

Research Notes

The Nylund Report of 2005 and the Frisk Study of 2019: Parallels and Differences

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ABSTRACT: In 2005, Lutheran priest Karl-Erik Nylund, hailed in the local media as “Sweden’s leading authority on cults,” prepared an expert report and testified orally before the Swedish Supreme Court in the case of the extradition requested by Romania and asylum of Gregorian Bivolaru, the founder of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA). Nylund is a Christian counter-cultist, but his testimony was favorable to Bivolaru and MISA. He stated that “cults” do exist, but MISA was not a “cult.” Nylund’s approach was significantly different from the one of the late Swedish scholar Liselotte Frisk, who in 2018–19 also prepared a report on MISA and Helsinki’s Natha Yoga Center, which is part of the same network of yoga schools. However, moving from quite different premises, Frisk and Nylund came to the same conclusions about MISA and its students.

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

Introduction

Liselotte Frisk’s (1959–2020) 2019 report on the Natha Yoga Center, the Helsinki ashram that is part of the same network of yoga schools also including MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (Frisk 2024), was not the first such document by a Swedish author. In 2005, Lutheran pastor Karl-Erik Nylund, sometimes called by local media “the leading Swedish authority on cults,” submitted a report to the Swedish Supreme Court (Nylund 2005) in the case where Sweden’s highest jurisdiction eventually denied Romania’s request for the extradition of MISA founder Gregorian Bivolaru and recommended he should be granted asylum in the Scandinavian country. Nylund also cooperated with

Swedish sociologist Örjan Hultåker for a report on MISA produced on behalf of the market research company SKOP-Research AB, with the assistance of SKOP associate Oscar Hultåker, which confirmed the Lutheran pastor's findings and was also filed with the Swedish Supreme Court (SKOP-Research AB 2005).

A parallel between Nylund's and Frisk's report is interesting and, at the same time, somewhat paradoxical. The two Swedish scholars had different approaches to the movements publicly stigmatized as "cults," yet they both defended MISA against criticism by media, anti-cultists, and the Romanian authorities. Nylund may be characterized as a "counter-cultist" and Frisk as a scholar critical of both the "counter-cult" and the "anti-cult" movements. These categories require a brief explanation.

In 1993, Massimo Introvigne proposed a distinction between sectarian counter-cult movements and secular anti-cult movements, which has since become a standard reference (Introvigne 1993). The counter-cult movement emerged in the early nineteenth century with Protestant and, subsequently, Roman Catholic theologians systematically criticizing what they saw as "cults" diverging from Christian orthodoxy. This effort extended into the twentieth century and persists today.

Counter-cultists primarily focused on doctrines they considered heretical and aimed to convert "cult" members back to mainstream Christian beliefs. They usually did not seek government intervention against "cults," opting instead to engage through writing books and articles, and giving lectures.

The anti-cult movement emerged in North America among parents concerned about their young adult children joining as full-time members new religious movements during the 1960s and 1970s and leaving behind conventional careers. Attracting followers from the hippie movement, these organizations often originated from Asia although others were American-made. Parents were less troubled by unorthodox beliefs than by their children's choice to leave college for full-time missionary work on behalf of controversial movements.

The anti-cult movement differed from prior religious opposition movements by focusing on actions over beliefs, seeking to re-integrate members into traditional career paths rather than converting them back to a mainline faith, and involving government and legal systems for support without relying on theological debate.

MISA was attacked by both a counter-cult movement organized by the Romanian Orthodox Church in the country where it was founded, Romania (Tanase 2005), and by a secular anti-cult movement relying on secular arguments

such as “brainwashing” and alleged sexual abuse in France, Finland, and other countries (Introvigne 2022).

While Frisk’s 2019 report mostly answered anti-cult arguments, and did not try to establish whether MISA’s doctrines were theologically “heretic” or otherwise, her general attitude was different from Nylund’s. The latter regards “cults” in general as dangerous for the Christian faith. Indeed, Frisk and Nylund were on different sides of the controversies about the Swedish Christian sect Knutby Filadelfia. The sect made headlines in Sweden in 2004 when a female member of the movement was killed and a male member was seriously wounded. Another female member of Knutby Filadelfia was convicted for the crimes, and one of the pastors was recognized as their instigator.

While recognizing the problems created by certain practices within the group, such as the isolation of members accused of sins known as “spiritual shunning,” which might have destabilized the devotee who committed the murder (Frisk 2018a), Frisk did not attribute a direct responsibility for the crimes to the movement or its theology. She concluded that

As for the crimes, there are no indications that they should be attributed to the religious group per se. Rather, the crimes seem connected to the unique lifeworld created by the two persons involved in the crimes—a lifeworld that also featured components from their wider religious context. The tragic outcome then, can be considered as the result of two specific individuals’ co-construction of a destructive reality in their particular interpretations of specific, but not uncommon, religious components (Frisk 2018b, 154-55).

By contrast, Nylund interpreted the crimes committed by members of Knutby Filadelfia as typical of “cults” and even predicted that the movement might commit a collective suicide, a usual but in most cases faulty prediction by counter-cultists and anti-cultists. Swedish academic scholars of new religious movements criticized Nylund and answered that mass suicides and homicides were perpetrated by small religious groups in a handful of cases, but in very peculiar contextual and theological situations that were not replicated at Knutby Filadelfia (*Dagen* 2005).

Nylund thus emerged from the Knutby Filadelfia controversy as a typical opponent of “cults.” Frisk, although recognizing in some religious movements problematic elements that may contribute to the tragic outcome of personal problems of some members, rejected the classic anti-cult and counter-cult stereotypes and warned against generalizations.

What, thus, led Nylund and Frisk to similar conclusions about MISA? And were they really similar? In this paper, I will first examine the context and the content of

Nylund's 2005 report and will thus compare it with Frisk's 2019 study that is presented in another article (by Massimo Introvigne) in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*.

1. *The Nylund Report: Context*

Gregorian Bivolaru, who founded MISA and led the movement for several years, received asylum in Sweden on December 31, 2005. This came after the Supreme Court of Sweden refused an extradition request from Romania on October 21, 2005 (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005).

MISA's tenets include principles and practices of what the movement calls "sacred eroticism" (Introvigne 2022). When religious practices incorporate elements of eroticism, they often provoke controversy and backlash, and MISA has not been spared such reactions. In Romania, both anti-cultists and the Romanian Orthodox Church instigated a fierce campaign in the early 2000s against Bivolaru and MISA (Tanase 2005, 278–79), alleging sexual abuse of minors within the community and claiming that students were coerced into unpaid labor for the organization, leading to charges of human trafficking.

On March 18, 2004, Romanian special forces and police, with the presence of the media, simultaneously raided sixteen MISA ashrams and the residences of MISA students at 7 a.m. The operation was publicized as Romania's largest anti-drug effort, with expectations of uncovering substantial drug caches and proof of minor sexual abuse within MISA. Numerous followers were taken into custody, and Bivolaru himself was arrested (Introvigne 2022, 31).

During the raids, no illicit drugs were discovered, and allegations of minor sexual abuse soon fell apart. Years later, on April 26, 2016, in *Amarandei and others v. Romania*, the European Court of Human Rights condemned the Romanian raid for being founded on scant evidence and excessive force, resulting in Romania having to compensate the victims (European Court of Human Rights 2016).

Ultimately, Romanian authorities conceded that they could not charge Bivolaru with sexual abuse, except in a single instance. They alleged that Mădălina Dumitru, a 17-year-old girl, had confessed to having a sexual relationship with Bivolaru. While the age of consent in Romania was 15, the legislation sanctioned sexual relationships between teachers and students. Bivolaru was considered Mădălina's "teacher" as he allegedly taught her yoga.

Mădălina, who later authored an autobiographical book detailing her odyssey (Dumitru 2023), asserted that the police had intimidated her into signing a statement accusing Bivolaru, which she claimed she never gave. The MISA leader was acquitted in both the first and second instances.

Yet, in 2013, the Supreme Court overturned these decisions and Bivolaru received an unexpectedly severe prison sentence of six years. It was also notable that Bivolaru, due to this relatively lesser offense—Mădălina was almost 18, and the alleged relation would at any rate have been consensual—, found himself on Europol's list of most wanted fugitives, given that he was no longer present in Romania at that time.

Arrested in March 2004, Bivolaru was freed at the beginning of April due to a procedural flaw. On May 31, a new preventive arrest order was issued. Eventually, Bivolaru left Romania and went to Sweden, where he submitted an application for asylum on March 24, 2005, claiming religious persecution in his native country. He was told to return to the Swedish immigration office after a week. When he did, he was arrested based on the Romanian arrest warrant.

The Chief Public Prosecutor of Sweden sent his extradition case straight to the Supreme Court, with a trial held on October 11–12, 2005. Gregorian Bivolaru testified first, claiming he suffered from religious and political persecution, harassment by Romanian media and politicians, and even had his home burnt down. He denied even having had a sexual relationship with Mădălina. He questioned the claim that he exploited his students for wealth, pointing out his modest possessions and limited bank funds. He added that MISA followers voluntarily work at ashrams, likening it to volunteer activities in other religious groups, refuting any links to human trafficking. A MISA student also appeared before the Supreme Court and confirmed Bivolaru's statement.

Mădălina also testified and made a powerful impression on the Court by telling the judges that she was coerced by the Romanian police to sign a false declaration, never had a sexual relationship with Bivolaru, and was not even a direct student of the MISA leader. Equally powerful, however, was the second witness for the defense, Nylund.

Niklas Larsson, Bivolaru's lawyer, stated that the testimonies and experts had definitively shown the case to be fabricated and that a fair trial in Romania was not possible for his client. He requested Bivolaru's immediate release, but the Court noted this could not happen until a decision on extradition was made.

On October 21, 2005, the Swedish Supreme Court delivered its verdict, initially addressing Bivolaru's apprehensions about the dangers of being extradited to Romania. He claimed that Romanian officials had threatened him with severe repercussions if he didn't disband MISA (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 3). On the other hand, the Court recognized the existence of a valid extradition treaty with Romania and mentioned that decisions from Romania are generally upheld in Sweden unless they are manifestly wrong (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 4), or there is a concern that the individuals would not get a fair trial or might face potential persecution and harm.

The Supreme Court concluded that what had transpired during the trial had proved that "due to his religious conceptions Gregorian Bivolaru runs the risk of being exposed to pursuits of evil character after an extradition." Thus, his extradition was denied and he was released (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005, 9). This decision led to his asylum grant in Sweden on December 31, 1995 (GregorianBivolaru.net 2006).

Further events such as Bivolaru's two arrests in France in 2016 and 2023, his current imprisonment there, and the consequent risk that his Swedish asylum may be revoked are beyond this paper's scope, which will now examine Nylund's report and testimony.

2. *The Nylund Report: Content*

In contrast to most academics studying new religious movements, who avoid the term "cult" ("sekt" in Swedish), Nylund is convinced that "cults" as manipulative groups essentially different from religions do exist. He describes a "manipulative cult" as characterized by the "four As":

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

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

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

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

Nylund contends that the presence of at least three out of the four "As" may characterize a group as a "cult." Following his interviews with various MISA

members and Bivolaru personally, Nylund determined that the movement lacks all of the “four As,” thus disqualifying it as a “cult.” In his written submission to the Supreme Court, Nylund noted that in MISA

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

Nylund further mentioned that certain characteristics typically associated with a “cult” are more aptly seen in groups that antagonize MISA and engage in its persecution within Romania. As a Lutheran critic of “cults,” he said he understood the Romanian Orthodox Church’s critiques of MISA. Nevertheless, he pointed out that the situation took an egregious turn when these critiques led to collusion with politically motivated individuals who wanted to destroy MISA, resulting in harassment and violence.

Upon reviewing the allegations of human trafficking and sexual abuse, Nylund observed that at MISA ashrams, “All people take part at the household activities from the ashram, such as cleaning, house and garden maintenance, house shopping, for instance...” He drew a parallel between the regulations at a MISA ashram and the expectations within a college student dormitory, noting, however, that what is secularly termed as “volunteer work” is considered “karma yoga,” a spiritual practice, by MISA students (Nylund 2005).

When discussing the accusations aimed at Bivolaru for allegedly coercing students into unpaid labor, Nylund stated that this

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

It should be noted that later, years after the Swedish Supreme Court case, Bivolaru was judged for charges of human trafficking by Romanian courts and not convicted (Curtea de Apel Cluj 2021). However, using accusations of human

trafficking as a tool against all sorts of religious movements is now becoming fashionable, as evidenced by the cases instigated by the special Argentinian prosecutorial office against trafficking called PROTEX (Amicarelli 2024).

Nylund also noted that the Romanian authorities misunderstood the concept of sacred eroticism within MISA's teachings when assessing accusations of sexual abuse, simplifying Bivolaru's extensive Tantric yoga discourses into mere "pornography." He concluded that,

If MISA is not a manipulative and dangerous cult, then what is it? I could say about MISA that it is a movement supporting a different way of life, alternative therapies, displaying strong Gnostic syncretism features. The basic ideas are reincarnation and self-transformation (the ability to transform one's self). A cult is a movement often emerging in a psychic deprivation environment, when people gather around a leader. MISA is a yogi movement where the participants aim at self-perfecting and improving their state of health and harmony through a lacto-vegetarian diet and yoga techniques.

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

3. *The Nylund Report: A Comparison with the Frisk Report of 2019*

There are both legal and theoretical differences between Nylund's report prepared for the Swedish Supreme Court in 2005 and confirmed in his oral testimony and Frisk's 2019 study. Nylund's was a legal expert report prepared in the context of the Supreme Court discussion about Bivolaru's extradition and asylum. Although conducted within the context of controversies and legal accusations in Finland, Frisk's was primarily a scholarly study. As most scholars of new religious movements, and unlike Christian critics of "heretic" movements such as Nylund, Frisk preferred not to use the term "cult."

However, in her study Frisk examined one of the most common definition of a "cult," the one proposed by American anti-cult psychologist Margaret Singer (1921–2003). Although the language was different, as Singer was a secular anti-cultist rather than a Christian counter-cultist, the American psychologist's criteria to identify a "cult" were not substantially different from Nylund's "four As" (aggression, aversion, alienation, and [claims of] absolute truth). Frisk stated that she did not believe such definitions of "cults" were valid but, for the sake of

argument, was willing to test them against her observation of the Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki, which as mentioned earlier belongs to the same network of yoga schools as MISA and applies the teachings of Bivolaru. Frisk concluded that, even assuming Singer's criteria to identify a "cult" were valid, the Natha Yoga Center and MISA did not meet them and therefore were not "cults."

In this sense, there are clear similarities between Nylund's and Frisk's report. Nylund concluded that there was no "alienation," since most students did not live in the ashrams and had outside jobs. Even those working full time with MISA were encouraged to maintain their relationships with friends and relatives outside of the school. Frisk, in turn, reported that the Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki, based on interviews with students she called "informants," appeared to her as

an organization that is quite open and does not monitor the informants' lives in detail. Some informants are... 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... Most of them have a steady job or they are students at different universities (Frisk 2024, 18).

Nylund concluded that, despite the authority vested on Bivolaru, no "absolute truth" was forcibly imposed on MISA students. Frisk also found that

Not all informants follow all advises given by the Natha Yoga Center. One informant had, for example, received certain kinds of health advise from Bivolaru, but did not follow all of them... There were also informants reporting not following the required practice of yoga for two hours every day... 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... 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 (Frisk 2024, 18–9).

Both Nylund and Frisk were skeptical of accusations of human trafficking and sexual abuse, based on similar arguments. Frisk criticized the application of "brainwashing" stereotypes to Helsinki's Natha Yoga Center and stated they were contradicted by her own research:

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 (Frisk 2024, 28).

Frisk noted that only by believing in the discredited theory of “brainwashing” one can come to the conclusion that all women following a path of sacred eroticism in MISA do not do it voluntarily and are by definition victims of sexual abuse:

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 (Frisk 2024, 29).

Conclusions

Coming from very different backgrounds, and studying groups inspired by the teachings of Bivolaru in different times of the movement’s history (2005 and 2018–19), Nylund and Frisk nonetheless came to similar conclusions.

Nylund believed in the existence of “cults” as malignant groups different from genuine religions. Frisk didn’t. However, both agreed that assuming that the current definitions of “cults” were valid investigation tools, and applying them to MISA, the conclusion was that MISA was not a “cult.”

Both Nylund and Frisk studied in depth allegations by anti-cultists and hostile ex-members of totalistic control, human trafficking, and sexual abuse, and concluded they were not believable.

As a Lutheran priest and critic of “cults,” Nylund shared the reservations of Orthodox priests in Romania about a movement with Hindu and Buddhist (as well as Christian) roots believing in reincarnation and other doctrines he disagreed with. As a social scientist, Frisk was less interested in a theological criticism of MISA. To his credit, however, Nylund firmly distinguished between Bivolaru’s theology, with which he disagreed, and his and MISA’s rights to freedom of religion or belief and fair trials when accused of crimes, which he defended.

Ultimately, the fact that such diverse characters as Liselotte Frisk and Karl-Erik Nylund, while disagreeing on many other issues, agreed on the fact that MISA had been misrepresented, slandered, and persecuted is highly significant. One may even conclude that this “discordant concordance” lends credibility to both their reports.

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