

## The Controversies Around Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki: Background, Causes, and Context

Liselotte Frisk†

*Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden*

For information on the article: [editors@cesnur.net](mailto:editors@cesnur.net)

**ABSTRACT:** Since 2009, Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki, Finland, has been subject to allegations of manipulation, human trafficking, and sexual abuse, as are other branches of the Natha and MISA organizations. This article was written by Liselotte Frisk (1959–2020) and peer-reviewed just before she died in 2020 (readers should consider it is updated to that year, without considering subsequent events and bibliography; only references to web sites have been checked and updated). It is published with her heirs' permission. It discusses the history, beliefs, and practices of the group. The controversies related to Natha Yoga are connected to the (now outdated) “brainwashing” paradigm of the 1970s and 1980s concerning new religious movements. The main material used consists of academic articles, internal material from Natha Yoga, and interviews with longtime members. The article argues that none of the controversial features proposed by the psychologist Margaret Singer as typical of “cultic brainwashing” are present in Natha Yoga.

**KEYWORDS:** Natha Yoga, MISA, Atman Federation, Gregorian Bivolaru, Tantra, Sacred Eroticism, Mental Manipulation, Brainwashing.

### *Introduction*

Natha Yoga Center (also spelled “Yogacenter”) Finland started in Helsinki in 1997. In Finland there is also a small yoga center in Tampere. “Natha” is a Sanskrit name for Shiva. In the ancient scripture *Tantraraja Tantra*, we read that the Tantric teachings originally were revealed by Shiva to Shakti, and then transmitted through the nine Nathas, or perfected masters, who descended to earth and revealed Tantra to humankind (Urban 2003, 30). The name Natha Yoga thus relates to a tradition originating with Shiva, perceived as transmitted to humans via perfected masters.

Natha Yoga is part of a global movement called MISA, The Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, started by the Romanian citizen Gregorian Bivolaru together with a group of around twenty people in Romania in 1990. Natha Yoga is affiliated to Atman Federation of Yoga and Meditation, an international organization for yoga centers of MISA, which exist in about thirty countries all over the world. In the Scandinavian countries, the name of the yoga centers is “Natha,” while centers in other countries may have different names. In Britain the centers are, for example, called Tara, and in the Netherlands, Ananda. All over the world, the number of followers is estimated by the group to be about 20,000–30,000.

Since 2009, Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki has been subject to allegations of manipulation, human trafficking, and sexual abuse. Finland is not the only country where allegations against MISA have emerged. Already in Romania, where Gregorian Bivolaru started teaching yoga around 1970, his yoga group was considered controversial and was surveilled by the Securitate police, at that time because yoga was considered to be against the communist regime. The tensions with society, however, continued in post-communist Romania, and allegations later appeared also in other countries.

The aim of this article is to discuss and evaluate the context, causes, and circumstances of the allegations related to Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki. The history of the center will be described, starting with its roots in Romania, and the beliefs, practices, and lifestyle promoted by the organization will be outlined. The controversies related to Natha Yoga will be positioned in the historical controversies about new religious movements in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the context of the now outdated and academically rejected “brainwashing” thesis. It will be argued, however, that, even by using the criteria of the “brainwashing” thesis, Natha Yoga would not be a candidate for manipulation, as significant criteria are not fulfilled in this particular case.

The method is triangular, using different kinds of sources, including internal material like the web sites of Natha Yoga/MISA, and texts written by Gregorian Bivolaru, as well as academic articles about the group, and reports and other official material. I also made a field visit to the Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki in the autumn 2018, which included observation as well as interviews with sixteen longterm ashram residents, yoga teachers, and advanced yoga students. The interviews were semistructured and aimed at getting a picture of the members’

beliefs, lifestyle, and perspectives of life. The interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, and that the material would be treated confidentially. No personal data about the informants were collected, with the conscious aim of keeping their absolute anonymity, as the subject of the interview was sensitive in the context of the controversies and allegations related to the group. Finally, I also conducted an interview on Skype with Mihai Stoian, the coordinator of the Natha Yoga Center in Copenhagen, to get clarification on some significant themes.

The first part of the article will contain a description of MISA and Natha Yoga. In the next section, the rejected “brainwashing” theory will be described, and MISA will be positioned in that particular historical context. Lastly, Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki will be discussed in relation to the most significant characteristics of the “brainwashing” theory.

### *History*

MISA and Natha Yoga are founded on the teachings of Gregorian Bivolaru, born in 1952 in Romania. As a young man, he developed an interest in Eastern spiritualities and yoga. Mihai Stoian, who is considered one of the leading yoga teachers in the movement (Introvigne 2017), reports that, already at the age of 15, Bivolaru read books in English and French about parapsychology, alchemy, sexology, and esoteric traditions, and also practiced yoga for eight or nine hours every day (Stoian 2018a, 309). In 1970, at the age of 18, Bivolaru started to teach yoga in Bucharest (Zoccatelli 2017, 11). Yoga was, however, at that time regarded with suspicion by the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918–1989), and Bivolaru was kept under surveillance by the Romanian Securitate police (Theils 2015, 63). From 1982, meditation and yoga were illegal in communist Romania, and were considered as activities against the state. However, Bivolaru, in spite of this, continued to practice and teach yoga in secrecy (Stoian 2018a, 311).

Another reason why Bivolaru was surveilled by the security police was that he was in correspondence with the exiled Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), the prominent Romanian historian of religion who was also a critic of the communist regime (Theils 2015, 63). Eliade was one of the founders of comparative studies of religion, and since 1957, he was the head of the Religions department at the

University of Chicago. In 1984, Bivolaru was arrested for political reasons for the first time (Bucharest Law Court 2011), and he was later sent to prison for one and a half years. Again, in 1989, Bivolaru was arrested and convicted as a political prisoner and was held at a psychiatric clinic (Stoian 2018a, 311–2).

After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, when Bivolaru was released from the psychiatric hospital, in 1990 he founded MISA (Thejls 2015, 63). MISA was a very successful movement; after a few years there were forty ashrams in Romania and 750 full-time members. The movement also spread to other countries, and soon had 37,000 members worldwide (Zoccatelli 2017, 11).

The police and media in Romania have, however, also during the post-communist period after 1990, accused Bivolaru and MISA of different crimes. In 2004, the Romanian police searched 16 locations inhabited by yoga practitioners of MISA, and some of the residents were taken to the police stations. Charges ranged from tax evasion, human trafficking, and dealing in drugs to money laundering and prostitution. Only one of the charges, that Bivolaru had a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old girl, illegal in Romania not because of her age but because he was allegedly her teacher and thus in a power position in relation to her, in course of time led to a conviction (Thejls 2015, 62). The girl denied the accusations (Introvigne 2017). Bivolaru was released under investigation and fled to Sweden, where he was granted political asylum in 2006 (Thejls 2015, 62).

Bivolaru was sentenced in 2013 in Romania for the relationship with the 17-year-old girl to six years in prison. He was arrested in France in 2016 and after some time extradited to Romania. In September 2017, Bivolaru was freed on parole. The European Court of Human Rights in 2017 ordered the Romanian state to pay Euro 6.980 to Bivolaru for having been illegally detained in 2004 (Introvigne 2017).

Bivolaru has also had legal problems in countries outside Romania. One of them is Finland, the case of which will be discussed below.

### *Beliefs: The Roots in Indian Tantra*

#### — Gender Polarity and Sexuality

Fundamental for the philosophy of Gregorian Bivolaru are the opposite poles of masculine and feminine principles, mirroring the Indian Tantric philosophy

and practices, common to Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions since at least the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Characteristic for the Tantric scriptures is that Shiva and Shakti, the primordial masculine and feminine Consciousness and Energy, are seen as the foundation of reality, and the erotic union of the male and female is depicted as a symbol of the eternal union of Shiva and Shakti. Sexual practices are thus described in certain Tantric scriptures. However, there are different interpretations whether the sexual practices should be interpreted literally, or whether they should just be seen as symbolical. In the same way, some scriptures describe ritual eating of meat and drinking alcohol, practices that are also discussed regarding their literal or symbolic interpretation (Urban 2003, 12; 42–3).

MISA has published extensively on Tantra, and it is clear that a perspective of erotic relationships as important and spiritual in nature is emphasized and promoted. MISA stands here not only as an actor in the age-old Indian Tantric tradition, but also in a Western tradition of Neotantrism, with precursors like the Osho movement, as well as in the trend of the much looser traditions of new spiritualities, some of which organize courses and events with the focus on connecting sexuality and spirituality (Åkerbäck 2018).

MISA—which is not always the case with the Neotantric new spiritual trends in Western society—is firmly grounded in the Indian tradition, and especially in Eliade’s understanding and presentation of Tantra. Eliade and Bivolaru had a personal relationship through letters, and it is clear that Eliade was a great inspiration to Bivolaru. Bivolaru’s knowledge of Tantra in his youth probably to a great extent originated from Eliade’s books, which were available in Romania at the time.

Eliade had spent three years in India, studying yoga and Indian philosophy (Urban 2003, 147). In his book *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (originally published in 1954), there is an extensive chapter about yoga and Tantrism. Eliade in this chapter describes Tantra as a much older tradition than the Vedic Aryan patriarchal tradition (an understanding that has been contested by later research, see for example Urban 2003, 30–1), centered around the Mother Goddess and being a continual undercurrent of popular spirituality in Indian traditions. Eliade writes that, in Tantra, every woman becomes the incarnation of Shakti, and that the female symbolizes the sacred and the divine, the ultimate reality. Eliade conceives Tantra as adequate for modern times, as humans have to

set out from the basic experiences of their fallen condition, and sexuality in modern times may serve as a vehicle for attaining transcendence.

Eliade cites the Hindu Shakta scripture *Kularnava-tantra*, which states that union with God can be obtained only through sexual union, as well as the Tantric Buddhist *Guhyasamaja-tantra*, stating that perfection can be gained by satisfying all one's desires. According to the latter text, Tantrists may even eat human flesh, lie, or steal—pointing to the teaching that all contraries are illusory, and that extreme evil coincides with extreme good. Only the universal void, *shunyata*, exists, everything else being without ontological reality (Eliade 1973, 202–6). Perhaps redundant to remark, these teachings are not interpreted literally in any contemporary religious group (including MISA), but as having a deep philosophical and symbolic meaning.

Eliade writes further that the Tantric path is far from easy, and that it presupposes a long and difficult *sadhana* (spiritual practice), the aim of which is to transcend the state of duality through the reunion of the two polar principles Shiva and Shakti. Eliade also emphasizes that the Tantric path includes an initiation that can be performed only by a master, a guru. Eliade describes other Tantric practices like visualization, *mudras* (archetypal gestures), *nyasa* (ritual projection of divinities into various parts of the body), *mantras* (mystical formulae), and the construction of *mandala* (ritual diagrams). He also writes about the importance of the body in Tantrism, and the relation to Hatha Yoga in this connection. The body is not seen as a source of pain, but as the best instrument for humans to conquer death (Eliade 1973, 206–27). Closely connected to the body are also teachings about the *chakras* (energy centers), the *nadis* (energy channels), and *kundalini* (the serpent power) (Eliade 1973, 236–49).

A central portion of the text, however, is devoted to what Eliade calls “mystical eroticism,” or *maithuna* (erotic union). The yogi should, in these rituals, incarnate the god, and the woman becomes the goddess. The human couple thus becomes a divine couple (Eliade 1973, 259–60). Eliade emphasizes the importance of not emitting the semen; *maithuna* is never allowed to terminate in the emission of semen. Sensual pleasure should play the part of a vehicle, abolishing normal consciousness and inaugurating an experience of unity by immobilization of breath, thought, and semen (Eliade 1973, 266–68). Sometimes we even find texts about the “return of semen,” performed through a

practice called *vajrolimudra*, symbolizing a transcendence of the phenomenal world (Eliade 1973, 270–1).

In the foreword to Bivolaru’s book *The Secret Tantric Path of Love to Happiness and Fulfillment in a Couple Relationship*, his close student Mihai Stoian writes that the amorous couple relationship, as an expression of the eternal creative game between the supreme masculine consciousness, Shiva, and the supreme feminine energy, Shakti, represents a mysterious gateway to amazing revelations (Stoian 2018b, 14). Stoian presents the book as a genuine practical guide for a harmonious amorous couple relationship (Stoian 2018b, 16). Sexual continence and mutual love are emphasized, as well as that the couple should worship each other. According to Stoian, they will through practice reach peaks of ecstasy through prolonged states of orgasm without discharge for women and without ejaculation for men. The sexual substance is claimed to be biologically transmuted, producing a huge amount of energy that can be channeled, sublimated, and accumulated in the superior levels of the human being (Stoian 2018b, 20–1). Urine, as another body fluid, is understood to have an esoteric significance (Thejls 2015, 66–7), a belief with deep roots in Indian traditions.

A contemporary reader notes that the emphasis, both in the Tantric scriptures and in Eliade’s interpretation, is on the male as a subject. For example—but the examples are abundant—Eliade writes that the woman is offered and consecrated, she must be young, beautiful, and learned, and the disciple will perform the ceremony with her. On the other hand, the woman may also be of low caste or a courtesan, representing *shunya* or emptiness (Eliade 1973, 260–61). Nothing similar is, however, said from the woman’s perspective. It seems that the female is considered a tool for the male; the male is the subject, and the woman is the object.

Concerning this aspect, the writings of Natha represent a more modern perspective, as there is in the texts as much emphasis on the female experience as on the male one. In the book *The Secret Tantric Path of Love* there are, however, many photos as well, and the reader notes that the visual perspective tends to lean towards showing either men and women together or naked women alone, not men only.

Members of MISA have also produced movies with erotic contents. The films are described as artistic and “erotic” and not pornographic, containing spiritual

teachings. The border could of course be discussed, and some sources claim that some films have appeared on pornographic web sites (Thejls 2015, 66; Introvigne 2017). It is emphasized that these movies have not been produced by MISA but were private initiatives from members (interview Stoian).

— Sexual continence

Massimo Introvigne (2018) refers to the fact that semen in many cultures, for example in China and India, but also in subcultures within Western Esotericism, is believed to hold mystical power. As in the microcosm semen generates children, in the macrocosm semen by specific techniques is seen as generating spiritual enlightenment or even immortality. Introvigne mentions three main sets of techniques: *continence* (orgasm without ejaculation or discharge); *assimilation, ritual ingestion, or anointing* of semen or sometimes female secretions; and *ritual use of urine* (or sometimes menstrual blood) through drinking or anointing.

In the traditional Tantric scriptures, and interpretations of Tantric scriptures, there are discussions as to whether the semen should be ejaculated or sublimated and withdrawn upward into the male body (Urban 2003, 43). Bivolaru positions himself within the tradition that emphasizes sexual continence, which he calls the superior capacity to fully control the creative erotic potential. Sexual continence involves the conscious control of the sexual function, both by man and by woman, involving erotic contact with the attainment of an unlimited number of orgasms, however not completed by male ejaculation or by “the explosive loss of the specific creative potential for the woman” (Bivolaru 2018, 51). This, according to Bivolaru, allows the biological transmutation of the sexual energy into superior forms of vital and spiritual energy by inner sublimation. Bivolaru writes that for the woman the control of discharge is very easy to achieve and requires next to no training. For the man, however, the control of ejaculation and its suspension for weeks, months, or years, requires gradual practice (Bivolaru 2018, 51–2). It is said to be achieved through certain Hatha Yoga techniques (Bivolaru 2018, 59).

Other positive effects of sexual continence are supposed to be, for example, less inner conflicts, as well as more energy, a courageous and brilliant mind, and increased intellectual potential (Bivolaru 2018, 52–3). According to Bivolaru, erotic relationships based on mutual love and sexual continence fill one’s being with happiness and enrich one’s life in inexpressible ways (Bivolaru 2018, 83). One goal described by Bivolaru is to awaken a state of androgyny; the woman

should awaken her inner man, and the man should awaken his inner woman (Bivolaru 2018, 92). The person one loves should be perceived as being the embodiment of love, in the case of a man, the masculine archetype *vira* (hero) and, in the case of the woman, the feminine archetype, *Shakti* (Bivolaru 2018, 157).

— Erotic Relationships as Divine and Transcendent

In Bivolaru's writings, the spiritual nature of loving erotic relationships is very significant. Bivolaru refers constantly to God in contexts of love and erotic relationships. For example, he writes that God is love and that love comes from God, that in love ecstasy God embraces the two lovers, that they experience states of being in God, and that God exists in their ultimate essence (Bivolaru 2018, 76). According to Bivolaru, one of the mysterious manifestations of God is the overwhelming state of cosmic orgasm (Bivolaru 2018, 376–77). "God" is defined as the infinite whole that embraces everything, comprising both the manifested and non-manifested (Bivolaru 2018, 373). Bivolaru often, however, refers to God as Father (for example Bivolaru 2018, 141), or "Him" (Bivolaru 2018, 144). Two lovers can approach the revelation of the supreme immortal self, Atman, as Atman should be contemplated in the other (Bivolaru 2018, 90).

Loving relationships are not, according to MISA, restricted to monogamous relations. Bivolaru writes that loving relationships could be parallel and multiple, without anyone ever feeling jealous or possessive (Bivolaru 2018, 270). Bivolaru writes further that selfishness and inferior states such as jealousy and desire to possess the other one, as if the lover is an object, prevent people from experiencing spiritual states (Bivolaru 2018, 77). According to Bivolaru the erotic relationship between two lovers even continues after death in the higher astral worlds (Bivolaru 2018, 268–69), and is thus not restricted to this earthly world.

— Homosexuality

MISA's perspective on genus is a complementary one. Bivolaru writes that the entire universe is born from the cosmic union of male (*yang*) and female (*yin*) principles, and that its expression at the human level is lovemaking between a man and a woman (Bivolaru 2018, 52). According to Stoian, women are receptive and passive, expecting the man to assume the initiative (Stoian 2018b, 39). On the other hand, Stoian also writes that women will initiate the erotic

revolution because they are naturally endowed with the ability to easily practice the self-discipline of sexual continence (Stoian 2018b, 20). Informants in Helsinki also talked about the different natures of men and women. The female energy is conceived of as mild, receptive, caring, while the male is courageous, protective, responsible (interview D.D.).

The complementary views on genus and spiritual sexuality also have bearings on views about homosexuality. Stoian comments that different ancient cultures accepted homoerotic relations between women (but not between men)—relations between several Shaktis—however, also noting that this kind of relationship generates different effects than a relationship between male and female. Stoian writes that an erotic love between two women awakens and amplifies their shared qualities, and that it contributes to the awakening, activation, and enrichment of their specific mysterious Shakti state (Stoian 2018b, 38–40). Stoian thus expresses some positivity towards homoerotic relationships between two women. He writes that women who open themselves to this kind of experience, awakening their femininity, will prepare for or become ready for an increasingly spiritual polar couple (man and woman) lovemaking (Stoian 2018b, 45–6).

Informants in Helsinki expressed that homosexuals (both sexes) are welcome to courses and are respected. However, the teaching about spiritual sexuality is profoundly based in the complementary functions of the two sexes and cannot, as such, be changed (interview D.D.). This perspective is far from unique for MISA.

### *Beliefs: Other Sources*

The basis of MISA and Natha Yoga is definitely Tantric, with deep roots in Indian philosophies and practices. On the web site of the Atman Federation, it is referred to the Gupta Maha Siddha Yoga lineage, although the connections are not developed further. Kashmir Shaivism, a North Indian religious philosophical tradition that has absorbed influences from the Advaita philosophy, is, however, salient. Abhinavagupta (975–1025) shaped Kashmir Shaivism into its specific form. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kashmir Shaivism was restored in India and expanded to the West (Vojtíšek 2018, 132).

There are, however, also syncretic tendencies in MISA, referring to different religions in a universalistic manner. According to Gregorian Bivolaru, his intention was to synthesize everything that is godly inspired and fundamental in the known authentic spiritual traditions. Vojtíšek writes that the members of MISA do not see their ideology as a religion, but as the essence of all religions. The yoga practitioners postulate universal spiritual principles, and among them two are very important: first of all, the laws that refer to the unity of the whole creation, the identity of this reality with God, and the correspondence between the limited realities and the cosmic ones; and second, the polarity laws, the two opposite principles masculine and feminine, or Shiva and Shakti. Bivolaru's texts are seen by many members as divinely inspired (Vojtíšek 2018, 130–33).

There are also several beliefs related to spiritual entities, not found in the Indian Tantras, which are often referred to in MISA. In the book *The Secret Tantric Path of Love*, Bivolaru writes for example about angels, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952), and Spiritualist mediums (Bivolaru 2018, 269). His books in English encompass, in addition to Tantra and erotic mysticism, subjects such as the harmony of colors, natural medicine, nutrition, and vitamins (Bivolaru 2018, 317–18). In printed material from the Atman International Federation of Yoga and Meditation, intended for yoga courses stretching for as many as 46 years, references are made to Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), and Ramakrishna (1836–1886). In the ashram in Helsinki, there are pictures of some of the above-mentioned spiritual masters, but also of, for example, Hariwansh Lal Poonja (“Poonjaji,” 1910–1997), Milarepa (1052–1135), Padmashambhava (8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries), the mythical Babaji, Sri Nisargadatta (1897–1981), Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), Ma Ananda Moyi (1896–1982), and Jesus (field visit, 17 and 18 September 2018).

Introvigne describes the sources of Bivolaru's teachings as encompassing aspects of Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Western Esotericism, and esoteric Christianity (Introvigne 2017). To this could be added different aspects of New Age. Thejls describes belief in extraterrestrials, malefic as well as benevolent, as part of the belief system of MISA. Thejls refers to a text by Bivolaru on the Danish Natha web site (which I did not find there anymore), where Bivolaru claims that MISA is working together with “the Supreme Galactic Council,” consisting of benevolent extraterrestrial beings. Thejls also describes the view of Freemasonry

as a satanic and evil group that tries to control the whole earth and uses diverse methods to keep the rest of humanity in oblivion, beliefs that are used to explain the persecution MISA has been victim of. Freemasons are perceived as having developed AIDS and SARS to reduce the population of the earth (Thejls 2015, 69–71).

### *Practices*

#### — Yoga and Tantra

The main objective of Helsinki Natha Yoga is to offer courses in yoga and Tantra to the public. Most of the courses do not refer to sexuality. Of around 2,100 courses, less than 100 refer to sexual components (Introvigne 2018). The yoga classes started in 1990 and are held once a week from September to July.

The courses are divided into two tracks: yoga and Tantra respectively. The yoga courses are divided into hatha yoga classes and esoteric yoga classes. Hatha yoga comprises physical exercises, relaxation, and meditation, and could be attended just once or as many times the participant wants. Once a month, couple yoga is also offered, where the yoga exercises are practiced together with a partner. The partner could be a lover or a friend. According to the web site, the practices do not include any intimate touching. Esoteric yoga classes encompass, besides physical exercises, theory and discussion, and are structured as courses continuing for many years.

According to the Finnish web site, the first year encompasses for example Patanjali's (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE?) classic eight limbs, knowledge of the *chakras*, mantra meditation, the law of resonance, yogic diet, and a holistic view of the human being. The content of the syllabus is to a great extent focused on different yoga practices and theory, much of a classic kind. During the first year *brahmacharya*, or sexual continence, is introduced, together with the role of eroticism in spiritual development. Gradually, over the years, the extra-yogic content seems to increase. Year 7, for example, has a certain focus on angels, angelic hierarchies, archangels, and fallen angels, and year 8 encompasses correspondences between the Christian angelology and the esoteric oriental traditions. Year 8 partly deals with aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, a subject that continues in year 9 as well. In year 10, aura and bio-energetic aura modifications

make up part of the teaching, as well as healing and spiritual guidance from the subtle worlds. In year 11, the secret code of the Bible is part of the course, as well as the secret of the christening in the Christian tradition and the magic force of some rings. In year 12, the occult law of resonance is introduced, as well as neuro-linguistic programming (“Syllabus for Esoteric Yoga Course” n.d.). Theoretically, the course stretches over 46 years. Some informants interviewed in Helsinki had been engaged in the group for sometimes as long as 28 years (interview 10), but as the groups sometimes were fused due to few participants, they were at the most on year 18 (interview 3).

Most of the informants interviewed in Helsinki had been studying the esoteric yoga course for many years. Most esoteric yoga students, however, take only the first course and do not continue. From the ones starting the first course, 20 % leave during it. Only about one third of the students usually start the second year (interview D.D.). Some informants interviewed in Helsinki had family members who had taken a limited number of courses and then stopped (interview 2).

The second track to follow at the Natha Yoga Center is Tantra. Tantra is presented on the web site as an authentic spiritual path in which one says yes to life. Tantra teaches to surrender to the flow of life with a loving attitude. Applying Tantra to one’s life is said to increase happiness, improve the ability to love, and deepen erotic experiences. Courses advertised on the web site are divided into Intensive Tantra and Erotic Tantra. Intensive Tantra is taught as a course continuing for several years, as the course in esoteric yoga described above, studying a new practice or principle each week. The first year includes, for example, study of the *chakras*, the law of resonance, polarity and play between masculine and feminine energies, sacred eroticism, sexual continence, and Tantric alchemy. It is emphasized that no erotic practices are included in the course.

Erotic Tantra is taught in workshops. Participation could be with or without a partner. The erotic exercises are not practiced in the classroom but are meant to be practiced privately at home as homework. It is explained on the web site that the aim of the course is to increase erotic energy and refine it for spiritual purposes; the practices also teach to open up for love and to maintain attraction in a couple relationship. Techniques for increasing sensitivity and strengthening muscles of the pelvic floor are included.

There are also men's groups and women's groups at Natha Yoga Center. Men's groups consist of more dynamic exercises demanding more physical strength, and also offer a possibility to talk with other men about male issues (interview 1). Women's groups are described as learning techniques to awaken femininity on all levels, like health, beauty, sensuality, controlling sexual energy, natural cosmetics, and communion with nature.

— Tantric initiation

There are several initiations that Natha members could choose to take, for example mantra initiation (subtle sounds). Among the possibilities are several kinds of Tantric initiations, which could be given by the Tantra teachers. The exact content is considered esoteric and is not shared with non-initiates. Mihai Stoian explains that in initiation certain keys are given as to how to, for example, awaken certain secret energy centers. Such esoteric knowledge is given in MISA gradually in a controlled way, and shared when aspirants are at the right level. One of the most controversial initiations, often conducted through recordings with the voice of Gregorian Bivolaru, is an initiation in “amorous postures.” This initiation is offered to groups of people, and the postures are practiced in the class as postures with clothes on. The initiated person can transmit this knowledge and practice it in his/her own private life. The system is constructed in such a way that a person who has acquired this initiation can, if he/she fulfills certain criteria, initiate other people through intimate love relationships (interview Stoian).

— Camps in Romania

For those deeply engaged in Natha Yoga, there is the possibility to attend yoga camps in Romania twice a year. There is a ten-day camp in Baile Herculane, and a camp up to five weeks long in the seaside resort Costinesti. The latter one draws thousands of participants. A special event that is performed at the summer camp is the Yang Yogic spiral group meditation. The attendants are arranged according to their astrological sign, holding hands, and the meditation is believed to enhance the beneficial effects of the planets (Introvigne 2018).

At the camp in Costinesti also the Miss Shakti female beauty contest is conducted. The contest is said to be a contest of inner and outer beauty, and that it develops femininity and sexuality. On the Czech web site—where also some photos characteristic of the archetypical way MISA portrays women are posted—

the Miss Shakti contest is described as a spiritual contest where the purpose is to transcend one's own limitations and awaken the Shakti energy, the divine aspects. The contest consists of several aspects, for example sensual dance, tantric knowledge, and male psychology.

### *Lifestyle*

As with many spiritual groups, there are possibilities to engage in Natha Yoga on different levels. The largest engaged group, the students of esoteric yoga, most of whom attend classes at the yoga center once a week, numbered in autumn 2018 around 85 in Helsinki, and 12 in Tampere (interview D.D.).

Some students are, however, more involved in Natha Yoga. A few of them, around 12–14 people, live in the “ashram”, an apartment adjoined to the yoga center (e-mail D.D. September 28, 2018). To note is that the structure of the ashram is different than in the Hindu context, from which the notion is derived. In the Indian culture, an ashram is typically centered around a guru/teacher, is characterized by a more collective lifestyle, and the residents live in celibacy. In the Natha Yoga ashram in Helsinki even one child spends his time every second weekend, as his father is one of the ashram residents (interviews 4, 8). There are in Helsinki 16 active yoga teachers as well, some of them overlapping with the group living in the ashram, but some living in their own apartments.

The interviewed informants numbered 16, and most of them had been engaged in Natha Yoga for a number of years. Some of the informants were yoga teachers, some lived in the ashram, and some were advanced yoga students. Several of the informants worked in academic professions. The overall impression from the interviews was that many of the informants continually reflect over their life choices and consciously choose again their engagement in Natha (for example, interview 10). Several of the informants reflected on and discussed critically their engagement in Natha Yoga during the interviews.

An ashram in the Natha context should mainly be understood as a living arrangement. Everyone has his/her own room under a rental agreement signed with the owner of the building, has an ordinary work outside the yoga school, and most of the time prepares his/her own meals and eats separately from the others. In weekends, there are common meditations in the morning, which most

residents attend if they are home (interview 4). The ashram residents are committed to practice yoga for at least two hours every day, except Sundays (interview 9). Many people have moved in as well as out during the years. To move into the ashram, a commitment to yoga is a precondition (interview 4). The informants agree that there are many advantages in not living alone. They get inspiration from each other as well as support in the spiritual practice (interview 6). Many of the informants who live in the ashram spend time at the yoga center about 3–4 evenings a week, participating in courses, helping with courses and other activities, and, if they are yoga teachers themselves, also conducting courses (interviews 1, 4, 6, 8, 10). Some have, however, girlfriends or boyfriends who do not live in the ashram and are not engaged in Natha Yoga (for example, interview 8).

The yoga teachers all teach yoga at the yoga center on a nonprofit basis (interview D.D.). One does not get paid for teaching yoga at the center, as it is seen as a spiritual service. Some yoga teachers who do not live in the ashram are also very engaged in Natha Yoga and spend 3–4 evenings every week at the yoga school (interviews 5, 7). Some are married to partners who are not engaged in Natha Yoga (interview 7). To become a yoga instructor, a two-year course is necessary. The Finnish yoga teacher trainees go to Denmark for Natha Yoga teacher training, which is organized by the Atman Federation. At least two years of yoga practice are necessary before participation in the yoga teacher training, plus a recommendation from the yoga school. The yoga teacher training is free of cost. The printed teaching material is, however, copyrighted and cannot be used outside of the MISA yoga schools (interview D.D.). The Atman Federation also offers a 4-year course to become a Tantra Teacher, and a 2-year Tantra for Women Teaching Course.

The summarized information from the interviewed informants gives the impression of an organization that is quite open and does not monitor the informants' lives in detail. Some informants are, as noted above, married to persons outside the school or have girlfriends or boyfriends not engaged in Natha Yoga. Some evenings each week are, for most of them, spent at the yoga center, but there is also time to do other things like socializing with nonmembers such as parents and friends (interviews 1, 8, 9, 10). Most of them have a steady job or they are students at different universities. Not all informants follow all advises given by the Natha Yoga Center. One informant had, for example, received

certain kinds of health advice from Bivolaru, but did not follow all of them (interview 9). There were also informants reporting not following the required practice of yoga for two hours every day (interview 9). Informants interviewed at the Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki report that the teachings are optional, and that the atmosphere at the yoga center is tolerant and different opinions are often discussed (interview 1). In the courses it is often repeated that the information provided in the school is not imposed, but that it is necessary to try it by own practice and through everyone's own assessment (interview 5).

Members who are deeply involved in the movement are often vegetarians (interview 10), do not drink alcohol, smoke, or drink coffee (Andreescu 2013). Fasting is also included in the lifestyle of some members, but is, however, optional (interviews 1, 9). Close friendships are valued and can also become erotic as Shiva manifests in every man and Shakti in every woman (Vojtíšek 2018, 135–36). Mihai Stoian explains that with spiritual practice and awakening, the outlook on life and relationships may become different than before. There are members who have children, but the ideal in that case is to have children in a conscious way (Stoian interview).

The Natha Yoga center is structured as a nonprofit association with statutes, members, and a board elected anew every year (interview 7). A membership fee is paid monthly; one member mentioned a sum of 200 euro each month (interview 1). If you want to leave the association, you just stop coming and stop paying (interview 7). The yoga teachers have their own group with meetings taking democratic decisions (interview 1), after discussions where different opinions are aired (interview 3). At the time of conducting the interviews there was one person, a woman with origins in Romania, as a coordinator with an overall responsibility that everything at the center should work well (interview 1). She is moderately paid by the yoga center, but she is not currently on the board (interview 7). There are also other groups with different missions, like the PR group (interview 3).

The informants interviewed do not recognize any kind of manipulation beyond ordinary social pressure at the yoga center (interviews 1, 3). The informants mention that of course mistakes happen as in any group, but in their opinion far from the scale portrayed in the critical TV programs (see below), or which could be defined as abuse (interview 3). Some of the informants suggest the possibility

that some people may set too high standards for themselves, which might cause inner problems (interviews 7, 10).

### *Controversies*

In Finland, the controversies around Natha started in 2009 with the Finnish YLE TV show, a program called “The Dark Side of a Tantric Cult” (MOT 2009). The program claimed that Natha Yoga is a cult in which people are exploited under the guise of spirituality. Further, it was claimed that Bivolaru and his followers are suspected of involvement in human trafficking and production of pornographic films.

Another TV show was aired on Finnish TV YLE 1 in spring 2013 by the same producer, claiming that several women had been taken to Paris to meet the leader Gregorian Bivolaru resulting in sexual abuse (MOT 2013). It was suspected that advantage had been taken of the victims’ dependent position and that they were misled to travel to France. It was claimed in the film that around twenty Finnish women had this experience, some more than once. One Finnish woman, interviewed in the TV program, said that one of the Finnish leaders had told her that Gregorian Bivolaru wanted to meet her, but that she had no idea that there would be sexual components in this meeting (MOT 2013). According to representatives for Natha Yoga, other women in the same group as the woman featured in the TV show testify that no sexual interaction took place between her and the leader Gregorian Bivolaru (Holopainen 2013).

Already before the second TV program, in autumn 2012, an investigation had started in Finland about human trafficking, misuse of spiritual authority, and sexual abuse of some young women in Natha Yoga (Mäkinen 2017). The police made a house search in the ashram in Helsinki on October 31, 2012 (Soteria International 2015, 17). According to representatives for Natha, the yoga school had, before the TV program, been financially blackmailed by a person, threatening it with a scandal in the media (*Ilta-lehti* 2013).

According to media, the case connected with the Natha Yoga School in Helsinki was transferred to prosecution for three suspects of human trafficking in July 2017. Besides human trafficking, the charges were sexual abuse and attempt of sexual abuse. The suspects are reported to deny the accusations (Orjala 2017).

The TV show aired in 2013 had been preceded by conflicts between Natha Yoga and some members regarding the content of the school's program. There were voices wanting to include modern dance, which was rejected by the school as not being part of its tradition (Soteria International 2015, 6). There was also a rival yoga school opened as a result of these conflicts (interview 5). According to Massimo Introvigne, there are cases of independent teachers who impart similar teachings as those of MISA, who are cooperating with the anti-cult campaigns against MISA (Introvigne 2017). A woman featured in the TV show is reported to have been in economic conflict with Natha regarding paying rent to the ashram, not paying her share of costs for living together with other yoga colleagues, and not acting according to the agreements (Soteria International 2015, 11).

In September 2017 there was an arrest warrant set up for Gregorian Bivolaru, who was not, however, found (Mäkinen 2017).

### *The Concept of “Cult” and the “Brainwashing” Thesis*

#### — The Use of the Concept of “Cult”

The sociological concept of “cult” (translated with words derived from the Latin “secta” in languages other than English) in popular discourse has become distorted to express negative value judgments about religions that are considered “false.” Value judgments like that are not, of course, scientifically valid. In sociological terms, religious organizations may have different characteristics, as for example various kinds of relationship to society, degree of engagement required of the members, or if members are typically born into the group or become members by personal conversion or decision. These—and other criteria—offer possibilities to sociologically classify religious groups into different organizational categories like “cult,” sect, denomination, and church. Even using sociological criteria, it is, however, difficult to classify religious groups and separate different kinds of religious organizations. The outcome may be different depending on how the criteria are interpreted. Additionally, several of the most common criteria used to classify religious organizations as “cults” are present in one form or the other in most religious groups. Even though these kinds of questions form one important strand within the field of sociology of religion, this kind of classification is therefore of limited usefulness (Frisk 1998, 220).

As indicated above, the concept of “cult” has, in popular discourse, been used to evaluate minority religious groups negatively. During the 1960s and 1970s, as an effect of increasing globalization and cultural pluralism, many new religions emerged in the West, several being imports from other cultures and religions, and some being culturally innovative (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). As is most of the time the case with religious (and other subcultural) groups, these groups changed and adapted with time in contact with mainstream Western society, with some characteristics decreasing and some increasing, and some simply changing. Religious change, import, and innovation are innate characteristics of religion, processes that to a different extent are going on everywhere in the world at any given time. Thus, religious change on a macro plane consists of very natural cultural processes (as indeed also on a micro plane).

— The “Brainwashing” Thesis

Many young people converted to the new religions that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, and it was in this context that the concept of “brainwashing” came into use. It is a concept that today is considered obsolete and has been shown by a significant body of empirical research not to have any scientific base. Sociologist James T. Richardson suggested that ethnocentrism and racism are related to the use of the “brainwashing” theory, as the new religions often originated from outside Western culture (Richardson 1996, 220). To mainstream Western society, conversion to religions very different from traditional Christianity seemed so absurd that only “brainwashing” could explain the phenomenon. Religious as well as secular organizations fighting against the new religions, the so called anticult organizations, were formed in different countries in the 1970s and 1980s. Many of them were initiated by parents who were worried about their (adult) children joining the new religions, and by ex-members who had left these groups and had developed a negative attitude to the phenomenon.

The concept of “brainwashing” originally developed during the Cold War in order to explain why apparently “normal” people could convert to such an evil ideology as communism. Gradually, the theory of “brainwashing” was applied to “totalitarian” forms of religion, or even to religion in general (Introvigne 2014, 304). Dick Anthony (1939–2022), a research and forensic psychologist, and Thomas Robbins (1943–2015), a sociologist of religion, together with several other researchers, refer to Robert Jay Lifton as having produced one of the foundational works for the origin of “brainwashing” theories. Lifton studied

prisoners of war during the Korean War, who underwent Chinese thought reform in the early 1950s (Anthony and Robbins 2004, 250–51). Anthony and Robbins, however, refer to the fact that Lifton’s findings indicated—contrary to what is popularly believed—that thought reform techniques are not very effective. The overwhelming majority of Lifton’s Western subjects exhibited only behavioral compliance under physical duress and threats. Very few subjects exhibited alternation of their convictions in the direction of Maoism (Anthony and Robbins 2004, 252–53).

— “Cults” in the Model of Margaret Singer

The “brainwashing” theory that was applied to the “cults” in the 1970s and 1980s was for the most part a construction by the American psychologist Margaret Thaler Singer (1921–2003) (Introvigne 2014, 304–5). Singer used the “cult” concept as basically meaning a false religious group devoted to deception and manipulation, with the sole goal of recruiting new members and earn money. This, she claimed, was opposed to the established religions, which aim at improving the lives of their members and humankind in general (Singer 1995, 9–11).

Further, Singer defined the main components of “cults” as: having cult leaders who are self-appointed, domineering, and center veneration on themselves; being authoritarian in structure; using a coordinated program of persuasion or brainwashing; being totalistic or all-encompassing in controlling their members’ behavior; and exhibiting extremism in their worldview, requiring total commitment and often requiring isolation from nonmembers. Singer stressed the isolation tactic as one of the most common mechanisms of control in “cults” (Singer 1995, 8–10). She further divided the persuasion techniques used in “cults” into physiological techniques (Singer 1995, 126), for example hyperventilation; repetitive motion; change in diet, sleep and stress; meditation; body manipulation (Singer 1995, 128–42)—and psychological techniques, for example trance and hypnosis; guided imagery; revision of personal history; and emotional manipulation (Singer 1995, 150–69).

There are, however, many possible objections to Singer’s perspective. Mainstream religious practice, for example, displays several of the characteristics Singer presented as typical of “cults.” Many of the established religions (including Christianity) would not even exist had it not been for the historical existence of a “cult leader.” One of the most prominent factors for religious

innovation and change is spiritual creativity (visions, prophetic expressions). Some human beings are certainly considered leaders (of different authority and kinds, see Frisk 2007), but may be both “self-appointed” and created by the followers, mostly through social processes in which both the leader and the followers participate actively (Dawson 2002, 82). A prominent factor in religious innovation and change is often an intense religious engagement, in protest and resistance against the secular lifestyle displayed by mainstream society. New religious movements to a great extent exhibit such intense engagement, and thus often promote a religiously intense lifestyle. This is, however, also the case with engagement in, for example, monastic orders in established religions.

Many of the physiological and psychological techniques referred to by Singer are also used in mainstream religions. They represent both quite normal lifestyle choices (diet, sleep, clothes), techniques sometimes traditionally used to induce wished for changes of mental frames, like body movements (yoga, *tai chi*, *qigong*) or meditation and guided imagery, or processes at work in any social group (social influences on emotions or revisions of personal history).

#### — The Academic Rejection of the “Brainwashing” Thesis

Based on empirical studies of new religious movements during the 1980s and 1990s, an overwhelming majority of the scientific community soon agreed that no support could be found for the “brainwashing” theory. Humans are certainly social beings, being constantly influenced by other people in social contexts, and many social institutions like child education and the school system are based on the understanding and acceptance of social influence as a medium for human change and social control. The “brainwashing” thesis, however, conceives “cult” psychological coercion as fully equivalent to physical constraint, and assumes that the psychologically coerced individual is as unambiguously under someone else’s control as is a physical captive. “Brainwashing” claims entail a model in which only extrinsic or external forces determine religious choices, as opposed to intrinsic or self-related forces, a point of departure that contradicts empirical research (Anthony and Robbins 2004, 244–45). The brainwashing perspective assumes humans as passive objects, without any freedom of will, with the personality and predisposing factors seen as insignificant (Anthony and Robbins 2004, 249).

Anthony and Robbins examined the existing body of research on participants in new and unconventional spiritual movements and summarized their findings on

this subject. They show that the participants typically manifest certain attributes of personal background and are not randomly chosen, as is claimed by “brainwashing” proponents (for further discussion, see Anthony and Robbins 2004, 257–69). Besides that, the power of the “brainwashing” seems to be very weak: Anthony and Robbins cite the famous study from 1984 by Eileen Barker, a professor of sociology, showing that no more than 0.005 percent of the prospective recruits who visited a Unification Church center was associated with the movement two years later (Barker 1984). After attending a 2-day workshop, 29–30 percent would attend the following 7-day workshop, 17–18 percent would attend the 21-day workshop, and 8–9 percent would join the church as full-time members. Summarily, very few potential converts were converted, and about half of the ones who did convert had left the group two years later. These results are confirmed by other studies on various groups. Anthony and Robbins conclude that many members leave the groups voluntarily, to an extent that they write about “revolving doors” through which recruits are moving in and out.

Anthony and Robbins also note, based on results from a number of studies, that ex-members were more likely to claim that they had been “brainwashed” if they had been forcibly removed from the group (deprogrammed) and if they had contacts with anticult organizations (Anthony and Robbins 2004, 262–64). James Richardson concludes, also based on the existing body of research, that reports of having been “brainwashed” tend to be learned interpretations. Richardson further writes that research shows that many participants seek out new religions to accomplish personal goals; that participation often seems to have a generally positive impact on most participants; that the “brainwashing techniques” are not very successful as proved by the fact that most new religions are very small, many participants remain in the groups for only a short time, and most of the people who come into contact with a new religion never join at all (Richardson 1996, 221–24). Richardson thus confirms the results of Anthony and Robbins on almost every point.

An important milestone regarding the status of the brainwashing thesis was when the professional associations American Psychological Association, American Sociological Association, and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion between the end of the 1980s and the 1990s all confirmed that empirical research disconfirmed the “cultic brainwashing perspective” (Anthony and Robbins 2004, 271). This standpoint affected the outcome of court cases, where

new religious groups had been accused of “brainwashing” and manipulation. From about 1990 the new religions tended to win these cases, based on the statements of the professional organizations (for a study of court cases during that period, and the role of the professional associations, see Introvigne 2014). An important event was further when the American anticult organization CAN, Cult Awareness Network, went bankrupt after a person who had gone through a failed deprogramming process sued the organization and won (Shupe and Darnell 2006).

### *Discussion*

Below will be discussed the allegations raised towards the Natha Yoga center in Helsinki. The allegations comprise human trafficking in the sense of manipulating female members to travel to France to meet the founder of the group, meetings alleged to have resulted in sexual abuse. The allegations will be placed in the context of the brainwashing thesis outlined above and will be related to the main characteristics of “cults” and “cultic manipulation” as formulated by Margaret Singer. Themes that will be discussed are deception and manipulation, isolation, totalistic commitment, and authoritarian structure. Finally, an additional theme, cultural challenge, will be raised, as an alternative cause of the emergence of these allegations.

#### — “Cults,” Deception, and Manipulation

As we have seen, the decisive characteristic of “cults,” in the perspective of Margaret Singer, the most well-known proponent of the “brainwashing” thesis, are assumed to be deception and manipulation. One may of course have different opinions about the teaching of sacred eroticism in Natha Yoga, but the standpoint of the school is far from being hidden from the participants and members. On the contrary, it is openly declared in different contexts as the website and is part of the syllabus for the first year of the esoteric yoga course. Informed consent seems to be as basic to intimate relationships in Natha Yoga as in mainstream society. Natha Yoga certainly is an esoteric group, which means that some practices and beliefs are taught only after some time, as outlined in the curriculum. The teaching about sacred eroticism is, however, openly described.

The allegation of manipulation, however, deserves a further discussion because of the blurred borders of social influence, which to some extent is present in all social groups. Human beings are social beings, and as such are susceptible to influences from other human beings. Some characteristics of social groups may strengthen the level of social influence; Singer proposes totalistic commitment, isolation, and authoritarian structure. These characteristics will therefore be discussed below in relation to Natha Yoga.

— Totalistic Commitment, Isolation, and Authoritarian Structure

Singer claims that “cults” are totalistic or all-encompassing in controlling their members’ behavior, requiring a total commitment, and also refers to “isolation” as an important characteristic of “cults.” Based on the empirical study above, it is, however, easy to see that these features do not characterize Natha Yoga. Not even the students living in the Natha Yoga ashram show a high degree of isolation from society, nor do they live in a totalistic environment requiring a high degree of commitment. All of the students living in the ashram work or study outside the yoga center, and thus have prolonged daily contacts with people who are not members of Natha Yoga. Some also have girlfriends or boyfriends who are not engaged in Natha Yoga and who live outside the ashram. Some of the informants also talk openly about the fact that they do not follow all the guidelines from the organization, and do not seem to think that this is strange.

Although several of the informants stressed the importance for them to have as close friends fellow members of the group, it is clear from the interviews that the residents of the ashram live a quite private life. They do not, for example, share meals but each of them prepares meals individually. This lifestyle could be contrasted with the behavior of some other new religious movements, where members live in communities where all aspects of life are shared, including work and meals, where the contacts with the outside world are restricted, and where marriage partners have to be chosen from inside the group.

Singer further writes about “cults” being authoritarian in structure and having domineering cult leaders. Gregorian Bivolaru is without doubt the initiator of MISA and Natha Yoga, and is held in great esteem by the yoga practitioners. He is not, however, present in the members’ daily lives, and has never visited Finland. Not all of the informants in this study have ever met him.

The allegations of the Finnish authorities hint that other people in the organization might be in a position to manipulate students to travel to France for sexual abuse. Although there are, for different reasons, in all social contexts people with more social power, research contradicts that humans are totally passive objects without any freedom of will, especially in contexts that are neither totalistic nor isolated.

An important piece of information illustrating the weakness of possible manipulation in Natha Yoga is that the statistics for staying in or leaving the group show a similar pattern as the reported empirical research on other new religious movements. Only one third of the students in the first year of the Natha Yoga course continue to the second year. The students after that keep on decreasing until the courses after a few years have to be fused due to having too few participants.

#### — Cultural Challenges

New religious movements offer alternatives to mainstream society concerning beliefs, practices, and lifestyles. Sometimes the alternatives are innovative, but more often to a significant extent they are imported from other cultures. Natha Yoga, although initiated by a Romanian citizen, is to a great extent imported from and formed by the Indian Tantric tradition, which has its roots in ancient India. Natha Yoga presents the polarized and gendered philosophy of Shiva and Shakti, consciousness and energy, and in this context promotes a perspective of sacred and spiritual eroticism.

Integral to new religious movements, as indicated above, is that they present alternatives compared to mainstream society. The area of sexuality and family is often included and thus differs from mainstream lifestyles (Palmer 1994). The perspective of the new religions may be more negative to sexuality than mainstream society, perhaps advocating celibacy as the preferred lifestyle, or perhaps sex only within marriage, which, at least in Sweden and Finland in contemporary society would be considered more constraining than “normal,” or, as in the case of Unification Church/ Family Federation, advocating arranged marriages, something that is also far from the norm in our society. At the other end of the scale, there are new religious groups that advocate a freer perspective on sexuality than the norm in Western societies. Still—although there are strong subcultures among young people, at least in Sweden, living polyamorously, or having several “sexual friends”—for many contemporary citizens it is still seen as

culturally challenging to simultaneously have more than one sexual partner. In spite of the emphasis by Natha Yoga that an erotic relationship has to be combined with love and a spiritual perspective, this is probably one reason that sparks the controversies between this group and mainstream society.

An observer like Thejls notes as surprising that at a time when sexual freedom is celebrated, Natha Yoga has received such a hostile attitude, especially from the media (Thejls 2015, 68). Also, Vojtíšek writes that Natha Yoga's attitude to eroticism with its consequences for human relationships is one of the core targets of criticism and repression by the Romanian authorities (2018, 138). This also holds true of the controversies in Finnish society. There are, however, also other aspects that might be conceived of as challenging for mainstream Western society. Vojtíšek writes that MISA is both a public and an esoteric community, which sparks a suspicion that keeping secrets is the same as hiding the true nature of the community, as well as that this true reason must be morally dubious. Second, the role of Bivolaru as a spiritual authority, typical for Indian traditions, is not understood in Western societies, and subsequently provokes suspicions of abuse of power (Vojtíšek 2018, 138–39).

These cultural misunderstandings, coupled with the outdated “brainwashing” thesis, form the context of the controversies related to Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki, and the allegations about manipulation and sexual abuse. Applying a non-ethnocentric perspective, Natha Yoga could as well be understood as a new religious movement with a teaching about sacred eroticism and an alternative approach to erotic relations, for each person to accept or reject.

### *Conclusion*

Natha Yoga is a yoga group with origins in Romania, with roots in traditional yoga, Tantra, and Indian philosophies. As is common with new religious groups in contemporary Western societies, there are also additional characteristics originating in other religious traditions. To a great extent, however, the roots of Natha Yoga conform to some historic strands of yoga and Tantra. There is an emphasis on the polarity between male and female principles in the macro- as well as in the microcosm, and a perspective of eroticism as spiritual and sacred. Similar to several groups within the new religious movements' spectrum, Natha

Yoga challenges the mainstream norms of monogamy and nuclear family structure.

An overwhelming majority of the scientific community today agree that the “cultic brainwashing” theory, launched during the 1970s, cannot be confirmed based on empirical studies. A strong argument against the “brainwashing” theory is that a substantial portion of the members in new religious movements leave the groups by themselves with time. Most people coming into contact with a new religious movement do not even join. This situation is the same for Natha Yoga.

The most well-known proponent of the “brainwashing” theory, psychologist Margaret Singer, proposed deception, manipulation, isolation, totalism, and authoritarianism as important characteristics for “brainwashing cults.” None of these categories are characteristic for Natha Yoga. The perspective of sacred eroticism, which is one of the core targets for criticism from mainstream society, is openly advertised and is not introduced in any deceptive manner. Certainly, social influences in Natha Yoga do exist as in any other social group, but isolation, totalism, and authoritarianism, which strengthen social influences, are not, as shown above, present in the group to a convincing extent.

## References

- Åkerbäck, Peter. 2018. “Tantriska festivaler och parövningar” (Tantric Festivals and Couple Exercises). In *Levd religion: Det heliga i vardagen* (Lived Religion: The Sacred in Daily Life), edited by Daniel Enstedt and Katarina Plank, 297–312. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
- Andreescu, Gabriel. 2013. “The Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute. Facets of an Identity: Minority of Conscience, Minority of Sexual Practice, and Minority Born of Repression.” A paper presented at CESNUR 2013 conference, Falun, Sweden.
- Anthony, Dick, and Thomas Robbins. 2004. “Conversion and ‘Brainwashing’ in New Religious Movements.” In *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, edited by James R. Lewis, 243–97. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barker, Eileen. 1984. *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

- Bivolaru, Gregorian. 2018. *The Secret Tantric Path of Love to Happiness and Fulfillment in a Couple Relationship*. Copenhagen: Natha Books.
- Bucharest Law Court. 2011. Civil sentence no 1271.
- Dawson, Lorne L. 2002. "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy and Violent Behavior in New Religious Movements." In *Cults, Religion and Violence*, edited by David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, 80–101. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1973. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Frisk, Liselotte. 1998. *Nyreligiositet i Sverige: Ett religionsvetenskapligt perspektiv* (New Religiosity in Sweden: A Religious Studies Perspective). Nora: Nya Doxa.
- Frisk, Liselotte. 2007. *De nya religiösa rörelserna—vart tog de vägen?* (The New Religious Movements—Where Have They Gone?). Nora: Nya Doxa.
- Holopainen, Simo. 2013. "Hyvaksikaittoa joogaliikkeessa?" (Wellbeing in the Yoga Shop?) *Ilta-Sanomat*, May 14.
- Iltalehti* 2013. "Yle: Joogaavia naisia käytettiin hyväksi" (Yle: Women Yoga Practitioners Were Abused). May 13.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2014. "Advocacy, Brainwashing Theories, and New Religious Movements." *Religion* 44(2):303–19.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2017. "Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute." *World Religions and Spirituality Project*, June 1. Accessed December 23, 2023. <https://bit.ly/3NHvVQL>.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2018. "Sacred Sexuality Within Contemporary Esoteric Groups: From Early 20th Century Origins to MISA." Accessed December 23, 2023. <https://bit.ly/4781BcN>.
- Mäkinen, Rami. 2017. "Suomessa toiminut tantrajoogaguru lisättiin Europolin etsityimpien rikollisten listalle—epäillään ihmiskaupasta ja seksuaalirikoksista" (Finnish Tantra Yoga Guru Added to Europol's Most Wanted List—Suspected of Human Trafficking and Sexual Offenses). *Ilta-Sanomat*, September 22. Accessed December 23, 2023. <https://bit.ly/4awN7pI>.
- MOT. 2009. "Tantrakultin pimeä puoli" (The Dark Side of the Tantra Cult). October 5. TV show. Accessed December 23, 2023. <https://bit.ly/4aCfD9e>.
- MOT. 2013. "Tantragurun kutsu" (Invitation to the Tantra Guru). May 13. TV show. Accessed December 23, 2023. <https://bit.ly/3RV06tT>.
- Orjala, Anne. 2017. "Joogakouluun liittyvä esitutkinta valmistui – KRP: Kolme henkilöä epäillään törkeästä ihmiskaupasta" (Preliminary Investigation into the Yoga School Completed—KRP: Three Suspects Accused of Aggravated

- Human Trafficking). *Yle.fi*, September 7. Accessed November 23, 2023. <https://bit.ly/3RJRANK>.
- Palmer, Susan J. 1994. *Deny the accusation soon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Richardson, James T. 1996. "A Critique of 'Brainwashing' Claims About New Religious Movements." In *Cults in Context: Readings in the Study of New Religious Movements*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson, 217–28. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Shupe, Anson D., and Susan E. Darnell. 2006. *Agents of Discord: Deprogramming, Pseudo-Science, and the American Anticult Movement*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Singer, Margaret Thaler [with Janja Lalich]. 1995. *Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Soteria International. 2015. "Considerations and Observations Regarding the Finnish Police Investigation and Media Attention in the Case of Jooga-ja Tantrakuoli Natha." Accessed December 23, 2023. <https://bit.ly/3TE9nrD>.
- Stark, Rodney, and William Sims Bainbridge. 1985. *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*. Berkeley, CA, and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Stoian, Mihai. 2018a. "Gregorian Bivolaru: An Exceptional Spiritual Destiny, an Example of Life." In *The Secret Tantric Path of Love to Happiness and Fulfillment in a Couple Relationship*, by Gregorian Bivolaru, 308–16. Copenhagen: Natha Books.
- Stoian, Mihai. 2018b. "Tantra Today." In *The Secret Tantric Path of Love to Happiness and Fulfillment in a Couple Relationship*, by Gregorian Bivolaru, 13–50. Copenhagen: Natha Books.
- "Syllabus for Esoteric Yoga Course." n.d. Supplied to the author by D.D.
- Thejls, Sara Möldrup. 2015. "MISA and Natha: The Peculiar Story of a Romanian Tantric Yoga School." In *Handbook of Nordic New Religions*, edited by James R. Lewis and Inga Bårdsen Töllefsen, 62–76. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Urban, Hugh. 2003. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Vojtíšek, Zdeněk. 2018. "Yoga, Tantrism, and Persecution: MISA, a New Religious Movement in Social Conflict." *Central European Journal of Contemporary Religion* 2: 123–41.
- Zoccatelli, PierLuigi. 2017. "Esotericism, Deviance, and Repression: An Introduction to the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute

(MISA).” *The Journal of Cesnur* 1(1):10–19. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2017.1.1.2.

Web sites of Atman Federation and Natha (all accessed by the author on February 1, 2019):

<http://atmanyogafederation.org>

<http://natha.fi/en>

<https://www.jogin.cz>

<https://www.nathayogacenter.dk>

Interviews:

D.D., coordinator of Natha Yoga Center, Helsinki, September 17, 2018.

Mihai Stoian, coordinator of Natha Yoga Center, Copenhagen, April 17, 2019, Skype.

Interview 1 September 17, 2018, male.

Interview 2 September 17, 2018, male.

Interview 3 September 17, 2018, female.

Interview 4 September 17, 2018, two males.

Interview 5 September 17, 2018, female.

Interview 6 September 17, 2018, female.

Interview 7 September 18, 2018, male.

Interview 8 September 18, 2018, male.

Interview 9 September 18, 2018, female.

Interview 10 September 18, 2018, female.

Interview 11 September 18, 2018, male.

Interview 12 September 18, 2018, two males.

Interview 13 September 18, 2018, two males.

E-mail:

D.D., e-mail, September 28, 2018.