

Research Notes

Sacred Eroticism or Sexual Magic? Liselotte Frisk's Research on MISA

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ABSTRACT: Shortly before her death in 2020, distinguished Swedish scholar of new religious movements Liselotte Frisk conducted a study of the Helsinki ashram of the Natha Yoga Center, a group connected with the Romanian-based MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute. Her report, although unfinished, was published in this journal in January 2024. The article places Frisk's report within the framework of controversies about "brainwashing" and the theories of American anti-cult psychologist Margaret Singer. It shows that Frisk's criticism of Singer did not simply repeat the arguments of previous scholars but included important original elements. Frisk then applied her criticism of Singer's to discussions about MISA and the Natha Yoga Center, challenging media and anti-cult theories that they are "cults practicing brainwashing" and that their practices of sacred eroticism are not embraced voluntarily by female students who decide to engage in this peculiar path to spiritual enlightenment.

KEYWORDS: MISA, Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, Natha Yoga Center, Natha Yoga in Finland, Gregorian Bivolaru, Brainwashing, Margaret Singer.

Introduction

In 2018–2019, shortly before her premature death, Swedish scholar Liselotte Frisk (1959–2020) conducted a study of the Helsinki ashram of the Natha Yoga Center, a group that follows the teachings of Romanian esoteric leader Gregorian Bivolaru, the founder of MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (Introvigne 2022a). In 2019, Frisk also interviewed one of the main leaders of MISA, Mihai Stoian.

Her unfinished report of the research was published in *The Journal of CESNUR* in January 2024 (Frisk 2024). Her posthumous article is important not only for the study of MISA and Helsinki's Natha Yoga Center, but as a last summary of Frisk's criticism of the anti-cult movement and the theories on "brainwashing" by the late American psychologist Margaret Singer (1921–2003), a matter of great interest for the Swedish scholar.

My article is divided into three parts. The first describes how "brainwashing" theories developed, from their origins to the controversies surrounding Singer. The second examines Frisk's specific contribution to the criticism of Singer's brainwashing model, and highlights its originality and differences from what other scholars had previously written. The third part is about Frisk's study of MISA and the Natha Yoga Center, which specifically rejects the accusations based on the Singer model that these groups are "cults" and "brainwash" their members.

Brainwashing from the CIA to Margaret Singer

The term "brainwashing" originated in 1950 with CIA agent Edward Hunter (1902–1978), who worked covertly as a journalist in Florida (Hunter 1951). Initially, "brainwashing" described the coercive methods used by Chinese, Russian, and North Korean governments to convert captured Christian missionaries and American POWs to Communism (Anthony 1996; Introvigne 2022b). The concept was thus not related to religious practices.

In a second phase, some mental health professionals hostile to religions proclaimed that religions, in many cases, "brainwash" their followers in the same way as Communists did. A leading English psychiatrist, William Sargant (1907–1988), popularized these theories (Sargant 1957). But few people were ready to accept this kind of global critique of religion.

In fact, Sargant argued that the technique of "brainwashing" was common to all religious groups without differentiating between established religions and "cults." In the U.S., resistance to "cults" emerged in the late 1960s, fueling interest in "brainwashing" concepts. The anti-cult movement originated from North American parents whose children in the '60s and '70s left their secular lives for new religious movements, which were appealing to students seeking alternatives to conventional careers during the hippie era. These movements included both

Asian imports like the Unification Church and domestic groups such as the Children of God.

Most parents strongly objected to the fact that their children had decided to drop out of college, and serve as full-time missionaries. The anti-cult movement was thus born. It included parents of “cult” members, lawyers, and psychologists (Introvigne 2024).

Psychologists introduced theories of “brainwashing” techniques to the anti-cult movement, arguing that these methods were unique to “cults,” not established religions. Margaret Singer emerged as a prominent figure in this movement, using her expertise to shape a career largely focused on providing testimony in legal cases against purported “cults” while serving as an adjunct lecturer at UC Berkeley from 1964 till 1991.

Singer suggested a framework of six-conditions for “brainwashing”: “keep the person unaware that there is an agenda to control or change the person;” “control time and physical environment (contacts, information);” “create a sense of powerlessness, fear, and dependency;” “suppress old behavior and attitudes;” “instill new behavior and attitudes;” and “put forth a closed system of logic” (Singer and Lalich 1995, 64).

Singer argued that a “cult” is not just distinct from other institutions such as the Army, prisons, and mainline religions in terms of the degree of indoctrination. She posited that what truly sets “cults” apart is their unique “brainwashing” process, which she considered qualitatively different from the techniques used by acknowledged institutions, and unrelated to the specific beliefs or “the content of the group” (Singer and Lalich 1995, 61).

The psychologist argued that the Marines, prisoner rehabilitation programs, and established religions engage in an ethical form of persuasion, while “cults” indulge in unethical tactics. Singer emphasized that a key distinction lies in deception. She pointed out that individuals enlisting in the Marines or joining the Jesuits are fully aware of the nature of these organizations, whereas “cult” recruits are often lured under false pretenses. Approaching potential converts without disclosing the movement’s name or identity is something that has surely been practiced by some new religious movements criticized as “cults,” but not always, not by all, and not by the majority of them.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, the legal conflicts pertaining to “cults” in the United States, which often featured testimony by Singer, had uncertain results. Judges in lower courts, particularly those in rural areas distant from urban centers,

tended to agree with the claims made by parents and decided unfavorably for the “cults.” However, a majority of these rulings were reversed at the appellate level.

The “brainwashing” defense based on Singer’s testimony was also dismissed during the infamous 1976 trial of heiress Patty Hearst, who after being abducted by the left-wing terrorist organization Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) in 1974, took part in their criminal activities. Despite Singer’s claim that Hearst had been “brainwashed” by the SLA and wasn’t accountable, the jury convicted her. Initially sentenced to 35 years, her term was reduced to seven and later to 22 months following clemency from President Carter. She eventually received a full pardon from President Clinton in 2001 (Richardson 2014).

In the 1980s, a clash emerged over the practice of “brainwashing” between two groups. Anti-cult organizations, deprogrammers, a handful of academics using “brainwashing” theories to criticize new religious movements, and certain journalists stood on one side. Facing them were new religious movements, their attorneys, NGOs advocating for religious freedom, various psychologists of religion, and many sociologists and historians who were busy shaping the study of new religious movements into a distinct academic discipline.

In the latter group, the leading figures were psychologists Dick Anthony (1939–2022: Anthony 1990, 1996, 2001) and H. Newton Malony (1931–2020; Malony 1996), historian J. Gordon Melton (Introvigne and Melton 2000), and sociologists James T. Richardson (Richardson 1978, 1993a, 1993b, 1996, 2014, 2015) in the United States, and Eileen Barker in Great Britain (Barker 1984).

The American Psychological Association (abbreviated as APA, a designation shared with the American Psychiatric Association) found itself at the center of controversy. In 1983, this APA agreed to establish a task force titled DIMPAC (Deceptive and Indirect Methods of Persuasion and Control), aimed at evaluating the credibility of “brainwashing” theories. Margaret Singer, leading the task force, selected its members and included prominent critics of “cults.”

The task force worked for years and provided a draft report to the APA’s BSERP (Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility), which governs psychologists’ public policy matters, in 1986. Singer later suggested it wasn’t final, yet BSERP stated it was “a final draft minus references.” The DIMPAC report included two key points: “cults” should not be categorized as religions or new religious movements as this

terminology would overlook what Singer believed were key differences with “non-cultic” groups. Second, it sought criteria to distinguish “cults” from religions, defining a “cult” as

a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative (i.e., deceptive and indirect) techniques of persuasion and control designed to advance the goals of the group’s leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community... Totalist cults...are likely to exhibit three elements to varying degrees: (1) excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment by members to the identity and leadership of the group; (2) exploitative manipulation of members; and (3) harm or the danger of harm (DIMPAC 1986, 14).

Upon reviewing the draft, the BSERP determined it contained adequate details to justify making a statement and sent it to two in-house and two external reviewers for further evaluation. These external reviewers were Jeffrey D. Fisher from the University of Connecticut and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi from the University of Haifa in Israel. One of the internal reviewers was American psychologist and academic Catherine Grady, while the name of the second internal reviewer was not disclosed. With this statement, the APA not only dismissed the DIMPAC report but also instructed that the report should not be cited as an APA document, a decision that was seen by members of the APA as a severe condemnation of the report’s contents.

The opinion of the reviewers were uniformly negative. According to Grady, the coercive persuasion techniques used by new religious movements in the task force estimate, “are not defined and cannot be distinguished from methods used in advertising, elementary schools, main-line churches, AA [Alcoholics Anonymous], and Weight Watchers.” According to her, references to “harm” in the DIMPAC report were extremely confused: “It’s all unsubstantiated and unproved newspaper reports and unresolved court cases. It’s not evidence” (Grady 1987).

Fisher wrote that the report was “unscientific in tone, and biased in nature,” “sometimes... characterized by the use of deceptive, indirect techniques of persuasion and control—the very thing it is investigating.” He also observed that, “At times, the reasoning seems flawed to the point of being almost ridiculous.” Fisher added that the report’s historical excursion on the “cults” “reads more like hysterical ramblings than a scientific task force report.” The DIMPAC task force had criticized the use of the expression new religious movements, arguing that the term “cults” should be retained. Fisher countered that “the reasoning becomes

absolutely some of the most polemical, ridiculous reasoning I've ever seen anywhere, much less in the context of an A.P.A. technical report" (BSERP 1987).

Beit-Hallahmi in his review of the report, asked,

What exactly are deceptive and indirect techniques of persuasion and control? I don't think that psychologists know much about techniques of persuasion and control, either direct or indirect, either deceptive or honest. We just don't know, and we should admit it. Lacking psychological theory, the report resorts to sensationalism in the style of certain tabloids (BSERP 1987).

A scholar hostile to the "cults himself, Beit-Hallahmi nevertheless offered a radical conclusion:

The term "brainwashing" is not a recognized theoretical concept, and is just a sensationalist "explanation" more suitable to "cultists" and revival preachers. It should not be used by psychologists since it does not explain anything (BSERP 1987).

Following the input from reviewers, the Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility for Psychology (BSERP) of the American Psychological Association (APA), released a Memorandum on May 11, 1987, critiquing what was referred to as the "task force's final report." BSERP dismissed the DIMPAC report, stating that it did not meet the necessary standards of scientific strictness and impartial scrutiny required for the endorsement by the APA (BSERP 1987).

Over the following years, the Memorandum sparked significant debate. Singer rejected the APA's decision. She steadfastly believed that it stemmed from a deliberate "Conspiracy" (a term she always capitalized), orchestrated by the APA's senior leadership and prominent scholars on new religious movements, who colluded to commit fraud, lie intentionally, and deceive in support of their scheme (Singer and Ofshe 1994, 30).

Singer and a colleague brought forth allegations in the U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, against APA, the American Sociological Association, and various scholars, claiming they engaged in racketeering activities and should therefore be held accountable under laws originally designed to tackle organized crime.

On August 9, 1993, the Court decided that anti-racketeering legislation is not applicable to actions driven by scholarly and legal disagreements (United States District Court for the Southern District of New York 1993). After the unfavorable outcome at the federal level, Singer resorted to Californian state law, armed with what she deemed as conclusive proof of collusion, but her effort was met with defeat

once more (Superior Court of the State of California in and for the County of Alameda 1994).

In the 1990s lawsuits, Singer herself took it for granted that the 1987 Memorandum constituted “a rejection of the scientific validity of [her] theory of coercive persuasion” and was even “described by the APA” as such (Singer and Ofshe 1994, 31). Later, however, some of Singer’s supporters focused on the Memorandum’s note in its fourth paragraph that “after much consideration, BSERP does not believe that we have sufficient information available to guide us in taking a position on this issue” (BSERP 1987). Contrary to Singer’s own opinion, they argued that the Memorandum, in fact, was not a rejection of her theory of brainwashing, which had neither been accepted nor rejected by the BSERP.

The question then is, on what topic did the APA decide to remain neutral? It wasn’t the DIMPAC report itself, as the Memorandum explicitly adopted a stance on that. Nor was it about the content of the DIMPAC report, specifically the “brainwashing” hypothesis by Singer and the anti-cultists, since this concept is detailed and criticized within the report. The likely explanation is that the purpose of the sentence on “insufficient information” in the 1987 Memorandum was to indicate that Singer’s anti-cult “brainwashing” theory was scientifically inadequate without assessing which alternate theories of persuasion might be credible, which is indeed a far broader issue that the Memorandum understandably did not address.

These issues were at the heart of a crucial 1990 legal case in California’s U.S. District Court, *United States v. Fishman*. Steven Fishman was notorious for suing corporate managements as a pseudo-ally of minority stockholders, then settling and hoarding the funds, disenfranchising those he represented. During his fraud trial, Fishman argued that his judgment was impaired due to his Church of Scientology membership, alleging it subjected him to brainwashing. Despite Scientology being irrelevant to his fraud, and evidence existing that he had resorted to past similar schemes before joining Scientology, Fishman’s defense persisted in involving Singer as an expert witness.

On April 13, 1990, Judge D. Lowell Jensen made a ruling regarding the matter. He noted that there were now ample academic documents on “brainwashing” for consideration, which was a new development compared to previous cases. His decision was greatly influenced by expert testimonies from Dick Anthony and psychiatrist Perry London (1931–1992) for the prosecution. Jensen declared that the concept of “brainwashing” put forward by Singer originated from Edward Hunter, who was a journalist and CIA operative rather than a scholar, and was

largely dismissed as a political propaganda theory by most academics (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990, 12–3).

Judge Jensen reviewed the APA's actions, noting that in the mid-1980s, "the APA evaluated the scientific validity of Singer's... views on coercive persuasion," by creating the DIMPAC task force and subsequently "rejected the Singer task force report on coercive persuasion." He additionally referenced parallel occurrences within the American Sociological Association. Hence, he pointed out that documents "establish that the scientific community has resisted the Singer... thesis applying coercive persuasions to religious cults" (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990, 14). Jensen's assessment was conclusive:

Theories regarding the coercive persuasion practiced by religious cults are not sufficiently established to be admitted as evidence in federal courts of law (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990, 14).

The *Fishman* decision included three key findings. First, that it wasn't just that the APA declined to endorse the DIMPAC task force report; in 1987, it outright rejected both DIMPAC and Singer's "brainwashing" theories. Secondly, that the academic minority supporting the "brainwashing" theory was too insubstantial to suggest that academia was divided on the issue. Instead, *Fishman* validated that a significant, albeit not absolute, scholarly consensus classified "brainwashing" theories as pseudo-science. Lastly, the ruling recommended against admitting expert "brainwashing" testimony in cult-related court cases. Consequently, *Fishman* set a legal standard that has predominantly been upheld in subsequent U.S. court proceedings, although this might vary in international contexts. Singer was still able to testify abroad, but her career as a professional anti-cult expert in American courts had ended.

Liselotte Frisk's Criticism of Singer's Theory

Like myself, Liselotte Fisk was part of the second generation of scholars of new religious movements—the first including Barker, Richardson, Melton, as well as David Bromley and Anson D. Shupe (1948–2015)—who rejected the "brainwashing" theory and the Singer model.

Frisk summarized the criticism of “brainwashing” developed by the founding fathers (and mothers) of new religious movements studies, but included a further personal element of both theoretical and legal importance.

In her report on MISA and the Natha Yoga Center, Frisk repeated that the “brainwashing” theory had been widely criticized and rejected by the majority of the scientific community, especially by sociologists of religion, who had conducted extensive empirical research on new religious movements. Their main criticisms were that the “brainwashing” theory is based on anecdotal evidence, lacks a clear definition and operationalization, ignores the diversity and complexity of individual and group experiences, and violates the principles of academic neutrality and respect for religious freedom.

Moreover, the “brainwashing” theory cannot account for the fact that most people who come into contact with new religious movements do not join them, and that many of those who join leave voluntarily after some time. Frisk’s report cites several studies that show that the conversion and defection rates of new religious movements are similar to those of mainstream religions, and that members of new religious movements are not passive “victims,” but active seekers who make rational choices based on their personal needs and preferences.

Frisk reports how well-known studies that have challenged and rejected the “brainwashing” theory have proved that:

- A substantial portion of the members in new religious movements leave the groups by themselves with time, and most people coming into contact with a new religious movement do not even join. She notes that the situation is the same for Helsinki’s Natha Yoga Center, which has a high turnover rate and a low conversion rate.

- Most members of new religious movements are not vulnerable and marginal persons, but rather active and rational agents, who join and stay in the groups for various reasons, such as seeking meaning, belonging, identity, or personal growth. They are not “brainwashed” or mindless, but rather aware and critical, and evaluate and adapt the teachings of the groups according to their own needs and values. They are not alienated or unhappy, but rather satisfied and fulfilled individuals who report positive outcomes from their involvement in the groups.

While the above criticism corresponds to the standard arguments developed by earlier new religious movement scholars who debunked the Singer model as pseudo-scientific, Frisk adds a new element. She notes that, faced with criticism that her broad concept of “brainwashing” might be easily applied to forms of

education and indoctrination normally regarded as legitimate practiced by mainline religions or the Army, Singer reacted by progressively fine-tuning her definition of “cults” engaged in “brainwashing.” While this had the advantage of excluding the Jesuits or the Marines, Frisk argues, it ended up offering definitions that moved most of the groups stigmatized as “cults” outside of Singer’s (later) definitions.

In the end, as summarized by Frisk, Singer’s features of a “cult practicing brainwashing” are:

- A total psychological control of its members, especially women, who are often subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse by the leaders of the movement.

- Isolation and manipulation of its members, who are cut off from their families, friends, and society, and coerced into giving up their money, property, and autonomy to the movement.

- Totalism and authoritarianism of the movement, which allegedly imposes strict rules, norms, and doctrines on its members, and punishes dissent and criticism with violence, threats, and ostracism.

- Deception and fraud against the converts, who are allegedly lured into the movement with false promises of spiritual enlightenment, health benefits, and social harmony, and then exploited for financial and political gains, without being told before joining what the movement really teaches and is all about, and sometimes not even its name.

Although *some* of these features, Frisk argues, may be found in movements the anti-cultists, and Singer herself, considered “cults,” even the most controversial groups fail to exhibit all or most of them. To escape criticism, Singer had come out with a definition of “cults practicing brainwashing” that would apply to very few movements, if any.

Here lies the originality of Frisk’s approach. First, following previous scholars, she notes that Singer’s and similar “brainwashing” models have been debunked as false and pseudo-scientific. But Frisk does not stop here. She adds a second criticism, that even if we assume for the sake of argument that Singer’s is a valid model, we should still conclude that most groups stigmatized as “cults” do not correspond to it, at least as presented in Singer’s most mature statements and after her earlier work had been criticized.

Frisk's Assessment of MISA and Helsinki's Natha Yoga Center

Frisk concludes that Helsinki's Natha Yoga Center and MISA are precisely groups that should not be considered as "cults practicing brainwashing," even assuming that Singer's model was valid.

In her report, Frisk notes that MISA and Natha Yoga combine elements of classical yoga, Tantra, alchemy, and esotericism, and emphasizes the practice of sacred eroticism as a way of achieving spiritual enlightenment and harmony. According to Natha Yoga/MISA, eroticism is a divine gift that can help humans transcend their ego and connect with the universal Divine Attribute of Love.

Frisk also reports that MISA and the Natha Yoga Center have faced considerable criticism and hostility from the media and anti-cult groups, which has led to the legal prosecution of Bivolaru for abuses allegedly committed, outside of Finland, against female members of Helsinki's Natha Yoga Center (the case is still pending, while Bivolaru is currently in jail in France in connection with a separate prosecution). MISA and the Natha Yoga Center have been accused of being "brainwashing cults" that deceive, manipulate, isolate, and exploit their members, especially women, for the financial and sexual benefit of Bivolaru. Some former members, as it often happens with groups labeled as "cults" (and sometimes with mainline religions as well), also reported negative experiences and abuses within MISA and the Natha Yoga Center, such as sexual pressure, psychological distress, financial exploitation, and social isolation. However, Frisk notes, allegation by hostile ex-members, while they should not be ignored, should be compared with the experiences reported by actual members.

In her report, Frisk challenges the "brainwashing" accusations and the "cult" label applied to MISA and the Natha Yoga Center, and tries to provide a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the movement. Her report adopts a sociological and historical perspective, and uses various sources of data, such as interviews, surveys, participant observation, official documents, websites, and publications. The article also compares MISA and the Natha Yoga Center with other new religious movements that have faced similar accusations, such as the Rajneesh group, the Unification Church (now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification), and the Church of Scientology.

Frisk's report concludes that none of the concepts of deception, manipulation, isolation, totalism, and authoritarianism that Singer required to identify a "cult

practicing brainwashing” are found in MISA and the Natha Yoga Center. The Swedish scholar provides evidence to counter each of these accusations.

The perspective of sacred eroticism, which is one of the core targets for criticism from opponents, according to Frisk is openly advertised and is not introduced in any deceptive manner. The members are informed about the nature and purpose of the erotic practices, and they consent to participate in them voluntarily and willingly. The school's rituals and activities are not abusive or exploitative, but rather respectful and empowering for both men and women.

Second, Frisk argues that the students of MISA and the Helsinki center are not isolated or manipulated, but rather maintain their contacts and relationships with their families, friends, and society. They are free to join or leave the movement at any time, and they are not coerced into giving up their money, property, or autonomy to the movement. They are also encouraged to pursue their personal and professional goals, and to balance their spiritual and material lives.

Third, Frisk concludes that the movement is not totalitarian or authoritarian, but rather democratic and participatory. It is certainly true that Bivolaru's teachings are regarded as normative, as happens for the teachings of founders and leaders in most religious organizations. However, the members are not subjected to strict rules, norms, or doctrines, but rather invited to explore and experiment with different aspects of the movement's teachings. They are not punished for dissent or criticism, but rather welcomed to express their opinions and feedback. They are not controlled by the leaders of the movement, but rather guided by them as mentors and benevolent teachers.

According to Frisk, MISA and the Natha Yoga Center do not impose a totalistic system on their members, but rather offer them a flexible and individualized path that respects their free will and personal development. Frisk's report provides various examples of how the Bivolaru-inspired movements throughout the world adapt to different cultural and legal contexts, how they allow their members to question and challenge the authority of the local leaders, and how they support students in their personal crises and conflicts.

The report presents the testimonies of both former and current members of Helsinki's Natha Yoga Center, who express their positive and negative experiences, their reasons for joining and leaving, and their views on the movement and its critics. The report acknowledges that MISA and the Natha Yoga Center are not perfect or flawless movements, and that some of their practices and doctrines

may be controversial or problematic, but it rejects the idea that they are “brainwashing cults” that harms their students or society.

Frisk’s report concludes by stating that MISA, with its associate organizations, is a legitimate and authentic spiritual movement that deserves respect and recognition, and that the “brainwashing” accusations and the “cult” label are unfounded and unfair. Frisk also suggests that the hostility and suspicion that MISA and similar groups face from the mainstream society are due to the lack of knowledge and understanding of the movement, and to the intolerance and prejudice against alternative forms of spirituality and sacred eroticism.

Acknowledging that a certain insularity of the movement may have contributed to misunderstandings, Frisk calls for more dialogue between MISA and at least those of its critics who would be willing to engage in respectful conversation, and for more academic and public education on the diversity and complexity of new religious movements. Her report also invites further research on MISA and on other new religious movements that practice sacred eroticism, as they offer valuable insights into the human quest for meaning and happiness.

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