan did not mean that all human rights problems had been solved. In December 1996, Taiwan had both a President and a Parliament elected by its citizens, yet it witnessed some of its worst violations of freedom of religion or belief. Canada has recognized that transitional justice is needed for abuses perpetrated while elected democratic institutions were in place. In Taiwan, a true and effective transitional justice should also address the human rights violations that occurred after 1992.

A second lesson of the Indian Residential School crisis, as evidenced by the attack on Calgary's Vietnamese church and other incidents, is that unsolved problems of transitional justice generates social unrest. Those who assaulted the Vietnamese church cannot be justified, but at the same time the root cause of the unrest was the perception that an effective transitional justice for the victims of the "cultural genocide" and the boarding school abuses was being delayed.

The Canadian government's reaction was to speed up the process of reconciliation, which eventually defused the violence. This is a lesson for Taiwan. Delaying the rectification of past abuses and the solution of long-lasting cases such as the one of Tai Ji Men cannot be conducive to social harmony and stability. Although Tai Ji Men is an extremely peaceful movement, the fact that such cases are not solved creates a general climate of suspicion and distrust.

A third lesson of the Canadian boarding school crisis is the importance of publicly telling the historical truth. First Nation Canadians did not ask for indemnification only. For them, it was very important that truth be publicly told. Maybe there are parts of truth impossible to unearth now, but it should be acknowledged that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada made substantial efforts to ascertain and divulge what really happened. It is another lesson for Taiwan, where citizens also demand that the truth be told, and told publicly, about past human rights abuses, including those originating from the 1996 crackdown on religious and spiritual movements.

A fourth lesson is not directly connected with the Indian Residential School case. However, this crisis, which did not start with the discovery of the mass graves but is going on since the 1960s, was a wakeup call that persuaded the Canadian government that it should listen to all its citizens. Since Tai Ji Men, after it won the criminal case originating from trumped-up charges of fraud and tax evasion, has continued to be harassed in Taiwan through ill-founded tax bills, it was natural for me to become interested in how Canadian taxpayers can lodge appeals against tax bills they regard as unjust.

In Taiwan, those who appeal are required to pay one third of the tax bill, either in cash or in guarantees on properties. I learned that in Canada for an appeal in the tax court, there is no administrative fee if the tax bill is less than 25,000 Canadian dollars or the amount of the appeal is less than 50,000 Canadian dollars. If the amount exceeds these figures, the administrative fee is proportional, with a maximum administrative fee of 550 Canadian dollars for filing an appeal. This seems another sign of how the Canadian ethos implies giving citizens the impression that the government is not trying to making the affirmation of their rights overly difficult.

Tai Ji Men Dizi in Canada and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Offices

There are Tai Ji Men *dizi* in Canada, and although for well-known reasons Canada has no diplomatic relations with Taiwan, there are three Taipei Economic and Cultural Offices in Ottawa, Toronto, and Vancouver.

Dizi who live in Canada believed that these offices were the proper place for a dialogue about the Tai Ji Men case. They wrote to all the three offices. The answer was that the Tai Ji Men case is a domestic Taiwanese matter and is outside the mandate of the Economic and Cultural Offices in Canada.

The incident deserves a comment, because it is somewhat typical of the reaction of Taiwanese bureaucrats when they are confronted with the Tai Ji Men case. It should be now abundantly clear that this case, which has attracted the attention of dozens of international scholars and human rights activists and generated a significant literature, is a political embarrassment for Taiwan. The government is very proud of its human rights achievements. Having to face protests both at home and abroad by thousands of people taking to the streets and claiming that their human rights have been abused in Taiwan, is exactly what Taipei's government does not need, particularly in the present international circumstances.

Yet, when reached by protests on the Tai Ji Men case, bureaucrats at all levels always answer with technicalities. Either the bureaucrat or office that receives the protest alleges that it is not competent and the request should be directed to somebody else, thus creating a never-ending vicious circle, or it answers that statutes of limitations have expired and revising the tax case is now technically impossible. Technical answers are offered while the problem is political.

The Canadian government could have answered as well that technically the abuses in the Indian Residential Schools happened too long ago and legally there is no longer an obligation of rectifying what happened, indemnifying the victims, and telling the truth to the public opinion. However, had it reacted in this way, the Canadian government would have caused more social unrest. Instead, although with delays and limits, it chose the path of truth and reconciliation (Miller 2017).

This is why the little story of my daughter and her soccer ball, while of much smaller scope and importance, is also relevant. The principal tried to understand what happened, reconcile the children involved, and defuse the tension. I believe

he succeeded in the moment when, rather than merely giving directions, he personally played soccer with the children. With his actions, he made the children understand that he cared.

In Taiwan, Tai Ji Men *dizi* advocate for legal and tax reform. I suggested that there are lessons Taiwan can learn from Canada, an older democracy. But perhaps the first lesson may be learned from the principal of my daughter's school. It is never too late for those in authority, including Taiwan's politicians and bureaucrats, to show that they care about those they are supposed to serve and govern.

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Dancing with the Dragon: Holistic Education and the Tai Ji Men Crisis in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT: The traditional Chinese dragon dance is an important part of the performances Tai Ji Men presents throughout the world. Studying how the dragon dance is prepared and performed by Tai Ji Men introduces us to the essence of its concept of holistic education. When confronted with the problems determined by its conflict with the tax authorities in Taiwan, Tai Ji Men applied the same holistic principles and tried to convert the crisis into an opportunity.

KEYWORDS: Dragon Dance, Tai Ji Men, Hong Tao-Tze, Tai Ji Men Case, Holistic Education, Freedom of Religion or Belief in Taiwan.

Introduction

My paper starts from the dragon dance, a traditional Chinese performance that is ubiquitous among Chinese communities (Edwards 2013) and is also part of what Tai Ji Men, a Taiwan-based spiritual movement, proposes during its international events. I argue that the dragon dance is representative of Tai Ji Men's holistic approach to culture and education. Tai Ji Men is also confronted with a crisis caused by its conflict with tax authorities in Taiwan, on which a sizeable scholarly literature exists (Jacobsen 2020; *Bitter Winter* 2021; Chen, Huang, and Wu 2021; Tsai 2021, 2022; Chen 2022). The holistic approach reflected in the dragon dance also inspires Tai Ji Men's reaction to this crisis.

I approach my subject both as a Canadian scholar specialized in the biomedical field and as a *dizi* (disciple) of Tai Ji Men. The topic of medical pluralism has been increasingly discussed in the field of medicine and healthcare in Western

countries such as Canada. Traditional Chinese medicine and accredited/licensed naturopathic doctors have been gaining recognition and popularity in Canada in the past couple of decades.

Medical education, a field I am personally involved in, has been growingly perceived as a way of training healthcare professionals to provide health services to the whole person. This means that they should consider the patient's psychological, mental, environmental, and social circumstances, rather than focusing only on the symptoms of a disease. Such an approach to health management is termed "holistic medicine" (McGuire 1993).

A holistic view of nature has been part of Taoism and traditional Chinese medicine for thousands of years. In the past several decades, as a result of globalization, people in the Western countries have grasped the Eastern holistic concept quickly, and it has significantly gained momentum during the COVID-19 crisis.

I searched the keyword "holistic medicine" in the Pubmed/Medline database, the most widely used reference and abstract search engine for health professionals on life sciences and biomedical topics. It is maintained by the United States National Library of Medicine (NLM). I found that the number of papers with keywords "holistic medicine" published started from under 200 per year before 1990 (with the first one dating back to 1952). It reached about 1,000 papers published per year in 2014. Then, the number jumped to over 2,500 per year in 2020, and close to 3,200 in 2021. A very similar trend is shown with keyword searches for "holistic education," "holistic health," and "holistic care." Globalization and current world crises likely play a role in this phenomenon.

What I would like to discuss in this paper is:

(1) what type of education Tai Ji Men provides, a topic I will approach through the example of the dragon dance; and

(2) why the group choses what I would call an original holistic approach to resolve the Tai Ji Men crisis in Taiwan.

As mentioned earlier, mine is an emic perspective, since I am both a scholar and a Tai Ji Men *dizi*. I was born in Taiwan and joined Tai Ji Men in 1995. In the same year, soon after I turned 18, I moved to Canada and completed my post-secondary education, as well as graduate degrees on the Canadian East Coast. In

the past 27 years, I have practiced Tai Ji Men qigong and meditation on a daily basis. Whenever time allows and opportunities arise, I volunteer and join cultural, spiritual, and social events organized by Tai Ji Men's *Shifu* (Grand Master), Dr. Hong Tao-Tze. Therefore, what I offer here is also based on my personal experience.

1. Tai Ji Men's Holistic Education and the Dragon Dance

Tai Ji Men, whose features have been presented in several self-presentations (Members of Tai Ji Men 2022) and scholarly studies (e.g. Introvigne et al. 2021), embraces a holistic approach to education. The teachings transmitted from *Shifu* to *dizi* at Tai Ji Men are unlike the classes taken at modern-day yoga studios, martial arts dojos, or gym fitness sports centers, where there is a curriculum set up for instructors to teach certain knowledge or skills to students. The *Shifu* of Tai Ji Men tries to transmit a “culture” as a whole, encompassing all life. Therefore, it is not limited to teaching the skills needed for practicing qigong or martial arts, or for singing or dancing. The lessons also include the beliefs and philosophies of Yin and Yang, how to be healthy, live happily, be in harmony with ourselves, others, and the environment, keep peace in dire situations, become the best version of ourselves, and find the true meaning of life (Members of Tai Ji Men 2022).

This may seem a program too vast to be effectively taught. However, I will take dragon dance performances as an example to demonstrate what holistic learning is like in Tai Ji Men. The magnificent dragon dance is a traditional performance in Chinese culture. It is most often seen in festival celebrations. Tai Ji Men included it in many of its worldwide cultural exchange programs. The dance team needs to learn not only physical strength, but also integrated teamwork. Each member must work in unity to move the dragon in such a way that it would appear lifelike and harmonious.

Therefore, dragon dance requires a training that is not only physical but also mental and spiritual. Trainees should achieve an adequate harmony, both within the individual and between team members. During the training, Dr. Hong presents the principles of Yin-Yang philosophy, and explains to the dance team the meaning of the dragon's true qualities: compassion, courage, and wisdom. He emphasizes that,

Only with compassion, can human beings truly love the world; only with courage, can humankind dreams to achieve peace without fear; and only with wisdom, the humanity knows how to stop wars and realize the idea of One World (Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2015: Dr. Hong's speech was delivered in Washington DC at Capitol Hill on March 22, 2000).

With this teaching firmly implanted in the mind of each dancer, the Tai Ji Men dragon dance, as some who have seen it reported to me, “really warms the heart of the audience with its energy,” and “nourishes the soul of those who encounter it.”

Moreover, what also sets the Tai Ji Men's dragon dance apart from performances of the same dance by other modern martial arts or cultural groups is the fact that the dragons are designed and built by the *dizi* themselves (Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2020). It would be easier to order a dragon from one of the companies that supply them, and have it made with modern and lighter materials such as aluminum and plastics. However, Dr. Hong is determined to follow the traditional craftsmanship and preserve the cultural heritage without shortcuts. Therefore, the dragons are made of wood with bamboo hoops on the inside and covered with a rich fabric, although this makes them heavier and trickier to maneuver.

In addition, the bamboos used do not come from a factory, but are picked up for the purpose from mountain bamboo forests. Describing all the details of this craftsmanship would make for a very long paper. Actually, it is a very time-consuming process. The fabric used to cover the body of the dragon has thousands and thousands of shiny glittery scales. Mrs. Hong, Dr. Hong's wife, works with *dizi* for months, and they hand-sew them one by one. The two longest dragons used in the performances (Golden Dragon and Azure Dragon) and made in-house are 144 meters long and consist of 60 segments each, with the dragon head weighed at 30 kg, the body measured at 90 cm in diameter and covered with approximately 250,000 scales.

Each dragon has its unique character. For example, the Golden Dragon symbolizes love and is a messenger of light. The Azure Dragon brings peace and justice. Experienced *dizi*, both male and female, will pass on their knowledge and skills to the younger generations. They believe this will offer an opportunity for the youths to learn how to be respectful of both the elderly and tradition.

This dragon-making project seems to be an unbelievably slow business, especially when contrasted with the fast-paced rhythm of contemporary world. However, this is exactly how Dr. Hong wants to pass down the traditions and wisdom of esoteric Taoism in a comprehensive and wholesome manner to his *dizi* at Tai Ji Men. To Dr. Hong, the long time spent in these endeavors is not wasted. First, *dizi* learn to appreciate nature when they have to hike up a mountain to find a suitable bamboo forest. Second, only bamboos of the right size and age are manually harvested. The other ones are left untouched. Hence, the concept of environmental sustainability is taught in a real-life situation. Third, such a project requires teamwork and good communication skills. It offers an ideal circumstance to teach how to create harmony and balance.

A good part of the life lessons, wisdoms, and moral values taught at Tai Ji Men, while in my opinion essential for all world citizens, are not being taught at a school system and higher education institutes these days. Dr. Hong often tells his *dizi*, “I am here to guide you so you can be the teacher for yourself (for the rest of your life).” This is the core of Tai Ji Men’s holistic approach, and is also applied to problematic situations such as those connected with the Tai Ji Men case.

2. A Holistic Approach to the Tai Ji Men Crisis in Taiwan

Taoist medicine takes a holistic approach to wellness and medical care. It focuses on the mind-body connection to treat a person, and insists on fixing the cause of the ailment and on disease prevention, not just on relieving symptoms. Tai Ji Men takes a holistic approach to help “cure” the Tai Ji Men crisis in Taiwan. I distinguish between three stages: diagnosis, healing, and prevention. This is a logical rather than a chronological distinction. During more than twenty-five years, the three stages occurred simultaneously.

2.1. Diagnosis—Observation and Detection of Problems

On the surface, it seems like there are two major problems in the Tai Ji Men case: (a.) tax discrimination; and (b.) government officials who abused state power and fabricated a case. As Tai Ji Men *dizi* went through the legal battle, they observed government officials making false statements, committing perjury, and

breaching the law in many different ways (Chao et al. 2021). These were the symptoms only, and indicated a much deeper illness at several levels: individual, governmental, and societal.

At an individual level, the fundamental issue is that too many government officials proved to be dishonest, greedy, ignorant, and careless. At the governmental level, the main problems are the existence of a bonus system quickly rewarding tax bureaucrats who issue bills, a dysfunctional administrative remedy system, and powerless disciplinary sanctions against tax officers who misbehave. At the societal level, the root causes of the problems include that the general public lacks understanding of what true democracy is, does not know basic human rights, feels powerless in the face of social injustice, does not want to appear different, and is afraid of speaking up.

2.2. Healing Processes—Problem Solving and Crisis Resolution

How do Taiwanese citizens try to solve similar problems? As mentioned earlier, the general public in Taiwan is afraid to speak up and demand its own rights to be respected. When facing an unfair tax bill, the average Taiwanese would likely do the following: (a) if the amount is affordable and small, they would just pay, without questioning the tax authorities; (b) if the amount is affordable but non-reasonable, they would double-check with the tax authorities and try to get a better “deal” on a new more affordable amount to pay; (c) if the amount is unaffordable, they might choose to go to court to resolve the dispute, but the chances of winning in the administrative court are very slim; (d) sadly, but truthfully each year, many taxpayers get ruined and some even choose to take their own life as a result of unjust tax bills. It is also true that many business owners, facing an unfair tax system plus a dysfunctional administrative remedy model in Taiwan, choose to end their business or not to start it at all.

Tai Ji Men chose to fight against the unjust tax bills, knowing it would be a long journey. Meanwhile, they kept the door of their academies in Taiwan open, and also continued their international outreach, all this while dealing with the legal procedures. Dr. Hong, however, also continued to examine what the roots of the problem were.

Part of the healing processes required strengthening Tai Ji Men from within, reinforcing the solidarity of the group, and promoting individual inner peace through a healthy body, mind, and spirit. It may sound simple, but it was in fact a complicated and painful process. Dr. Hong turned the crisis to an opportunity to teach and educate his *dizi*. He initiated what he called the World Peace and Love Movement in 1999, less than three years after the Tai Ji Men case had started. On August 1, 1999, he gave a speech entitled “A World of One Heart, A Well-Spring of Happiness” in San Francisco (see Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2017). He was talking to the world, but also to the Taiwanese. He wanted not only to put the frightened hearts of his *dizi* at ease, but also rectify the crisis of taxation system in Taiwan as part of larger global troubles.

Tai Ji Men believe they fight a battle not only for themselves and for those who live in Taiwan today, but also for future generations. Not only should problems be solved. They should not come back.

2.3. Preventative Measures—Compassion in Action

How can we be sure that, once overcome, the crises will not reappear in the future? Tai Ji Men’s answer is education. The education movements Dr. Hong initiated have a global scope. Yet, he believes they will also be instrumental in solving the Tai Ji Men case and the crisis of tax bureaucracy in Taiwan.

Dr. Hong believes that teaching about human rights, freedom of religion or belief, tax justice, and what a true democracy is, are largely missing from Taiwan’s educational system. He also advocates for a conscience-based education. Tai Ji Men collaborates closely with educators, scholars, and experts from different fields, and spreads the idea of a holistic education through a variety of tools.

It also publishes books documenting its own case such as *Who Stole Their Youth?* (Chao et al. 2021) and educates Taiwanese on their rights as citizens and taxpayers, something which is new and unprecedented in Taiwan. Street protests are also part of this campaign, and in December each year since 2010, and even outside the December yearly protest since 2016, supporters from the Tax and Legal Reform League that Tai Ji Men helped establish pitch tents and camp outside the Presidential office in Taipei to protest the unjust tax system. Volunteers reached all neighborhoods in Taiwan collecting signatures for

petitions. And millions of people signed international petitions Dr. Hong proposed on behalf of world peace and love.

This is a real-life example of how Tai Ji Men use a holistic approach to promote human rights and conscience-based education, fight injustice, denounce fake news, and resolve crises.

Conclusion: Holistic Education and Sustainable Future

One can argue that this is a long shot, and promoting conscience and love internationally would not solve the Tai Ji Men case. However, from a Taoist perspective, “All is One.” *Dizi* believe that the brightness Tai Ji Men brings to the world shall eventually shine back and dispel the darkness surrounding their case in Taiwan, although the process will be painfully long and slow.

Tai Ji Men *dizi* would answer objections that their approach is unrealistic by countering that in fact it is the only realistic path, reaching for the source of problems rather than remaining at the surface and looking for quick fixes and cosmetic repairs. The comparison with the dragon dance performance explains their attitude. From dragon making to dancer training, the success of the enterprise is guaranteed by the fact that no shortcuts are taken for the sake of just quickly preparing an acceptable show. A really holistic approach requires a coordinated action and preparation at all levels.

Concluding with a personal experience, I attended many international conferences featuring Dr. Hong as a speaker over a period of more than twenty years. The first large conference was the 2001 World Citizens Assembly hosted by the Association of World Citizens in Taiwan when I was in my early 20s. The main theme was how a holistic, conscience-based education is essential to prepare world citizens, and achieve the goal of a sustainable development emphasized in United Nations documents. The experience made a magnificent impact on my young self. It helped me seeing our world from a deeply holistic and meaningful angle.

It has always been part of this holistic experience to cooperate with other religious and spiritual groups. I learned that large or small, each group has something valuable to offer, and there is some truth in all of them. They also have

a right not to be discriminated. As Albert Einstein wrote in his last unfinished manuscript (1955),

In matters concerning truth and justice, there is no difference between large and small problems for issues concerning the treatment of people are all the same (Einstein 2007 [1955], 506).

In the end, it is all about the dragon's spirit, which is traditionally said to consist of compassion, courage, and wisdom. Tai Ji Men speaks of love, peace, and conscience—but the essence of the holistic teachings is the same.

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Taiwan's Tax System, the Two Covenants, and the Tai Ji Men Case: Six Problems

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ABSTRACT: Taiwan has incorporated the two main United Nations human rights covenants, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights into its domestic legislation in 2009. However, Taiwan's laws did not fully implement the Two Covenants, particularly in the area of tax justice. Since taxes are weaponized to crack down on religious and spiritual movements the powers that be do not like, identifying the flaws in Taiwan's legal system is also important for freedom of religion or belief.

KEYWORDS: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Two Covenants, Two Covenants in Taiwan, Tax Justice in Taiwan, Tai Ji Men, Tai Ji Men Case.

Introduction

The Tai Ji Men case has been presented in scholarly articles, both in this and in other journals and magazines, as well as in a comprehensive book published by the movement itself (Chao et al. 2021). I do not need to summarize it again here. The purpose of my article is to ask the question how and why was it possible that the Tai Ji Men case continued unsolved for more than twenty-five years, notwithstanding Taiwan's otherwise laudable path to democracy and freedom of religion or belief. My answer is that there remain six major problems, which in part are a heritage of the authoritarian and post-authoritarian periods, that democratic Taiwan has not yet been able to get rid of.

Before examining them, I would emphasize that, despite not being a member state of the United Nations, Taiwan has incorporated the two main United

Nations human rights covenants, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights into its domestic legislation in 2009. Taiwan's compliance with the Two Covenants, which include provisions on freedom of religion or belief and economic justice, is examined periodically by reviews conducted by international independent experts. Thus, Taiwan acknowledges that it has freely assumed an obligation to respect the Two Covenants (Introvigne 2022).

However, in practice the Two Covenants are not always respected. The Tai Ji Men case is at the crossroads of freedom of religion or belief (FORB) and tax justice. More precisely, taxes have been used as a tool to discriminate against a spiritual minority, as it has happened with other religious movements as well. While other countries, including France in its fight against groups labeled as "cults," also weaponized taxes for religious discrimination (Fautré 2021a), in Taiwan the six problems I will discuss made the misuse of tax law for the purpose of FORB discrimination easier (Huang et al. 2021a, 2021b).

It may seem that the six problems I will list are technical tax law issues, and have little do with religion. But since taxes are used to limit FORB, the six issues are relevant for religious and spiritual liberty as well, and I will later mention some examples taken from the decade-old history of the Tai Ji Men case.

1. The One-Third Payment Rule

A first provision in Taiwanese law that is inconsistent with the two Covenants and taxpayers' rights is the one-third payment rule. It means that when Taiwanese citizens have a dispute with the tax authorities, to stop the enforcement they should pay one third of the contested tax amount or provide an equivalent guarantee. Note that this payment is due before clarifying what the effective tax liability is. Without such guarantee, the tax authority has the discretion to impose travel bans or even detention to the taxpayer, or request the Administrative Enforcement Agency to seize the taxpayer's property.

The provision seems obviously unfair, and aimed at preventing taxpayers from challenging tax bills. When it is still unclear whether the tax liability or the amount is correct or not, why does the citizen have to pay one third just to interrupt the enforcement? While a final decision on the taxation has not been

rendered, the taxpayers are forced to deliver their funds to the tax authority just for their complaints to be considered. Besides being grossly unfair, this is against the principle that citizens should not be unjustly deprived of their property.

Article 4 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights provides that these rights may only be subject to limitations “compatible with the nature of these rights and solely for the purpose of promoting the general welfare in a democratic society.” The one-third payment rule is intrinsically incompatible with economic human rights, as it creates an excessive burden on those who want to assert their rights in a dispute with the state, and deprives them of their property on the basis of an assessment that is still contested and not final.

I live in the United Kingdom, where the costs for the parties involved in tax disputes with Her Majesty Revenue & Customs are limited to legal fees. For complex cases, the High Court costs regime applies, i.e., the losing party pays the costs of the winning party; but with the caveat that the taxpayer can opt out of that regime within 28 days of the case being classified as complex. In this case, there will be no additional cost, i.e., no burden to pay for the costs of the winning party, whether the taxpayer wins or loses. The rationale behind this is that taxpayers should not be deterred from filing a complaint by excessive expenses or by the risk of having costs awarded against them—as is the case in Taiwan with the one-third payment rule.

2. The Original Taxation Decision Is Never Revoked

From 9 to 13 May 2022, the third review of the implementation of the Two Covenants in Taiwan by a Review Committee consisting of nine independent experts took place in Taipei. Just before the beginning of this review process, the Control Yuan, the inspective arm of Taiwanese government, published a report where it exposed inter alia a second serious problems of Taiwan's tax system (Introvigne 2022).

When a taxpayer criticizes a tax bill, the “original taxation decision” is followed by a “review decision.” If the review decision is unfavorable to the taxpayers, they can challenge it through a court case. Assuming that the taxpayer wins, the court revokes the review decision but not the original taxation decision. The latter still stands and, armed with the court verdict, the taxpayer should

contest it and obtain a new review decision. However, if the tax authorities render a second review decision that is again unfavorable to the taxpayer, the latter should either pay or go to court and try to cancel the new review decision. Again, this would not mean that the original taxation decision is revoked. The taxpayer should seek a new review decision, and so on ad infinitum.

The parties who have successfully won the tax case will instead fall into the predicament of an infinite reincarnation of judicial relief. Under such circumstances, citizens are likely to choose to give up their right of litigation when there is no effective redress at huge cost. Not surprisingly, the Control Yuan called the system absurd. But it still stands.

3. Flaws in the Taxpayer Rights Protection Act

There has been no specialized tax tribunal in the administrative court system of Taiwan until 2016, when the Taxpayer Rights Protection Act was passed. No one can acquire professional knowledge overnight, and no training on taxation rules and practices is included in the education of the judges. As a result, there are merely a few judges in the administrative courts equipped with sufficient knowledge to understand the complexity of tax rules and practice, and to form an independent view. The other judges, due to their lack of knowledge, usually accept the tax authority's statements and end up ruling in their favor.

In 2017, the long-awaited Taxpayer Rights Protection Act of 2016 came into force. According to the Act, a Taxation Special Tribunal will be set up within the administrative court system, and a Taxpayer Rights Ombudsmen task force will be set up to provide support and assistance to the taxpayers. This should have solved a number of decade-old problems. In fact, it didn't.

The first problem with the Act is the selection process of the Taxpayer Rights Ombudsmen. The ombudsmen team is selected by the Ministry of Finance and the tenure is two years. There is a potential conflict of interests because these ombudsmen are not independent third parties—as they are appointed by the Ministry of Finance—and their performance assessments are still conducted by the tax authority. The ombudsmen know that if they rule in favor of taxpayers, which means they criticize their colleagues and superiors, they will have a difficult

time when, after two years of working temporarily as ombudsmen, they will come back to their old job. Their careers will be at risk.

Another critical point is the certification of the specialized tax judges. There is no strict selection and certification process. Those who applied for the certificate were incumbent judges who had already proved that they were not skilled nor independent enough. Nonetheless, all were approved by the Judicial Yuan as qualified taxation specialists. But they are the same persons as before, and the quality of the rulings will not improve.

According to the statistics, in 2020 the success rate of administrative relief in tax cases was less than 10% and the success rate of judicial relief (i.e. through Administrative Courts) was merely 11% (Huang et al. 2021a). Lai She-Bao, a legislator, during his session of enquiry to the Minister of Finance, pointed out that citizens of Taiwan have only a 0.3% chance of winning a lawsuit against the government in the High Administrative Court. This rate is far lower than that in other democratic nations, for example, 44% in Germany, 60% in Denmark, 50% in the Czech Republic, around 50% in India (Huang et al. 2021a). Such statistics reveal that the system is unbalanced in favor of the authorities.

4. Endoprocessual Disqualification

In democratic countries it is generally agreed that to protect the citizen's right to effective remedy stemming from the Two Covenants, judges who have participated in a decision on the same matter in a previous trial should disqualify themselves from the new trial. They have an "endoprocessual" incompatibility, as opposed to an "extra-processual" one that may derive, for example, from the fact that they are relatives or business partners of one of the parties.

Such mechanism exists to protect the right to a fair trial. In case of an appeal, fresh eyes should review the case, not the same old eyes. In Taiwan, rules about endoprocessual disqualification are not strict.

The Tai Ji Men case offers a somewhat extreme example of this problem. Three judges should have disqualified themselves, but a blatant case concerns Judge Huang Shu-Ling (Chao et al. 2021, 118). She participated in four Tai Ji Men trials at the High Administrative Court of Taichung, and heard again a Tai Ji Men

case after she had been transferred to the Supreme Administrative Court. In the end, she was involved in Tai Ji Men cases at different levels thirty-three times.

Not surprisingly, she was not inclined to renege her previous decisions, and became responsible for the anomaly concerning the year 1992. Those familiar with the Tai Ji Men tax case know that it is about the nature of the content of the so-called red envelopes that *dizi* (disciples) give to their *Shifu* (Grand Master) in certain occasions, as happens in many other Chinese martial arts, qigong, and self-cultivation groups. It is generally agreed that these are non-taxable gifts. However, in the Tai Ji Men case it was argued that they are taxable tuition fees for a so-called cram schools, i.e., a school that impart quick teaching on a subject, normally for preparing exams.

What happened in 1992 was not different from what happened in all the other years. Yet, for 1992, and only for 1992, it was decided that the content of the red envelopes was taxable, which created the contradiction at the core of the Tai Ji Men case (Chao et al. 2021, 117). The movement refused to pay what it regarded as an unreasonable tax bill, and the execution by auctioning off (unsuccessfully) and then confiscating its sacred land followed, generating the *dizi*'s massive protests.

While this is generally known to those who have studied the Tai Ji Men case, I want to point out that the real difference between 1992 and the other years was Judge Huang. Had she disqualified herself rather than insisting on ruling on the 1992 tax issue, 1992 would have been ultimately treated as all the other years, and the Tai Ji Men case would have been solved long ago.

5. Parties Cannot Access Evidence

In a truly democratic judicial and administrative system, the parties have a right to access the evidence used against them. This is not necessarily the case in Taiwan.

Again, I will use an example from the long Tai Ji Men saga. After several requests from the Administrative Appeal Committee of the Ministry of Finance, in 2002 the National Taxation Bureau (NTB) finally agreed to conduct a survey to clarify the nature of the content of the red envelopes. The NTB designed the form and selected the sample, and sent out 206 questionnaires to *dizi*. Tai Ji Men

believe that all the 206 responses, although with different language, confirmed that the red envelopes included gifts.

However, Zheng Sheng-He, the then Director of NTB Taipei and Hsu Yu-Zhe, the then Director of NTB Central Area, concealed the evidence and prevented the interested parties from accessing the survey results. Both Directors claimed that only nine and five respondents respectively stated that the content of the red envelopes consisted of gifts (Chao et al. 2021, 99–101). In 2009, Ling Chung-Yuan, the then Director of NTB Taipei, in her response to the Control Yuan, claimed again that none of the 206 responses had indicated that the monetary donations were gifts. Tai Ji Men *dizi* believe that this is the contrary of the truth (Chao et al. 2021, 131).

Later, the survey was repeated on a larger scale. Its results were announced in 2012, and it came out that all the 7,401 respondents had manifested their belief that the content of the red envelopes should be considered as gifts (Chao et al. 2021, 137–38). But the damage had been done, and the famous decision about the year 1992 mentioned the alleged results of the 2002 survey. Tai Ji Men *dizi* know that the results of the 2002 survey announced by the tax bureaucrats cannot conceivably be true. After all, *they* answered the question. However, they cannot prove that such is the case because to this very day they have been refused full and unrestricted access to the material of the 2002 survey.

6. Lack of Accountability

Another problem that emerged in the Tai Ji men case is that, despite the numerous misconducts and violations of laws by the prosecutor who started the case and the tax officers, none of the unscrupulous bureaucrats has been held accountable. The government agents acted against the rule of law knowing there was no effective mechanism to punish their wrongdoings (Huang et al. 2021b).

Indeed, government agents are fully aware of such deficit in the administrative system, and take advantage of it. Things get even worse in the tax administration, where an improper bonus structure exists. NTB officers are awarded bonuses for issuing tax bills, which is a powerful incentive to issue as many as possible. The contradiction is that rogue tax bureaucrats may profit from the bonuses but would not be held accountable for issuing wrong or arbitrary tax bills (Fautré 2021b).

Conclusion

Of course, these six problems affect all Taiwanese citizens, not Tai Ji Men *dizi* only. They show that when it comes to tax justice the Two Covenants have not been fully implemented in Taiwan. These flaws in the system allow bureaucrats to use the tax weapon to try to destroy groups they do not like. The flaws offer ample potential to crack down on groups for ideological or religious reasons, as it happened with Tai Ji Men (Jacobsen 2020). It is a perennial temptation of governments and bureaucrats to use taxes as sticks to repress those who think independently.

Tai Ji Men is not the first spiritual group that found itself at the receiving end of a tax stick used for repression. *Dizi*, however, hope it will be the last, at least in Taiwan. But this requires a solution for the six structural problems I have listed.

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Young Taiwanese Dizi and the Tai Ji Men Case

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ABSTRACT: The author is part of a generation that was not born when the Tai Ji Men case started in 1996. As both a graduate student interested in the condition of Taiwan's youth and a Tai Ji Men disciple (*dizi*), she reflects on four circles of her generation's experience. The first is Taiwan's interest for global human rights, and the strategies the U.S. and Taiwan's government promote in relation to freedom of religion or belief (FORB). The second is the Tai Ji Men case. The third is the experience of young Taiwanese practicing martial arts and qigong. The fourth is their interaction with international scholars and human rights activists who study and advocate for the Tai Ji Men case.

KEYWORDS: Tai Ji Men, Tai Ji Men Case, Freedom of Religion or Belief, Religious Liberty in Taiwan, Democracy in Taiwan.

Introduction

Much has been written about the Tai Ji Men case, and there is always the risk of repeating what others have already said. I am a 23-year-old student at National Taiwan University, and a Tai Ji Men *dizi* (disciple) who was not even born when the case started in 1996.

In preparing this paper, I have interviewed several *dizi* who were there in 1996. Some are getting old, and the case has been around for so long that some Tai Ji Men grandmothers and grandfathers, who preserved a vivid memory of these days, already died. However, they had passed their memories to their children and grandchildren.

My paper focuses on how my generation sees the Tai Ji Men case within the context of contemporary Taiwan and of the world in the 21st century. Being a

young Tai Ji Men *dizi* means being part of four different circles I will shortly discuss: the circle of the widespread interest in Taiwan for human rights; the circle of those participating in the Tai Ji Men protests; the circle of martial arts and qigong practitioners; the international circle of those studying and at the same time advocating for the Tai Ji Men case. Being inside these circles, mine is an emic perspective, although one also informed by my experience as a college student and my interaction with academics.

The First Circle: A Global Interest for Human Rights

On February 24 of this year, the Russo-Ukrainian war began when Russia invaded Ukraine. The war in Ukraine is followed with great attention by young people in Taiwan. On the one hand, this depends on the peculiar geopolitical situation of Taiwan. On the other hand, there is a real empathy with the Ukrainian people, a feeling of outrage at the human rights violations, and the idea that when a sovereign country is brutally attacked, all countries should stand up and voice out to safeguard peace in solidarity with their conscience and humanity.

The Ukrainian war made young people in Taiwan even more interested in human rights. Everybody understands that they include freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which are protected as fundamental rights by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Young people are idealistic, and naturally enthusiastic about justice, injustice, and violations of human rights. However, in the case of freedom of religion and belief (FORB), this interest is also fueled by the strategies of world leaders.

The United States pursues a freedom of religion strategy, first because religious liberty is an integral part of the American ethos since the Constitution, and second because insisting in FORB allows the U.S. to occupy a higher moral ground with respect to superpowers it sees as antagonist such as China and Russia.

In his statement on the eve of National Religious Freedom Day 2022, President Biden underlined once again the primacy of religious freedom for the United States. In his remarks, he made three points. The first was that religion is a sign of hope and inspiration. Mentioning his personal experience (as a Roman

Catholic believer), Biden said that, “In my life, faith has always been a beacon of hope and a calling to purpose, as it is for so many Americans” (Biden 2022).

Second, the U.S. President stated that, regardless of whether or not people believe in religion, no matter what their religion is, the United States will protect their rights. He said:

We must continue our work to ensure that people of all faiths—or none—are treated as full participants in society, equal in rights and dignity. We can only fully realize the freedom we wish for ourselves by helping to ensure liberty for all. On Religious Freedom Day, let us rededicate ourselves to these fundamental principles (Biden 2022).

Third, and a point that is perhaps less obvious for non-Americans, Biden reiterated that the United States sees as its mandate to defend freedom of religion or belief not only at home, but everywhere around the globe:

My Administration, he said, remains steadfast in our efforts to lead and advance human rights including the freedom of religion around the globe at a time when many people are subject to horrifying persecution for their faith and beliefs (Biden 2022).

When the leading United States authorities speak about human rights, their statements resonate in Taiwan, as young (and old) people try to read in these words a commitment to help Taiwan protect its democratic and human-rights-based system.

These words by President Biden and his predecessors are also considered with attention by Taiwanese politicians. They understand that the United States expect from their allies that they support their global campaign to affirm FORB and criticize those who deny it.

In fact, the administration of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen made three main moves to participate in this campaign. These moves were emphasized in the 2020 periodical report on how Taiwan implements the two United Nations Human Rights Covenants, which it incorporated into its domestic law in 2009 (Introigne 2022a, 2022b).

First, while the United States have promoted three “Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom,” two in Washington DC and one in Warsaw (and a fourth in July 2022 in London), inviting the foreign ministers of many states, experts, and human rights activists, Taiwan has organized in March 2019 a parallel regional initiative called “Civil Society Dialogue on Defending Religious Freedom in the Indo-Pacific Region.” The initiative was opened by a speech by President Tsai,

and efforts were made to bring to Taiwan some of the same international experts who had been invited by the United States in the two Ministerials that took place in Washington DC, including Massimo Introvigne and Rosita Šorytė.

Second, the United States has an Ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, and encourages other countries to institute a similar office. President Tsai also appointed an Ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, a distinguished Taiwanese Christian scholar called Pusin Tali, whose mandate has been renewed for a second term.

Third, the Taiwanese government makes an annual contribution to the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Fund, beginning in 2019.

The Taiwanese government hopes to demonstrate to the rest of the world that it values religious freedom as a source of personal and national stability, and that it is vigilant in protecting religious freedom, in an effort to demonstrate that Taiwan is on the same side of all democratic countries and participates in their global efforts for promoting FORB throughout the world.

The Second Circle: The Paradox of the Tai Ji Men Case

I am not suggesting that these efforts are not sincere. Both the government and the youth in Taiwan perceive their identity as defined in opposition to two "others." We are not like our neighbors who do not respect human rights, and we are not like the past generations who in Taiwan during the Martial Law era lived under the shadow of the authoritarian government and its White Terror.

However, this self-definition is not totally in accordance with the reality. My second circle consist of my fellow *dizi* who participate in the protests for the Tai Ji Men case. The case is well-known enough in Taiwan because of the massive street protests, but a larger part of the population feels that the path to democracy is not yet complete and find obstacles in corruption and the excessive power laws and regulations give to bureaucrats in several fields, including taxation.

The Tai Ji Men case went through four phases. I know the first one only because I interviewed those who were there in 1996, as I am too young to have lived it personally. It was a time of anguish, when the Tai Ji Men academies were raided, the *Shifu* (Grand Master), his wife, and two *dizi* arrested, and a virulent

campaign of slander directed at the movement, which was even ridiculously accused by Prosecutor Hou Kuan-Jen, the main instigator of the persecution, of raising goblins. It was a time of immense suffering for the *dizi*, who were discriminated even by their own friends and relatives who believed in the slander campaign (Chao et al. 2021).

The second time was the one of the great legal victories, which culminated in the 2007 decision of the Taiwan Supreme Court, which ruled that the Tai Ji Men defendants were innocent of all charges, including tax evasion. They even received national compensation for their previous unjust detention. This second time was one of excitement and celebration. Many *dizi* believed they had been vindicated and their problems were over (Jacobsen 2020).

The third time, which in fact started before 2007, was the use of taxes as a tool to continue the persecution and harassment of Tai Ji Men. Ignoring the decision of the Supreme Court, the National Taxation Bureau (NTB) continued to issue ill-founded tax bills. This is a time I and thousands of younger *dizi* personally went through. It was an endless cycle of protests, promises by politicians and bureaucrats that the case will be solved, new tax bills, and new protests. It would be wrong to conclude that Tai Ji Men did not achieve anything. The tax bills for all years except one, 1992, were reduced to zero. The one for 1992 was maintained due to a technicality, even if obviously nothing different had happened in 1992 with respect to all the other years (Chao et al. 2021; Chen, Huang, and Wu 2021).

The fourth time of the Tai Ji Men case is still very much in my mind and my heart. It started in 2020 when, based on the 1992 tax bill, the National Enforcement Agency auctioned off, unsuccessfully, and confiscated land that for Tai Ji Men is sacred as it is intended for a self-cultivation center (Chao et al. 2021, 152–59). New massive protests followed, and they continue to this very day.

The Third Circle: Practicing Qigong

How young Tai Ji Men *dizi* react to this stressful situation leads me to examine the third circle, centered on the cultivation of mind, practice of qigong, martial arts, and purification of the soul. It is an experience other young people from

Taiwan share if they attend one of the other qigong and martial arts schools, many of which exist there. Interestingly, they remain popular with the younger generations as well.

One martial arts movie that has been very successful with Taiwan's youth is "The Grandmaster." It was scripted and directed by Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai and released in 2013 (Wong 2013). It tells the story of Yip Man (1893–1972), aka Yeh Wen, a Chinese master of the martial art known as Wing Chun, who is famous because actor Bruce Lee (1940–1973) was his pupil.

It is not a movie featuring martial arts action only. In fact, it received good reviews as one of the best movies that tried to convey the philosophy of traditional Chinese martial arts. Its message is that one had reached the highest spiritual level when martial arts are used to defend the country and its people, and embody values of loyalty and righteousness. Grand Master Yeh Wen claims in the movie that there were three stages in his martial arts training: learning to "see" (i.e., to perceive the essence of) himself, to see Heaven and earth, and to see all beings.

The movie resonated with me and my fellow Tai Ji Men *dizi*, as we understood it expressed our experience of protesting the persecution as well. The first stage of Yeh Wen's martial arts training, "seeing" himself, corresponds to a first stage of our protests, when we were children and teenagers and went to the protests with our parents. We saw ourselves as capable of behaving as adults, putting fun aside, and doing what was right. "Seeing" ourselves meant coming of age in a situation of crisis.

In the second stage, the Grand Master of the movie sees Heaven and earth. For our generation of *dizi*, this was the stage when we started college, and we saw the Tai Ji Men case in a broader perspective. We felt we were part of a broader social movement for FORB and for legal and tax reform. We spent a lot of time protesting in front of the Presidential office and the Five Yuan, but we also explained to our friends and fellow college students that the Tai Ji Men case was part of a larger problem of democracy and human rights in Taiwan.

In the third stage, Yeh Wen "sees all beings." Many Tai Ji Men *dizi* of my generation went through this passage. We realized that the tax case was not preventing Dr. Hong from continuing his world tours teaching values of conscience, peace, and love. Many of us became volunteers and joined him, preparing cultural performances that we took to all continents. We understood

that this is our true goal while the tax case is simply a product of fate and circumstances.

Perhaps our opponents hoped that by harassing and persecuting us, we would stop teaching our path and values. Not only this did not happen, but we multiplied our efforts to carry our message to the world. This is the meaning of learning to “see all beings,” not only our own problems.

The Fourth Circle: International Mobilization

In the last few years, as Tai Ji Men continued both to protest the tax harassment and to tour the world with events and performances of peace advocacy and education, something we had not fully expected happened.

Tai Ji Men saw scholars and human rights activists from all over the world mobilizing and joining their request that their case be solved. There had been precedents, such as the 1503 complaint on the Tai Ji Men case filed on November 9, 2010, with the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva by Dr. René Wadlow, the Vice President of the ECOSOC-accredited NGO Association of World Citizens. A 1503 procedure is a complaint denouncing a case of violation of human rights and inviting the Human Rights Council to investigate. The Human Rights Council has no direct relations with Taiwan, and no action was taken, but the 1503 complaint was widely publicized and marked the beginning of the internationalization of the Tai Ji Men case. In 2012, Wadlow followed up by visiting Taiwan and meeting with the President of Taiwan’s Control Yuan, Wang Chien-Shien, asking for a solution of the Tai Ji Men case (Introvigne 2020). Kenneth Jacobsen, a professor of law at Temple University, Philadelphia, also studied the case and read some of the first papers on it (Jacobsen 2020).

However, it was since 2020 that regular seminars and webinars started being organized every months on the Tai Ji Men case, and dozens of articles were published, thanks to the efforts of CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, *Bitter Winter* magazine, and the Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (see *Bitter Winter* 2021). The case was also the focus of sessions in international academic conferences and events such as the third Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in 2020 in Warsaw (Bovolenta 2020), the International Religious Freedom Summit in 2021 in Washington DC

(Introvigne 2021a), the 2021 Parliament of World's Religions (Introvigne 2021b) and others. Between 2021 and 2022, the ECOSOC-accredited NGO CAP-LC (Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, Coordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience), filed four written statements at the United Nations Human Rights Council on the Tai Ji Men case (Introvigne 2022c), and international scholars and NGOs sent several letters to the President of Taiwan and other authorities.

All these initiatives are extraordinary, and have created a global community of scholars and activists who follow the development of the Tai Ji Men case almost on a daily basis, thanks also to the recently inaugurated Web site TaiJiMenCase.org. Young Taiwanese *dizi* also feel that they are part of this community, that they are not alone, that what some might consider a local administrative case in fact is regarded as a key FORB issue by scholars from Italy to Canada and from Ukraine to Brazil, Mexico, and United States.

This is the globalization of human rights issues in action, a living and moving experience for many young Taiwanese. It remains for Taiwan's government to also take note, and understand that solving the Tai Ji Men case is a necessary part of a process that will persuade those young women and men in Taiwan passionate for human rights that rhetorical statements about protecting freedom of religion or belief are not mere words.

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Book Reviews

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 5th and 12th 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 19th 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 20th 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 (Víctor Manuel Gómez Rodríguez, 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 page 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.

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