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## Soka Gakkai's Interpretation of the Principle "Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life" and Ikeda's Climate Action

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**ABSTRACT:** The principle "Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life" (Japanese *Ichinen Sanzen*, Chinese *Yīniàn Sānqiān*) was taught by Chinese Buddhist master Zhiyi in the 6th century CE. The number 3,000 results by multiplying the hundred worlds for the ten *tathātā* ("suchnesses" or factors) and the three realms. The principle affirms that life at each moment contains all phenomena of the universe, thus has limitless potential. By changing how we live the moment, we can change the entire world for better—or for worse. Zhiyi's principle has been interpreted differently by different Buddhist schools. Unlike other schools, Nichiren Buddhism's interpretation is that everybody has the possibility of achieving Buddhahood in this present life, without having to wait for dying and being reborn into a higher state of life. One of the three realms is the environment, and Soka Gakkai emphasizes the principle of *eshō-funi*, the oneness of life and environment. The principle "Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life" is interpreted by Ikeda and Soka Gakkai to the effect that the self and the environment, which falsely appear to be separated, are in fact one in essence. Confronted with the ecological crisis, Ikeda taught that by transforming our inner selves we can at the same time heal the environment and fight climate change.

**KEYWORDS:** Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda, Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life, Ichinen Sanzen, Yīniàn Sānqiān, Eshō-Funi.

### *Introduction*

The late Italian scholar PierLuigi Zoccatelli (1965–2024) devoted a significant part of his researches into Buddhism in Italy to investigate why Soka Gakkai had been more successful than any other Buddhist group in the country, and why its Italian branch had become the largest in Europe. He answered that Soka Gakkai members are as concerned as the average Italian, or more, about the dangers created by wars, violence, and ecological disasters, potentially threatening the very survival of humanity. However, unlike other Italians, they sincerely believe that these dangers can be averted, a better world can be created, and world peace is not a naïve utopia but something that can be achieved—not primarily by political action

but by transforming ourselves through the practice of Buddhism (Zoccatelli 2024).

Lukas Pokorny came to similar conclusions concerning Soka Gakkai members in Austria. They are persuaded that,

Plagued by ceaseless strife, poverty and suffering, our world is in a tragic state and, as such, is in dire need of a positive transformation. Nichiren Buddhism offers the salvific tools to achieve this formidable task, that is, to nourish one's inner transformation and subsequently to create world peace. According to Nichiren Buddhism, only individual self-cultivation can lead to global harmony... one's self-cultivation affects collective transformation since one's thoughts and actions (microcosm) impact one's environment and the cosmos itself (macrocosm) (Pokorny 2014, 8).

A key Buddhist concept Soka Gakkai members rely on to affirm that changing the world is possible is the principle “Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life” (Japanese *Ichinen Sanzen*, Chinese *Yīniàn Sānqiān*), which finds its origins in the works of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE Chinese monk Zhiyi (538–597). In this article, I will first explain the origins in the *Lotus Sutra* and the meaning of the principle in the thought of Zhiyi. Second, I will discuss the interpretation of the principle by Nichiren (1222–1282). Third, I will examine how Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) made the principle into a central tenet of Soka Gakkai and connected it to ecological action.

### *The Lotus Sutra, Zhiyi, and the Principle of Yīniàn Sānqiān*

Although the dates of the composition of the *Lotus Sutra* are controversial, we can call Zhiyi a late commentator of the text. Zhiyi lived and taught in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE and the *Lotus Sutra*, at least according to most contemporary scholars, had emerged four or five centuries earlier (Lopez 2016).

The *Lotus Sutra*, like other fundamental religious scriptures of humanity, is not a systematic text. It mostly teaches through stories and parables. Recent scholars have argued that the first community gathered around Buddha Shakyamuni (according to traditional dates, 566–466 BCE) did not have a clear and unanimous apprehension of his role. According to these scholars, some believed that he was just a great human master who was born, achieved enlightenment, taught, and passed into the Nirvana at death. It was only gradually that the Buddhist community came to a different understanding of the Buddha as a divine-like being who had been teaching the Dharma to all sort of living beings through the ages and continues to do so.

Due to the limited capabilities of the humans of his time to understand him, he pretended that he needed to achieve enlightenment and went through the motion of “dying,” while in fact he continues to be present and teach the Dharma to all sentient beings. If these modern scholars are right, this progressive comprehension of the role of the Buddha would parallel how the Christians came to understand the divine figure of Christ and created the branch of Christian theology known as Christology (Hábito 2020).

Be it as it may be, the *Lotus Sutra* clearly expressed this understanding of Buddha, by making him explaining the reasons why he pretended to have died:

For the sake of ordinary, perverse people  
though truly alive, I say I am extinct.  
If people see me all the time,  
They become arrogant and selfish,  
Indulge in the five desires without restraint  
And fall into evil paths (Reeves 2008, 298).

Living beings do need the Buddha, as most of them due to karmic reasons are entrapped in the *samsara*, the cycle of reincarnations. Those caught in the *samsara* were already classified by Hindus into six worlds of sentient beings, a system that Buddhism inherited. They are the hell dwellers, the hungry ghosts, the animals, the humans, the lower deities (*asuras*), and the gods or heavenly creatures (*devas*). Even those in the sixth world, the gods, still achieve only impermanent happiness and remain in a situation of suffering.

While this is a pessimistic description of the situation of living beings, it is not without hope. Through parables and stories, the *Lotus Sutra* tells us that the Buddha continues to operate to rescue those entrapped in *samsara* and suffering. Two typical stories are those of a father who rescues his children who had carelessly remained inside a burning house (Chapter 3), and of another father, who is also an “excellent doctor,” who returns from a trip, finds that his sons have swallowed a poison, and feigns his own death to persuade them to take an antidote (Chapter 16).

The fact is that beyond the six worlds that bind living beings to suffering there are four progressively superior worlds leading to liberation. They bring the total of worlds to ten. They are those of the “hearers of the voice” (*śrāvaka*), who pursue

awakening through study, meditation, and observance of the precepts; of the “solitary enlightened ascetics” (*pratyekabuddha*), who have achieved enlightenment outside of a community and do not teach it to others; of the *bodhisattvas*, who having achieved enlightenment voluntarily remain in the world to help others on the enlightening path; and finally of those fully enlightened and liberated, the Buddhas.

Before discussing how Zhiyi systematized the teaching about the ten worlds, we should introduce another important notion imparted by the *Lotus Sutra* in form of an enumeration: the ten *tathātā*. Translating the term *tathātā* into English is not easy: “suchness” and “thusness” have been proposed, as well as “factor.” These are ten fundamental aspects of all that exists. According to the *Lotus Sutra*

every existing thing has such characteristics, such a nature, such an embodiment, such powers, such actions, such causes, such conditions, such effects, such rewards and retributions, and yet such a complete fundamental coherence (Reeves 2008, 78).

In fact, the traditional enumeration of the ten *tathātā* Zhiyi relied on, listing them as appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, inherent cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect, and their consistency from beginning to end, does not come from the earliest texts of the *Lotus Sutra* but from the Chinese translation of Kumarajiva (ca. 344–413). The *tathātā* are so important in the *Lotus Sutra* because they represent the non-dual way in which the Buddha sees reality, “not in the way as we [humans] experience it” but as things really are, beyond the apparent contradictions and oppositions: “Nothing is simply real, nothing simply empty, nothing as it seems, nothing the opposite” (Reeves 2008, 291).

The organization of these principles of the *Lotus Sutra* into a coherent system first emerged in the school called in China Tiantai, which flourished in the sixth century CE, and from which later derived the Japanese esoteric Tendai school, formally established in the year 806. According to the school’s tradition, Zhiyi was the fourth patriarch of Tiantai and a disciple of a leading authority on the *Lotus Sutra*, third patriarch Nanyue Huisi (515–577) (Ziporyn 2000, 2016).

One of Zhiyi’s main teachings was that each of the ten worlds (the six worlds of suffering and the four worlds of enlightenment) contains in itself all the others. There are thus one hundred possible combinations (as each world can also be combined simply with itself). In each of these combinations, the ten *tathātā* are all presents, bringing the possibilities to the number of one hundred multiplied by ten, thus one thousand. Zhiyi added that this figure should still be multiplied by three, as in Buddhist cosmologies since Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250), whom Zhiyi



recognized as the first Tiantai patriarch, there are three realms, of the five components (form, perception, conception, volition, and consciousness), of the living beings, and of the environment. Zhiyi thus concluded that the total number of realms is in fact three thousand.

But why, we can ask, is this important? Zhiyi has been often compared to the great Medieval Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who also liked to proceed through lists and enumerations. For both Aquinas and Zhiyi these numbers, although perhaps not in accordance with modern taste, are not pedantic but aimed at presenting deep conclusions and teachings.

Zhiyi used the enumeration to propose the doctrine of “Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life,” which deeply influenced the whole history of Buddhism. What he meant is that in every single moment of the life of a sentient being, all the three thousand realms are simultaneously present as possibilities. The worst is possible, but so is the best. At every given moment we can become a hell dweller, a hungry ghost, or an animal, but also a *bodhisattva* and even a Buddha.

### *Nichiren's Ichinen Sanzen*

Some of Zhiyi's disciples interpreted the principle of *Yimiàn Sānqiān*, perhaps abusively, as only intended for monks, who had the technical knowledge to understand it and put it into practice. As for the others, they should just behave and hope to advance through the path of the reincarnations so that they may achieve enlightenment in a next life. In Japan, some Tendai monks adopted what in Christianity would be called a quietist attitude, preaching that since all was one, Buddhahood can be attained by simply wishing it, without the need of any practice. Obviously, such a position, as it happened with quietism in Christianity, could easily justify moral corruption.

As Ikeda will later put it, Zhiyi's genuine teaching

was distorted by later Tendai scholars. The Tendai school in the Daishonin's [Nichiren's] day had declined even to the point of repudiating the value of Buddhist practice. Their view, simply put, was that since the true entity was at one with all phenomena, then it was fine for things to be just as they were; one was a Buddha even if he or she carried out no practice. They had become completely degenerate; they had killed the spirit of the founder... Simply saying that reality, mired in pollution and suffering, is itself the true

entity cannot possibly lead to any improvement in people's lives or in society. To this day, the tendency to readily view present conditions with rose-colored glasses and neglect action needed to bring about positive change remains deeply ingrained in Japanese people's outlook on religion and on life. Nichiren Daishonin fought against this decadent Tendai school. It could even be said that the priests of the Tendai school used the teaching of the true entity of all phenomena to justify their own decadence (Ikeda 2007b).

Parenthetically, Ikeda compared Tendai's decadence to the attitude of the monks of Nichiren Shoshu and their patriarch Nikken (1922–2019), from which Soka Gakkai had painfully separated, writing that the Tendai priests in Nichiren's time "resemble the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood today." The latter

similar to the Tendai school in the Daishonin's time but incomparably more reprehensible—has trampled upon the spirit of the founder, Nichiren Daishonin. Neglecting practice and whiling away their lives in dissipation, they have thoroughly defiled the spirit of Buddhism (Ikeda 2007b).

In his effort to restore the genuine teachings, Nichiren quoted often Zhiyi but made a consistent effort to explain the principle of "Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life," called in Japanese *Ichinen Sanzen*, in a simple way, which even laypersons would be able to understand and put into practice. He even used physiognomy to make himself understood:

When you look at somebody's face, at times you see joy on it, at times you see anger, at times you see peace, at times that face expresses greed, at other times stupidity, and at other times adulation. Well: anger shows the Realm of Hell; greed shows the realm of Hungry Spirits; stupidity shows the Realm of Beasts; adulation shows the realm of asuras, joy shows the Realm of Devas (Gods); peace shows the Realm of Humans. The expressions you see on people's countenance show the six Realms of birth and rebirth. Concerning the Four Holy Realms, they are hidden and are not expressed in people's faces, but if you investigate (the matter) more clearly, you will find that they are also included (in the Realm of Humans)... it is difficult to see (in us human beings) a manifestation of the Buddha Realm. But since you have finally come to believe that all other nine Realms of existence are included in our human existence, do not refuse your faith concerning the last one... the Realm of Humans includes the Buddha realm (Hábito 2020, 50, referring to "Three Major Writings of Nichiren," an unpublished translation by the Italian Jesuit Pier Paolo del Campana).

According to Filipino scholar (and a former Jesuit priest who has become a Zen *rōshi*) Ruben Hábito,

Nichiren refers specifically to this notion of *ichinen sanzen* in many of his own writings, and amplifies on it in his major treatise dealing with "the one important matter in my life"... For Nichiren, the principle of *ichinen sanzen* is what undergirds the teaching on the buddhahood of all sentient beings. It is the father and mother of all Buddhas, as well as the seed of buddhahood (Hábito 1999, 290).

As part of his “bodily reading” (*shindoku*) of the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren taught that among the three thousand possibilities present in every single moment of life, Buddhahood can be achieved by reciting the Japanese title of the *Sutra*, *Myōhō Renge Kyō*. This is, Nichiren believed, the way that in his infinite compassion the Buddha himself devised to come, rescue human beings, and lead them to the glorious path of Buddhahood. As Hábito summarizes,

The recitation of the five-character phrase *Myōhō-rence-kyō* thus becomes the concrete and practical way wherein this principle of *ichinen sanzen* is activated and realized. What easier way is there to the realization of buddhahood than the recitation of this phrase, which contains within itself all the treasures of the universe, all the truths in the teachings of all the Buddhas? (Habito 1999, 291).

### *Ikeda, Ichinen Sanzen, and Climate Action*

*Ichinen Sanzen* is also a key aspect of Ikeda's thought. Ikeda offered an approach relevant for our contemporary world to the three components of Zhiyi's multiplication: the ten factors (*tathātā*), the ten worlds, and the three realms. Concerning the ten factors, he explained that

The three factors of appearance, nature and entity explain the essential composition of all phenomena. The six factors of power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect and manifest effect analyze the functions and workings of all phenomena. And consistency from beginning to end indicates the coherency of the nine factors from appearance to manifest effect (Ikeda 2007a).

All beings in the ten worlds possess the ten factors, although “according to the[ir] state of life” (Ikeda 2007a). Indeed, according to Ikeda, since the ten factors correspond to the “true entity of all phenomena,” they are also present among vegetables and even non-sentient “inorganic things”:

Flowers blooming on the roadside, for example, have the appearance, nature and entity of beauty. And they also possess power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect and manifest effect, without any omission. And in their totality all of these factors are coherently integrated with the life of the flower.

The same is also true of inorganic things. A pebble, the sky, the moon, stars, the sun, the sea with its salty scent, rugged mountains, skyscrapers overlooking noisy streets, houses and cars and every piece of furniture or utensil—the 10 factors describe the existence of all things (Ikeda 2007 a).

The interaction between the ten worlds and the ten factors carries the all-important practical consequence that “the beings of the ten worlds can all become Buddhas”:

To say that the beings of the ten worlds all possess the ten factors of appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, inherent cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect and their consistency from beginning to end, is nothing less than an affirmation that, as seen with the eye of the Buddha, there is no difference between the life of the Buddha and the lives of others. The enlightenment of all people, therefore, is a certainty (Ikeda 2007b).

Ikeda emphasized that the *Lotus Sutra* also overcame the objection that women could not obtain Buddhahood through the story of the enlightenment of the Dragon Girl, the daughter of the Dragon King who lived at the bottom of the sea. According to Toshie Kurihara, Ikeda

interprets the enlightenment of the dragon girl from the viewpoint of the three thousand realms in a single moment of life, “everyone, men and women alike, possesses the ‘attainments that were inherent in her nature.’ It is a jewel that exists in the lives of all living beings. This is the meaning of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds and three thousand realms in a single moment of life; this is the Lotus Sutra’s fundamental revelation” (Kurihara 2010, 49–50).

Ikeda wrote that

If it were true that women could not become Buddhas, then the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life would fall apart. To deny three thousand realms in a single moment of life is to deny the possibility of anyone’s attainment of Buddhahood. Therefore, the dragon girl’s enlightenment signifies not only the enlightenment of all women but the enlightenment of all men as well (Ikeda, Saito, Endo, and Suda 2000, 99).

“Enlightenment,” here, means the achievement of the tenth level, Buddhahood, as even the ninth, of the *bodhisattvas*, may still include “deluded aspects,” such as judging those one is helping (Indigo 2007, 22). According to Soka Gakkai, in the thought of Nichiren,

The departure from other schools of Buddhism lies in the understanding that Buddhahood can only exist in the nine worlds, that is, daily life. It cannot manifest as an abstract ideal; it is actually through the transformation of an individual that it is revealed and becomes meaningful. It is an expression of a desire to live purposefully, with hope and with the realisation that our own happiness is connected to others. The nine worlds, which form our daily reality have both enlightened and destructive potentialities (Indigo 2007, 21).

Ikeda also emphasized Nichiren’s teaching that Buddhahood can be achieved directly by chanting *daimoku*. He argued that the path of other Buddhist schools towards Buddhahood

is like climbing a mountain, starting at the foot and heading for the summit. During the ascent, we are given explanations of how wonderful the peak is, but we ourselves cannot appreciate or comprehend it. Nor is there any guarantee we will eventually reach the top. We may get lost or meet with an accident on the way. In contrast, Nichiren Buddhism reveals the way to the direct and immediate attainment of enlightenment, so in an instant we find ourselves standing on the mountain peak (Ikeda 2021).

We do not reach the mountain peak only for our personal satisfaction, however. When we are on the peak of the mountain, “we personally savor the marvelous view with our whole beings and, out of our desire to share that joy with others, we descend and go out into society” (Ikeda 2021). Here, the third element of Zhiyi’s multiplication comes into play, the three realms: of the five components, of the living beings, and of the environment. Summarizing Ikeda’s approach, George David Miller writes that

Whereas the five components pertain to the physical and psychic analysis of living beings, the realm of living worlds pertains to the continuous interrelationship and reciprocal influence among living beings. The realm of living beings not only pertains to the physical environment but to the social environment as well. The realm of environment pertains to the environment that supports the existence of beings. This consists of the mostly non-sentient environment: example, oceans, mountains, and plants (Miller 2002, 33).

For Ikeda, a key point of *Ichinen Sanzen* is that within a non-dualistic Buddhist worldview the three realms cannot be conceived as separated. This has both theoretical and practical consequences:

The Daishonin’s Buddhism teaches not that we should merely observe the true entity of all phenomena within our lives but that we should strive to make the reality of our lives and our environment shine as the true entity of all phenomena. It is a philosophy of change and improvement for causing all phenomena—our lives and society—to shine as the entity of the Mystic Law (Ikeda 2007b).

By changing ourselves, we also change society. Soka Gakkai also emphasizes the doctrine of *eshō-funi*, the non-duality of life and environment:

life and its environment, though two seemingly distinct phenomena, are essentially non-dual; they are two integral phases of a single reality. In the Japanese term *eshō-funi*, *eshō* is a compound of *shōhō*, meaning life or a living being, and *ehō*, its environment. *Funi*, meaning “not two,” indicates oneness or non-duality. It is short for *nini-funi*, which means “two (in phenomena) but not two (in essence)” (Soka Gakkai International 2002).

The three realms “exist in a single moment of life and are inseparable from one another. Therefore, a living being and its environment are non-dual in their ultimate reality” (Soka Gakkai International 2002).

Ikeda's climate action campaigns confronted the problem of climate change at different levels, through lectures, exhibitions, dialogues with politicians, scholars, and activists, and cooperation with the United Nations (Šorytė, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). However, the principle of *Ichinen Sanzen* was the basis of his persuasion that solving these problems was indeed possible. Nichiren had already written in his *On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime* that

if the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds (Nichiren 1999, 4).

When we understand that the self and the environment, which falsely appear to be separated, are in fact one in essence, we also understand that by transforming our inner selves we can at the same time heal the environment and fight climate change.

Miller's conclusions about the importance of *Ichinen Sanzen* and its role in Ikeda's educational project also apply to his climate action:

*Ichinen sanzen* is perhaps the most accurate depiction of the complexity of human nature and human reality in the history of philosophy. The basic human emotional attitudes (Ten Worlds) are integrated with our cognitive faculties, interactive and reciprocal relationship with other beings, support of the non-sentient environment (taken collectively, the Three Realms) and intersect ontological realities (the Ten Factors). The uniqueness of human existence is dramatically portrayed in the *ichinen sanzen*. To fully understand what it means to be human, the driving question of wisdom-based education, we require a model based on the *ichinen sanzen* that helps us determine our place in the chain of being (Miller 2002, 35).

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## **Ecoselves as Part of Ecosystems: What Can Daisaku Ikeda's Philosophy and Practice Contribute to a Cultural Transformation Regarding Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Climate Change?**

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**ABSTRACT:** Mahayana Buddhism has for thousands of years posited that all life is interdependent and deeply interconnected, and that human beings are embedded in nature and their environment. Drawing on ideas from Deep Ecology and social change, this article investigates Daisaku Ikeda and Soka Gakkai's contribution to social transformation based on the conviction that change in the intention, purpose, and consciousness of an individual can influence the whole ecosystem. Daisaku Ikeda has developed the concept of Buddhist humanism calling for awakened change agents who can generate a sense of solidarity with our fellow inhabitants of this planet and inspire collective action for the sake of future generations. Using examples from Ikeda's writings and the application of his philosophy and socially engaged Buddhist practice as a starting point, this article begins to explore how the inner, spiritual transformation of individuals and communities might be able to impact wider social and cultural transformation.

**KEYWORDS:** Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai International, Social Change, Social Transformation, Spiritual Transformation, Daisaku Ikeda, Deep Ecology, Change Agents.

### *Introduction*

We are living in a time of biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate crisis, and many people working in the environmental space are suggesting that, as well as scientific data, we need “a spiritual and cultural transformation” (Speth 2016) to effectively deal with the problems facing us. Together with many others, I suggest that making superficial, “outer” changes to the systems we live in is not enough and that an inner spiritual revolution is necessary. My question is: what can help us create this spiritual transformation, and how might it deal with the root causes of our collective problems?



This research is inspired by my own inner journey as a practicing Buddhist of over thirty years with the lay organisation Soka Gakkai International (SGI), of which Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) was the third president responsible for making it a world-wide religious movement. The Soka Gakkai and Daisaku Ikeda’s philosophy are based on the 13<sup>th</sup> Century priest Nichiren’s (1222–1282) understanding that the *Lotus Sutra* contains Shakyamuni’s (according to traditional dates, 566–466 BCE) ultimate teachings—that everyone can attain Buddhahood or enlightenment in this life-time just as we are—and that we can do it by chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*, the title of the *Lotus Sutra*.

This article is also inspired by my search for how to best respond to the climate and ecological crises, and to find a way I can personally help myself and others navigate the often seemingly overwhelming interconnected challenges facing us. This quote by environmental lawyer James Gustave Speth has provided a starting point for my thinking:

I used to think that the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation (Speth 2016).

Speth points to the fact that we need collective inner spiritual transformation to create a collective cultural transformation, which leads me to the question—how might we be able to create this social and cultural transformation, and in what way can our inner spiritual transformation contribute to it?

Here I will explore some of Daisaku Ikeda’s unique contributions to the subject matter. I will first give a brief explanation of some useful Mahayana Nichiren Buddhist concepts with examples of Ikeda’s interpretation, then I will briefly elucidate the idea of Deep Ecology, and lastly I will investigate the process of social transformation and the relationship between inner transformation, or what Daisaku Ikeda and his mentor Jōsei Toda (1900–1958) call “human revolution,” and outer change or engaged Buddhist practice.

### *Some Mahayana/ Nichiren Buddhist Concepts*

*Engi* (Japanese) is possibly more familiar in the West as *pratitya-samutpada* (Sanskrit) or *paticca samuppada* (Pali). It is difficult to translate but some of its meanings are “dependent origination,” “interdependent co-arising,”

“interconnection,” or what Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–2022) termed “Interbeing.” It can best be described by the metaphor of Indra’s Net. In Hindu mythology, the god Indra has a beautiful net that spans the entire universe and at each intersection of this net there is a precious jewel. When any strand of the net is moved, it activates all the jewels in the universe, which in turn reflect each other. This is a visceral depiction of how each of our actions can potentially have a huge impact—both positively and negatively.

Ikeda posits that an awareness of our deep interconnection with all life can help our actions be more impactful. We can become aware that we are the universe experiencing itself. Ikeda explains,

Buddhism uses the term “dependent origination” (Jpn. *engi*) to describe symbiotic relations. Nothing—no one—exists in isolation. Each individual existence functions to bring into being the conditions that in turn sustain all other existences. Reality is understood more in terms of relationality and interdependence than in terms of discrete individualities. All things, mutually supportive and related, form a living cosmos, what modern philosophy might term a semantic whole. This is the conceptual framework through which Mahayana Buddhism views the natural universe (Ikeda 1993).

Another useful Buddhist concept is the “three poisons” or “evils,” which are inherent in all human beings. These are greed, anger, and delusion. Collectively they lead to the systemic problems we find ourselves entangled in:

–*greed*: always wanting more and never being satisfied—leads to consumerism and social injustice;

–*anger* on a collective level is expressed as militarism and warfare;

–*delusion* or blindness to the fact that all life inherently possesses Buddha nature (life’s highest potential) leads to collective spiritual crisis and alienation expressed as separation from the self, from “others,” and the Earth. This sense of human alienation or separation has led to the creation of the climate and ecological crises.

In Buddhist doctrine the antidotes to these three poisons are the three qualities of the Buddha: compassion, courage, and wisdom. Ikeda writes,

Buddhism teaches that earthly desires—the three poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness inherent in human life—are the fundamental cause of unhappiness and suffering. Buddhahood is the underlying power of the universe that can vanquish these poisons. It is the highest and noblest state of life. Buddhism teaches that all people possess this life state within them.

The life state of Buddhahood, in short, is the function of supreme compassion and wisdom and the source of all life activity. Bringing forth our Buddhahood gives us the power to transcend the self that is controlled or swayed by desire and suffering, and establish our original, true self (Ikeda 2011b, 84).

Here Ikeda expresses the importance of us human beings transcending our self-centered “small” self and transforming our earthly desires by bringing forth our inherent Buddhahood, which SGI members do through the process of chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* and reaching out to others. He sees this as the basis for socially engaged Buddhist practice.

### *Engaged Buddhism*

The idea of “Engaged Buddhism,” also known as “modern socially engaged Buddhism” emerged in Asia in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as a term coined by Thích Nhất Hạnh (Hạnh 1967). It encompasses many different ways of applying Buddhist *dharma* to contemporary social, political, economic, and environmental crises and suffering, and it manifests as Buddhist social activism through non-violent means.

Although not always explicitly linked to the movement, I argue that Daisaku Ikeda is a prominent proponent of “Engaged Buddhism” and that the practices of the SGI movement aim to embody it. In SGI there is a strong emphasis on reaching out to others and engaging in society. Although historically this has not always been applied in terms of action regarding the climate and ecological crises, in 2020–21 in the run up to COP26 in Glasgow SGI-UK, together with the Centre for Applied Buddhism, took huge steps to educate and inspire its membership.

Regarding ecological and climate action, David Loy who together with Joanna Macy is an influential figure in the Engaged Buddhist movement in the West, has an effective explanation of the “dual path” of Buddhist practice (Loy 2018). He asserts that inner transformation through Buddhist practice and outer climate or ecological action should by necessity be mutual and interactive. SGI practice operates in a similar way, and Ikeda explains it as the two kinds of *Daimoku* (chanting): the *Daimoku* of faith, which is the inner, spiritual work we do to fight our delusions, and the *Daimoku* of practice, which consists of chanting for ourselves and others, and taking action (Ikeda 2011a).

David Loy also coined the phrase *Ecosattva*, a contemporary incarnation of the Buddhist *bodhisattva* who eliminates suffering and brings joy (Loy 2018). *Ecosattvas* work and practice on behalf of all life (people, nature, and ecology),

look at the root causes of our problems, and transform the three poisons, in themselves as well as systemically in society. Those who choose to act as *Ecosattvas* realign their motivation and use their Buddhist practice for the good of the deeply interconnected web of life.

### *Deep Ecology*

“Deep Ecology” is a term coined by Norwegian philosopher and activist Arne Næss (1912–2009) in 1973 and has often been seen as the spiritual aspect of the ecology movement. It consists of a holistic worldview in contrast to a “shallow” anthropocentric approach to ecology, which has often focused on short-term technological solutions to our crises. In contrast, Deep Ecology aims to look at the deeper causes. It posits that,

–The flourishing of all human and nonhuman life on earth has inherent value independent to their usefulness to human purposes;

–An ideological change is necessary—from continual growth economies to appreciating quality of life;

–Diverse philosophies of nature are embraced—including the Gaia principle and seeing Planet Earth as living, creative, and evolving, and nature as continually creating itself based on a principle of compassion (Næss 2008).

Deep Ecology also aims to act as a political platform by unifying a diversity of activists with the intention of affecting policy change. It adopts the methodology of deeply questioning the underlying causes of our crises and acts as a movement, which embraces spiritual and religious approaches.

Næss was influenced by a variety of religions and philosophies including Buddhism, the thought of Gandhi (1869–1948), and Christianity. Deep Ecology shares a similar worldview and methodology with Ikeda's Buddhism: the understanding of the interconnection of all life and the inherent dignity and worth of all life as well as a spiritual approach to creating change. It shares a similar methodology or approach to social change with the belief that a deep transformation can only take place collectively and that it requires collaboration. However, Deep Ecology does not fully explore how this change might happen,

whereas Ikeda and the SGI have a clear approach to spiritual and social transformation.

At this point, I will investigate some aspects of “transformative capacity” and “social transformation” as defined in the social sciences.

### *Transformative Capacity and Social Transformation*

According to Christine Wamsler and her colleagues, a well-developed sense of one’s own agency is one of the main transformative qualities needed in an evolution of change and consciousness (Wamsler et al. 2021). In SGI and Ikeda’s philosophy and practice, this sense of agency is constantly being developed through the world-wide discussion meeting movement where practitioners and guests meet on a monthly basis, locally in small groups, to dialogue, discuss, and encourage each other in their inner transformation, as well as in taking outer action.

Furthermore, according to Gina Ziervogel, Anna Cowen, and John Ziniades, agency includes an enhanced ability for cooperation and co-creation as well as “creativity,” which is developed through a “strong social cohesion” based on a sense of belonging within community (Ziervogel, Cowen, and Ziniades 2016, 8–9). These qualities are also nurtured through the SGI discussion meeting movement where close collaboration between a very diverse membership is constantly required. Ikeda often stated that this process of steady inner change and the development of agency through heart-to-heart interaction and dialogue is what leads to collective social and cultural transformation.

Mark G. Edwards identifies social transformation as a “discontinuous... qualitative shift towards a more adaptive form of organising,” which “involves the whole system at all levels, including both visible, objective aspects and invisible, subjective elements of individuals, groups and structures” (Edwards 2010, 30).

He points to the fact that in change processes there is a “fundamental realignment of personal attitudes, consciousness, motivation, beliefs and spirituality” (Edwards 2010, 31), pointing to the importance of focusing on the transformation of people’s inner qualities such as values and beliefs, purpose and meaning, both individually and collectively.

In my recent research with young people from South-East Asia, data showed that an enhanced engagement with climate and ecology, as well as increased action was based on an interactive process of both individual and collective transformation processes. Participants’ changed values and behaviors became

more embedded and sustained when they were involved in regular collective reflection and exchange with like-minded others, which also contributed to a sense of belonging.

I suggest that in this respect SGI, together with other religions and ecology movements, can in many ways act as learning communities. They can support collaboration and collective transformation in an iterative interaction with constant personal self-reformation.

With her term “change agent,” Judith Chapman expresses how in “transformational change” every person can be identified as a “change agent” in so far as they have been involved in contributing to the change (Chapman 2002). Ikeda picked up this term as a contemporary way of expressing the idea of a Buddha or an “awakened one”—someone in the process of “human revolution,” or inner spiritual change involved in taking outer action. He describes the process of iterative inner and social transformation in the face of the climate crisis,

Buddhism describes this transformation in the depths of consciousness as follows: “We burn the firewood of earthly desires and behold the fire of enlightened wisdom before our eyes.” Rather than allowing the anger or grief we feel about our present circumstances to find outlet in acts that harm or degrade others, we must expand and elevate those feelings to become the motivation for action to counter the social ills and threats that bring suffering to ourselves and others. Buddhism teaches that such transformation enables us to live lives that illuminate society with the qualities of courage and hope (Ikeda 2012).

He also writes that,

A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, can even enable a change in the destiny of all humankind (Ikeda 1995, viii).

## *Conclusion*

Ikeda and the SGI have laid a huge emphasis on education, in addition to taking other forms of social and environmental action. One of Ikeda and SGI's main purposes is to inspire people with hope, courage, creativity, and joy, as well as the understanding that if we take even just one small action, we can contribute creatively to the interconnected web of life. The *Sowing Seeds of Hope and Action* exhibition, created by Soka Gakkai International and the Earth Charter International, shows through many examples how this can be done. In 2021,

SGI-UK and the Centre for Applied Buddhism showed this exhibition at COP26 in Glasgow as well as organizing accompanying events around the exhibition. These included intra- and interfaith panel discussions, events which gave young activists from the global south a platform, and cultural celebrations based on the exhibition's principles of "Inspire, Learn, Reflect, Empower, Act."

Although there is still much to be done in terms of the SGI membership gaining a deeper understanding of both the natural and human-made systems and being involved more deeply in climate and ecological action, SGI offers a strong dual practice of inner and outer transformation. This iterative process helps develop a strong sense of individual and collective agency leading towards creative collaboration and the steady development of "change agents."

In a message sent on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition in Glasgow Ikeda wrote,

The purpose of this exhibition is not simply to sound the alarm and raise concern among the viewers. Many of the panels showcase the visible joy of those who are courageously working to realize change in different places around the world. The exhibition aims to generate a sense of solidarity with our fellow inhabitants of this planet and to inspire collective action for the sake of future generations.

The role of the world's forests as carbon sinks that can mitigate climate change has gained increasing attention in recent years. I believe it is equally important to foster people who, as awakened change agents, will grow and spread like a protective canopy for our world, generating the much-needed momentum for building a sustainable society. The objective of this exhibition is thus to sow the seeds of hope and action in each individual (Ikeda 2021).

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**The Treasure Tower: The Peace Proposal 2020,  
Daisaku Ikeda’s “Last Word” on Climate Action**

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**ABSTRACT:** 2019 saw both a series of catastrophic weather events and the United Nations Climate Action Summit, where one third of United Nations member states announced policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. These themes figure prominently in Daisaku Ikeda’s 2020 Peace Proposal, largely devoted to climate change and the need for effective climate action. Ikeda discussed there his meetings with Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai and the importance of her Green Belt Movement. Both Maathai and British American activist Hazel Henderson and her fight against air pollution were featured in the Soka Gakkai exhibition “Seeds of Hope.” Ikeda also mentioned the UN Youth Climate Summit that took place ahead of the Climate Action Summit and called for a “youth-led climate action.” In analyzing the Peace Proposal 2020, the paper emphasizes that Ikeda’s plans for climate action have a specific Buddhist root. They refer to the *Lotus Sutra*’s principle that Buddha’s *sahā* world—our world of suffering and crises—and the paradisiac Land of Eternally Tranquil Light are not separated. By changing ourselves and accepting the Buddha’s teaching, we can change the *sahā* world into the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light. The *Lotus Sutra* expressed this hope through the image of the Treasure Tower, which with its shining light emerges in the *sahā* world and transforms it into the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light.

**KEYWORDS:** Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, Ikeda 2020 Peace Proposal, United Nations Climate Action Summit, Greenhouse Gas Emissions.

The 2020 Peace Proposal (Ikeda 2020) can be considered as Daisaku Ikeda’s (1928–2023) last comprehensive statement on climate action. Although Ikeda also mentioned climate issues in the 2021 and 2022 Peace Proposals, the text of 2020 offers an in-depth analysis, highlighting not only practical issues but also the ultimate Buddhist roots of his concern for climate. In the first part of this paper, I will examine some contemporary climate-related issues and theories discussed in the 2020 Peace Proposal (which, as usual in these documents, also mentioned problems other than climate). In the second part, I will illustrate how Ikeda’s approach to climate was rooted in the religious thought of Buddha Shakyamuni

(according to traditional dates, 566–466 BCE), Nichiren (1222–1282), and his predecessors as Presidents of Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944) and Jōsei Toda (1900–1958).

### *I. Ikeda and Some Contemporary Climate-Related Issues*

There are six important references I will now examine in the 2020 Peace Proposal: to different theories of disasters and their victims; to Anthony Giddens' idea of "ontological security"; to Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement; to Hazel Henderson's campaigns against air pollution; to the role of the United Nations—and finally to a youth-oriented climate action.

#### 1. Theories of Disasters

The year 2019 saw several weather disasters:

record heatwaves in Europe, India and elsewhere, and super typhoons and torrential rains triggered flooding around the world. The havoc wrought by the massive wildfires in Australia continues (Ikeda 2020, 1).

In Japan,

Typhoons Faxai and Hagibis struck different regions with ferocious wind and rain, causing extensive flooding and leaving broad swathes of the country without power or water, shredding the fabric of daily life (Ikeda 2020, 2).

Ikeda appeared to be familiar with the modern academic scientific discipline of disaster studies, which was dominated for many years by the paradigm of vulnerability. In the words of disaster scholar Anthony Oliver-Smith, the paradigm was initially

welcomed for identifying the root causes of disaster and locating them within society. In addition to foregrounding structural factors, it also extended the spatial and temporal horizons of disaster research (Oliver-Smith 1994, 31).

Echoing vulnerability theories, Ikeda noted that in natural disasters, including those caused by climate change, the most dramatic

impacts tend to be concentrated on and felt by people already afflicted by poverty and those in the more vulnerable sectors of society, such as women, children and the elderly. Such people are more exposed to danger and have greater difficulty rebuilding their lives in the aftermath of a disaster necessitating appropriate and continuous support (Ikeda 2020, 2).

In other words, there is no such a thing as a purely “natural” disaster, as its consequences derive from previous vulnerabilities, whose causes are human-made (Cannon 1994).

However, in 21<sup>st</sup> century disaster studies

Research on vulnerability was increasingly replaced by work on resilience. Resilience was first formulated as the antithesis of, and solution to, vulnerability. This seemed to have the advantage of restoring agency to disaster victims and of opening up thinking about the ways in which disasters impact different people, and how they in turn respond and recover (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021, 966).

While resilience theories are not without problems (Uekusa 2018), they have the advantage of regarding those who suffer disasters not only as victims but as agents whose reactions largely determine the final outcome. Ikeda agreed and mentioned the fact that the Toda Peace Institute, which he founded, was conducting a research project on the effects of climate change on Pacific Island communities (Ikeda 2020, 2). He also mentioned that Soka Gakkai was regularly “engaging in emergency relief activities and recovery activities in times of disaster” (Ikeda 2020, 27).

## 2. Anthony Giddens’s “Ontological Security”

Precisely when discussing the Toda Peace Institute’s report on “Climate Change, Migration and Land in Oceania,” Ikeda quotes the report’s reference to “ontological security.” Although he is not mentioned in the original Japanese text of the 2020 Peace Proposal, the concept was developed by Anthony Giddens, one of the most influential contemporary sociologists, in his 1984 book *The Constitution of Society* (Giddens 1984), and further discussed in his 1991 work *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Giddens 1991). As summarized by Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological security is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice” (Mitzen 2006, 344). While the world around us changes continuously, we need to believe that, although we also change, in a fundamental way our personal boundaries are stable, and we remain the same persons.

Today, ontological security is threatened in different ways. American sociologist Sherry Turkle, for example, argued as early as 1995 that the Internet puts ontological security at risk because by spending hours in front of a computer we assume multiple identities and may lose the integrity and unity of

the self. Obviously, this is even more true today than when Turkle wrote her classical book *Life on the Screen* some twenty years ago (Turkle 1995).

A note box in the English translation of Ikeda's 2020 Peace Proposal (not present in the original Japanese text) added that today

ontological security is threatened by anthropogenic climate change. On a societal level, migration from environments degraded by climate change breaks the continuity of the bond between people and their land, and compromises the material, social and cultural aspects of security (Ikeda 2020, 2).

Drawing, again, on the research work of the Toda Peace Institute, Ikeda focused on the situation of the inhabitants of small islands in the Pacific Ocean. Because of climate change, rising ocean levels flood their ancestral lands. They are compelled to leave their homes and move to other islands, sometimes even to other countries or continents. International cooperation may be able to give them a new home, but this would not solve the problem of the loss of ontological security. "The loss of the land is equivalent to a fundamental loss of identity," Ikeda argued, causing "irreparable pain" (Ikeda 2020, 2).

### 3. Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement

Coming to possible solutions to problems created by climate change, Ikeda offered a vivid reminiscence of his 2005 meeting with Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai (1940–2011). She had just become in 2004 the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Maathai's main concern was the deforestation and the reduction of the areas preserved both as national parks and city parks in her native Kenya to make room for industrial projects and commercial real estate. She connected these developments with the rise of authoritarian governments and corruption, which led her to be repeatedly arrested and fired from her position as a college professor and put her life at risk.

She encouraged Kenyan women to react in a very simple way, by planting trees. In 1977, she founded the Green Belt Movement, whose activities started with the planting of just seven trees. The movement extended to other African countries and later to all continents. By 2020, 15 billion trees had been planted, and the Green Belt Movement hopes to double this figure by the end of the current decade (Trillion Tree Campaign 2024).

Although raised a Roman Catholic, Maathai argued that both Christianity and African indigenous spirituality should be mobilized to persuade African women

that planting trees might be both an ecologically significant act and a spiritual experience (Maathai 2010; van Klinken 2021). Increasingly interested in non-Christian religions in the last years of her life, she was deeply impressed by her visit to Japan and to Soka University and included Buddhist references and terminology in her later works (Kinefuchi, Mutua, González, and Wolbert 2018, 156–57).

In turn, Ikeda recalled his and Soka University students' meeting with Maathai noting that it occurred just two days after the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions entered into force:

We discussed her work of igniting hope toward the creation of a new world starting in her immediate surroundings. Reflecting upon the Green Belt Movement, which began with the planting of just seven saplings, Dr. Maathai asserted: 'The future does not exist in the future. Rather, it is born only through our actions in the present, and if we want to realize something in the future, we must take action toward it now.' I vividly recall Dr. Maathai's beaming smile and how it swept across her face like a spring breeze as students from Soka University welcomed her with a rousing rendition of the Green Belt Movement song in Kikuyu, her native language: *This is our land. It is our mission to plant trees here.* As I watched her mouth the lyrics and move in rhythm with the song, I couldn't help but feel that I was witnessing the joy that comes from engaging in the challenge of construction. This joy, emanating from her entire being, had served as the driving force that enabled the tree-planting movement to spread throughout Africa from its start in Kenya (Ikeda 2020, 10).

#### 4. Hazel Henderson's Fight Against Air Pollution

In 2020, Soka Gakkai International in cooperation with Earth Charter International, launched a second edition of the exhibition *Seeds of Hope & Action*, which had been first held in 2010. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second edition was first launched in several countries online. The exhibition, which continues to be physically exhibited and includes twenty-five panels, features among others the work of Wangari Maathai and of British-American "futurist" Hazel Henderson (1933–2022).

While Maathai was an academic, Henderson had only a British high school degree when she moved to New York in 1957. As a young mother, she noted the adverse effect on her daughter of the city's air pollution. She gathered other concerned parents and co-founded Citizens for Clean Air. Eventually, the organization grew to some 20,000 members and was able to have both state and federal pollution control laws passed in the United States. It was also due to Henderson's efforts that air quality data are now included in most weather reports

available on the Internet and on cell phones. Despite not having a college degree herself, she was invited to teach as a lecturer at the University of California in Santa Barbara and Berkeley, sharing her lifelong experience as an anti-pollution activist.

Ikeda noted how Henderson, like Maathai, did not limit herself to complain but took decisive action to improve the quality of the environment. This corresponded to the Buddhist concept of transmuting pain into energy. In the case of Maathai and Henderson, Ikeda wrote

the experience of acute distress made them intensely aware of the things they treasure, things the world cannot afford to lose. But they did not let that pain paralyze them... Henderson began working with like-minded individuals out of her desire to enable children to breathe clean air again. In both cases, they [Maathai and Henderson] transmuted their pain into the energy of construction that would enable them to actualize the world they hoped to see (Ikeda 2020, 11).

## 5. The Role of the United Nations

As I have noted in previous articles on SGI President Ikeda, I was always impressed by his and Soka Gakkai's professionalism in dealing with the complicated machinery of the United Nations (Šorytė 2019, 2021, 2022). While certainly aware of the limitations of the United Nations, and proposing in several of the forty annual Peace Proposals he published between 1983 and 2022 substantial reforms of their regulations, Ikeda directed Soka Gakkai to cooperate with the international organization and its agencies. A main concern of Soka Gakkai has always been the abolition of nuclear weapons, but Ikeda argues that nuclear annihilation and climate change are twin evils threatening the very survival of humanity.

In the 2020 Peace Proposal, he summarized what had been achieved at the United Nations level in the fight against climate change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted in 1992. The UN Conference on Environment and Development also known as the Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro in the same year 1992. The Kyoto Protocol aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions was adopted in 1997 and entered into force in 2005. By 2020, 120 countries had ratified it, although the list did not include the United States and Canada, having originally ratified the protocol in 2004, withdrew from it in 2012. The Paris Agreement on climate change was adopted in 2015 and signed in 2016. It was ratified by almost all countries of the world.

Among the large emitters of greenhouse gas the only country that did not ratify it was Iran. Under the administration of Donald Trump, the United States withdrew from the agreement, but President Joe Biden re-entered it once elected. Trump has suggested that the U.S. may withdraw again from the Paris Agreement if he is re-elected as President this year. Finally, 2019 saw the United Nations Climate Action Summit, where one third of United Nations member states announced policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

Soka Gakkai and its associate organizations have been major non-state stakeholders in supporting the United Nations action against climate change and campaigning to persuade countries to ratify the various treaties. They have not always been successful, but certainly their conferences, publications, and exhibitions have raised awareness of the climate change problems in several countries. No world religious leader has been more active and effective than President Ikeda in these campaigns.

## 6. Youth-Oriented Climate Action

When Ikeda published the 2020 Peace Proposal, the United Nations Youth Climate Summit of September 2019 was still fresh in the memory of eco-activists throughout the world. Ikeda made a passing reference to the speech there of young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, then 16 years old, at a time when scholars were debating whether Thunberg was inventing a new language and even a new body language and changing the rules of the ecological game (Olthof 2021). The emphasis on Thunberg has since decreased. While she had impressed the world as a girl able to mobilize the world teenagers in a global ecological movement, she is today a young woman with clear political positions not everybody agrees with. She has also been criticized for some radical proposals including the public “flight shame” directed at those who use airplanes (she doesn’t, and travels to United States by boat) because of their greenhouse gas emissions.

Ikeda, however, did not focus on Thunberg as an individual activist but saw as a positive development the increasing involvement of young people in campaigns against climate change. Soka Gakkai’s Youth Division has been especially active in this field.

## *II. The Buddhist Roots of Ikeda's Climate Action*

Ikeda did not approach the question of climate change as a politician but as a religious leader. He firmly believed that Buddhism offered deep motivations to those willing to fight climate change and ultimately indicated the most effective way to achieve results, by changing ourselves to change the world around us. In the 2020 Peace Proposal, he referred to four Buddhist teachers crucial for himself and his disciples: Buddha Shakyamuni, Nichiren, and the first and second Presidents of Soka Gakkai, Makiguchi and Toda.

### 1. Shakyamuni and King Ajatashatru

Somewhat surprisingly, when referring to Buddha Shakyamuni, the 2020 Peace Proposal presents a reflection on King Ajatashatru of Magadha, who reigned in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and was an important but controversial figure in the history of India. According to the tradition, as crown prince of Magadha he became a disciple of Devadatta, an early Buddhist monk who promoted a schism and repeatedly tried to assassinate the Buddha. Devadatta persuaded the crown prince to kill his own father and became the new king. In this capacity, he tried to help Devadatta in his unsuccessful assassination attempts against the Buddha.

What interested Ikeda in the history of the evil king is that he eventually fell prey to severe illness and in his last days was abandoned and shunned by his courtiers and friends. At this time, the Buddha himself was about to die. According to the *Nirvana Sutra*, he told his disciples that “I shall, for the sake of Ajatashatru, live.” The Buddha did not allow himself to die until he was able to meet the king and forgive him. The king was cured of his illness, repented of his evil ways, and joined the Buddhist community. Why the Buddha delayed his own death and entrance into Nirvana for the sake of a king who had conspired to assassinate him was, as the Buddha himself told his disciples, “hard for you to understand.” However, he explained that the king had become a universal figure whose significance went beyond his physical existence. He was a representative of “all those who have committed the five deadly sins,” “have not yet aspired to unsurpassed Enlightenment,” and if they do not repent “will assuredly suffer eternal death” (*The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* 2007, 269). These persons should not be abandoned. All efforts should be made to offer them the Buddha's compassion so that they can repent.



Ikeda wrote that

In Shakyamuni's actions—his refusal to allow anyone to suffer in isolation or to leave anyone alone in their confrontation with severe difficulties—I feel we can discern the original source of the Buddhist spirit of compassion (Ikeda 2020, 6).

Ikeda refers the story of the Buddha and the evil king to the situation of both those who experience ontological insecurity because of the climate change and of those who perpetrate crimes against ecology. Buddha shows that neither the victims nor the victimizers should be abandoned. All can be helped, and all can change.

## 2. Nichiren and the Treasure Tower

The medieval Japanese Buddhist monk Nichiren Daishonin was the founder of the tradition of which Soka Gakkai is part, and his interpretation of the “Treasure Tower” represents the ideal center of Ikeda's 2020 Peace Proposal. “The Treasure Tower” is the eleventh chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. It starts with a description of the *sahā* world—our world of suffering and the world where the Buddha gathered his disciples to preach. While the Buddha is speaking, an enormous shining tower emerges and transforms the *sahā* world into the paradisiac Land of Eternally Tranquil Light.

Nichiren explained that the meaning of the story is that to reach the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light, “It is not that he [the practitioner of the *Lotus Sutra*] leaves his present place and goes to some other place” (Nichiren 2004, 192). In fact, “the *sahā* world is in itself the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light” (Ikeda 2020, 10).

Nichiren, according to Ikeda, reacted against “escapist ideologies” and “systems of thought portraying human beings as powerless” (Ikeda 2020, 10). We do not need to go “elsewhere” or to wait for a paradise to be reached after our death to change this world, here and now, including by addressing the problems of climate change. The Land of Eternally Tranquil Light,

this ideal land that the people yearn for does not exist in some other place, far from their reach. The heart of the *Lotus Sutra* lies in taking ever greater action to enable the place we are in now to shine as the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light (Ikeda 2020, 10),

Ikeda was persuaded that “within every one of us is the same brilliant and dignified light as that emitted by the Treasure Tower” (Ikeda 2020, 10). For a Christian, these words resonate with Jesus' teaching that “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).

### 3. Makiguchi's *The Geography of Human Life*

In the 2020 Peace Proposal, Ikeda discusses an early book by Makiguchi, the founder of Soka Gakkai, published in 1903 with the title *The Geography of Human Life* (see the 8<sup>th</sup> revised edition: Makiguchi 1908). Makiguchi noted, as early as in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, how the world was inter-connected. When his wife was not able to produce milk to breast-feed his son, following the advice of his doctor he purchased powdered milk made in Switzerland and protected the frail baby with Indian cotton clothing. He thought of how shepherds and factory workers in Switzerland and women spinning cotton in India were connected with his child without knowing it.

The book also described negative connections, and how wars and economic competition generated by greed endanger humanity as a whole. While wars are easily visible, devastating economic competition is often invisible, but not less dangerous. Makiguchi, Ikeda explained, was not against competition in general. He criticized competition unrestricted by rules where greed leads to disrespect for the competitors, the rules, and nature itself.

Ikeda believed that the ideas of Makiguchi's 1903 book also apply to the problems of climate change. Those who do not want to fight it are motivated by greed and are not prepared to sacrifice a part of their profits for the sake of the Planet's health. They should be reminded of the Buddhist principle that we cannot protect our own lives without protecting the lives of others, a key theme of Makiguchi's *The Geography of Life*.

### 4. Toda and Value-Creating Pedagogy

In the terrible years following Japan's defeat in World War II, Makiguchi's successor, Jōsei Toda, who had just been released from jail, hired his promising 21-year-old disciple Daisaku Ikeda to work in his publishing company as editor of a children's magazine called *Bōken Shōnen* (Boy's Adventure: Shiohara 2021, 43). Soka Gakkai's second President wanted to help young Ikeda to make ends meet in the dramatic economic situation of the country, and also to offer him an opportunity to be with Toda daily and attend what he affectionately called "Toda University." It was not a formal university but Toda's way of using every opportunity to train his future successor (Shiohara 2021).

At the same time, Ikeda wrote in the 2020 Peace Message that assigning him to work for a children's magazine was not coincidental. He noted that, even before hiring him, Toda made great efforts to publish thirty-five issues of educational magazines for children during the war, between 1940 and 1942.

Nothing could be more important than educating future generations. This is also true for combating climate change. "The flame of education requires constant tending," Ikeda wrote (Ikeda 2020, 30). This is the message he left to Soka Gakkai and to all women and men of good will striving for a sustainable world where climate and ecological problems will be regarded as crucial challenges for the future of all.

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## Research Notes

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### **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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## Research Notes

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### 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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## Research Notes

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### Liselotte Frisk and MISA: An Emic View of a Yoga School and Its Perils

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**ABSTRACT:** A student of MISA herself, the author describes her personal journey and how she decided to investigate whether the accusations against her yoga school were true and where they came from. In the process, she met several scholars, including Liselotte Frisk, and also came across judges and prosecutors, whose perspective was obviously different. The article, the author's contribution to a panel on Liselotte Frisk's research on MISA at the Göteborg 2024 conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), where the papers of Introvigne and Šorytė published in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* were also read, discusses the differences between the respective approaches by academics and by certain prosecutors and judges by examining a previously unpublished 2023 decision on MISA by the Court of Florence, Italy.

**KEYWORDS:** MISA, Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, Gregorian Bivolaru, Liselotte Frisk, Natha Yoga, Atman International Yoga and Meditation Federation.

#### *Introduction*

Many studies and research have been carried out over the years on the MISA (Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute) yoga school, the Atman International Yoga and Meditation Federation, of which it is part, and its founder, yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru.

Sociologists, psychologists, religious scholars, specialists in the fields of political science and human rights, among whom I would mention only a few university professors and activists—Sara Møldrup Thejls (2015), Liselotte



Frisk (1959–2020: 2024), Susan Palmer (2024), J. Gordon Melton (2017), PierLuigi Zoccatelli (1965–2024: 2017), Rosita Šorytė (2022), Zdeněk Vojtíšek (2018), Raffaella Di Marzio (2017), Gabriel Andreescu (2005, 2007, 2008, 2013a, 2013b, 2016), Willy Fautré (2013), and Tova Olsson (2024)—have published on and debated the teachings of the yoga school, the legal context that accompanied its progress, and its integration into society.

In addition to these studies, which have each contributed to clarifying or understanding the context surrounding the school and the teaching of its founder Gregorian Bivolaru, in March 2022 Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne published his book *Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA)* (Introvigne 2022a). I would call this the most significant and richest work on the MISA yoga school and the teachings of Bivolaru, touching on different controversial perspectives such as: occultism; the conflation of esotericism with eroticism, which the school regards as separate from sexuality; the possible tensions arising from the combination of eroticism with spirituality; legal controversies, taboos, and slander. Presenting the full context makes it easier to understand and collocate in its proper place the study on MISA and Helsinki's Natha Yoga Center by Liselotte Frisk.

Also to clarify the context, I will add a few personal comments. I have been a student of the MISA yoga school for more than thirty years. Between the years 1995 and 2004, there were many media campaigns in Romania and since 2004, when the legal problems started, the slandering publications about the yoga school started to be more vicious and spread to several countries. In the meantime, the yoga school had also developed in more than thirty countries, so that its visibility had become higher. In what has been published about the school two main accusations were mentioned, sexual abuse and human trafficking.

These accusations are very broad and are very easily directed against several spiritual groups stigmatized as “cults.” In the case of the MISA yoga school, however, they come with a special sensationalism: accusations of sexual orgies, sexual perversion, and more recently, in France since November 2023, rape and abuse of vulnerable women. How did these horrific accusations come about?

In the beginning, as I was personally not greatly affected by the situations that arose, I decided to ignore all these media campaigns. I believed that eventually justice would be served and the accusations would be proven to be false and fabricated. However, after years of directly feeling the effects

of both social and institutional discrimination, in 2012 I became a human rights activist for religious and spiritual freedom. I wanted to shed light on these developments, first of all for myself, to understand why there was so much hate against certain yoga schools, including MISA. In my long experience, in our yoga classes we were always taught peaceful principles and treated with integrity and respect. The legal accusations, the sensational speculations in the media, had nothing to do with what I knew directly and practiced weekly.

I personally practiced in MISA and Atman yoga schools in Romania, Denmark, India, and Belgium. Everywhere, the teachings of the yoga schools were the same, based on the courses of yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru. The classes were based on yoga practice, with the corresponding theory, in an atmosphere of soul-searching and sacredness, where I saw commitment and enthusiasm from both instructors and students.

Although this was the reality that I was living at the yoga classes, both relatives and friends, who were not MISA students, kept telling me that “there should be a grain of truth” in what was being said in the media about the school and Bivolaru. Maybe I just had not been able to notice what was really going on. So, I embarked on a personal search. I started a study of the school from a different perspective: not just as a yoga student, but as a human rights activist and as if I were an outsider observer.

After years of research, during which the legal and media abuses against the yoga school and Gregorian Bivolaru continued, both in Romania and in other countries, I found myself at the same point. I still did not understand how things could be interpreted so tendentiously. I still did not find anything in MISA that could be regarded as illegal. So, the question remained. What exactly was disturbing somebody and creating these legal and social problems?

Since 2016, I have also had the chance to get in touch with academics and meet some truly remarkable people who have helped me understanding things from a different point of view.

In fact, I would like to thank everyone who has helped me, along the way, to broaden my perspective and to be able to understand the causes of some of the problems that the yoga school is facing.

It is in this context that, in 2018 and 2019, I met on several occasions Professor Liselotte Frisk. She impressed me with her humility and kindness

and at the same time with the rigor with which she examined every detail and every aspect when conducting a study. Her research was carefully documented and supported by multiple elements. I appreciated both the woman and the scientist, a very harmonious and visible combination of female compassion and academic integrity.

In her works, I noticed that she managed to present complicated subjects in simple words, understandable to everyone, no matter how difficult the subject matter was. She also did this in her study of the Natha Yoga school in Finland. She left, as they say, no stone unturned and also asked questions about difficult or controversial aspects of the school's teachings and activity.

### *Academics, Prosecutors, and Sacred Eroticism*

As mentioned by Rosita Šorytė (this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*), both Liselotte Frisk and her Swedish colleague Karl Nylund, who had a quite different point of view on spirituality in general, examined the subject of sacred eroticism as a teaching of the yoga school. Liselotte Frisk, however, went one step further, touching on the subject of erotic initiations and intimate, loving relationships.

The concept and practice of sacred eroticism is perhaps the aspect that attracts the most both attention and misunderstanding, although it is only one among many areas addressed by MISA teachings. For those desiring more knowledge in this field, in his aforementioned book Massimo Introvigne discusses the history of sacred eroticism as it has emerged over time in various esoteric movements.

In the conception of the MISA school of yoga, sexuality and eroticism are two distinct subtle energies exhibiting distinctly different vibrational frequencies (one lower, sexuality, and the other higher, eroticism). “Gross sexuality” is a descending energy leading to manifestation, separation, procreation, objectification, materialism, and so on. On the contrary, “pure eroticism” is an ascending and uplifting energy, leading to universality, unity, and sublime inspirations. Unlike in sexuality, in eroticism, based on male continence, ejaculation is avoided.

To clarify, I would briefly mention the yoga school and yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru's vision of: (1) Eroticism as a combination of two divine attributes, of Eros and of Love; and (2) Sacred Eroticism as a combination of three divine attributes, of Love, of Eros, and of Divine Holiness.

About the Godly Attributes, the school teaches that they are endless, eternal, free energies. To achieve spiritual progress, it is necessary to create in the human being the favorable conditions for triggering processes of occult resonance with these sublime, Godly energies. These premises of the school's approach to sacred eroticism are often ignored in the controversies.

As Liselotte Frisk pointed out,

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 (Frisk 2024, 29).

In his book, Introvigne notes that with such an understanding, it is clear that, from the perspective of MISA, the accusations of being a “sex cult” are perceived, if not as absurd, at least as paradoxical if one considers that sexuality in itself is firmly rejected by the movement. Initiated practitioners of the MISA school of yoga are even advised to “discard gross sexuality as obviously inferior, like old, shabby clothes, and embrace only eroticism” (Introvigne 2022a, 65).

After in-depth studies and many interviews conducted with yoga practitioners, both Frisk in 2019 and Introvigne in 2022, as well as other academics who have studied the yoga school such as Susan Palmer (2024), argue that the violence of the media and legal campaigns against the MISA yoga school and Gregorian Bivolaru are disproportionate, somewhat unprecedented, and truly international in scale, most likely due to the fact that our societies do not tolerate the combination of eroticism with religion or spirituality.

Police actions, in several countries, against groups of “sacred eroticism” have been documented by researchers, described in detail by witnesses, and summarized in court decisions. They follow a strikingly similar pattern, one that raises the question of whether the repressive scenarios were inspired by each other. We can say that, following the parallel investigations, there is no doubt about the way in which the facts unfolded, in many cases, in different countries, against different spiritual groups: Argentina, Romania, Czech Republic, Italy, Finland, France.

We could say that in all the interventions motivated by the practice of sacred eroticism (real or imaginary, as in the Argentinian case of the Buenos Aires Yoga School there were in fact no teachings on eroticism except in the imagination of one opponent: Introvigne 2023), spiritual movements were

targeted because their unconventional practices were perceived by the authorities, without any reasonable basis, as anti-social and criminal.

In her report on the Natha Yoga Finland school, Liselotte Frisk (2024) analyzed the standard anti-cult definition of a “cult” and its elements. She did not believe in this definition. However, by analyzing its components one by one, she concluded that even if one adopted that definition, Natha Yoga Finland could not be called a “cult.” She reported that the students at the Natha Yoga Finland school made fully informed choices about what they wished to practice, their lifestyle, interactions, and relationships. This also applied to intimate relationships, when it came to choosing a path of erotic love continence and sacred eroticism.

Obviously, there is a difference between the approach of academic scholars and the prosecutors or the police. However, both should investigate objectively, evaluate sources critically, and try to overcome prejudices.

### *An Italian Case*

These different approaches emerged in the case of the Natha Yoga School in Finland studied by Liselotte Frisk and in an Italian parallel case. In Finland, the Natha Yoga Center legal saga started with a police raid on October 31, 2012, in Helsinki.

Also in the same year, on December 6, 2012, raids took place against the headquarters of the Italian branches of the Atman Federation (to which MISA also belongs) and the homes of members, with the involvement of a special anti-cult squad of the Italian police. The prosecutor who ordered the investigations accused the yogis of conspiracy, enslavement, human trafficking, and sexual violence. Documents, diaries, electronic equipment, and cell phones were seized.

After eleven years of investigation, the Florence Court on March 28, 2023, closed the investigation against the yoga school practitioners without any indictment. Although the judge did not find any crime, her decision expressed “agreement” with the prosecutor’s comments that

a large number of cases have been identified in which it is not easy to establish whether this condition [of participation in community life] is the result of a free choice on the part of female students or whether this choice is only apparently free, in the sense that it is the result of subjugation [‘plagio’ in Italian] and manipulation of the personality or whether it is, in any case, a voluntary adherence to a certain lifestyle, albeit not one we could agree with (Tribunale di Firenze 2023).

Note that this is a decision favorable to the yoga students, who were found not guilty of any crimes. The prosecutor himself asked to declare the defendants not guilty. Note also that Italy is a country where “mental manipulation” is not recognized as a crime, as the provision on “plagio,” or mental subjugation, of the Criminal Code, dating back to Fascist times, was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in a historical 1981 decision, which stated that “mind control” was not an accepted scientific theory (Introvigne 2022b, 50–2). While the Constitutional Court declared in 1981 that “plagio” does not exist, as late as 2023 the Florence prosecutor was still using the word “plagio” and claiming that the Atman-affiliated school was practicing “psychological subjection,” although without committing any crime. The prosecutor also felt the need to add that he did not agree with the school’s “lifestyle.”

The Florence decision, which came after a long cooperation between prosecutors, judges, anti-cultists, and hostile ex-members of the school, shows how prejudices even in a comparatively liberal country as Italy are stronger than the laws. It almost looks like the prosecutor and the judge would have liked to find that the yoga students had committed some crimes and were disappointed that eleven years of investigation confirmed they had always acted as good and law-abiding citizens. In other words, they had to declare the defendants innocent but were not pleased about it. Perhaps, this also explain why the investigation lasted for eleven years. They kept looking for evidence of crimes that, as they had to reluctantly conclude, never existed.

Romanian political science professor Gabriel Andreescu in a recent article on the repression of sacred eroticism groups refers to this case in Italy, and comments that,

The doubt in the argumentation, using stigmatizing suggestions, is a denial of the presumption of innocence that suggests the lack of good faith of the judge (Andreescu 2024, 46).

### *Conclusion*

These prejudices were also at work in the recent French case. On the morning of November 28, 2023, SWAT teams of approximately 175 police officers wearing black masks, helmets, bulletproof vests and semi-automatic rifles stormed eight houses and apartments in Paris, the surrounding area,

and Nice that housed less than one hundred peaceful yoga students, who had full legal rights to be and, in some cases, to work in France, most of them of Romanian origin. Masked police handcuffed several of them, dragged them out of their homes, without clothing or shoes appropriate for the cold weather, and took them by bus to the police station. Gregorian Bivolaru was in France at that time, was also arrested, and is still in detention (Palmer 2024).

The charges were of “human trafficking,” “forcible detention,” and “abuse of vulnerability” by an “organized gang.” And in this case, as in others, the brutal interventions of the investigative bodies took place after long periods of surveillance of the yoga movements, years in a row, according to the official statements of the prosecutors. Thus, in the raid in France, ignorance of the yoga practitioners’ activity and their lifestyle was excluded. Note also that, after nine months, all the women the French police claims were held in captivity and were “liberated” in November 2023 continue to testify they were not victims, they went to France voluntarily and were happy to participate in spiritual activities that in some cases included sacred eroticism (Palmer 2024).

As Susan Palmer (2024) and other scholars have noted, with arguments similar to Liselotte Frisk’s about Finland, what happened in France is a continuation of a long series of attacks against MISA and Bivolaru by forces that regard any combination of eroticism and spirituality as intolerable.

Unfortunately, the academics’ studies, although they have been published, have not yet counterbalanced what the media campaign has created for years: the image of the yoga school as a “sex cult” guilty of “brainwashing” and “sexual abuse.”

Nor did those legal decisions in Sweden, Romania, and other countries that affirmed the yogis’ and Gregorian Bivolaru’s innocence (Introvigne 2022a, 31–36) matter. The portrayal of the yoga school was and remains a tool of discrimination and slander, in the hands of the mass media, used as a springboard for unfounded legal accusations.

As a yoga practitioner, I can say that every such police action is also reflected in my life. Every time I feel that I have to decide whether to continue the spiritual practice, which I find so effective, with results and personal confirmations of the application of yoga techniques. I am aware that by choosing to continue I will face the public reproach and the terrible accusations that will be indirectly brought against me as well.

Unfortunately, over time, some of my fellow yoga students could not bear the pressure and gave up the spiritual path, fearing the consequences of associating their name with the yoga school. Others gave up due to the doubts awakened in their hearts by the series of accusations and scandalous publications. I think it would have helped them if they had met Liselotte Frisk and discussed with her the context of the campaigns against the school. Sadly, this is no longer possible. There are, however, other scholars willing to study the school without prejudices. We are open to answer all their questions, and trust that, although they may disagree with some of our teachings, they will report objectively on the unconventional spiritual path we have chosen and ask to be free to pursue.

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## Book Reviews

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Lorita Tinelli, *Sette e manipolazione mentale* [Cults and Mental Manipulation], by Marco Marzari and Lorita Tinelli. Segrate (Milan): Piemme, 2023. 192 pp. EUR 17.50. ISBN: 978885668950.

Reviewed by Luigi Berzano, Università di Torino, Italy, [luigiberzano3@gmail.com](mailto:luigiberzano3@gmail.com).

The book *Sette e manipolazione mentale* (Cults and Mental Manipulation) by Lorita Tinelli, a psychologist and president of the Center for the Study of Psychological Abuses (CeSAP), an anti-cult organization that is a member of FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), and Marco Marzari, a lawyer, presents two types of issues: the first of a logical-methodological order, the second related to the content.

After the preface and introduction, eleven chapters follow, four of which are devoted to specific cases and six to the following topics: the central figure of the leader, the process of entering and leaving a “cult,” strategies for defending a “cult,” and strategies for protecting oneself from recruitment. The last chapter deals with the “geopolitics of the cultic phenomenon.”

In the introduction, the authors clarify their objective: “The goal of this book is thus to bring attention back to the phenomenon of cults, which is much discussed and studied but in practice difficult to curb.” They also explain how they intend to achieve it: “by illustrating significant case studies, through legal cases, documents, judgments, and stories, which demonstrate the existence of such realities, with all the serious and disturbing consequences that follow” (p. 23).

Since the authors do not give any definition of the phenomenon to which they intend to “bring attention back,” namely that of “cults,” despite claiming that it is much “discussed” and “studied,” the structural layout of the book is devoid of any

real rationale. What is missing is a theoretical basis from which exemplifications would flow that could, as the authors state, demonstrate “the existence of such realities, with all the serious and disturbing consequences that follow.” In essence, the readers do not know what the authors are talking about, but they will get some examples in the following pages of the book where some “cults” are named.

The assumption from which the authors start is that there is a “cult phenomenon” that they are unable (or do not think it is important) to define: to prove this, one only has to read the “legal cases, documents, judgments, and stories” that are presented in the following chapters. The weakness of this thesis emerges as one proceeds to read the first four chapters, in which the reader is supposed to find “evidence” that the “cult phenomenon” exists “with all the serious and disturbing consequences that follow.” The cases cited are those of Wanna (Vanna) Marchi, Arkeon, Mauro Cioni (1945–2021), and the Forteto community.

First, the authors consider these cases as indicative of the existence of the “cult danger,” of mental manipulation, and the need, to protect victims, to institute new crimes, such as the reintroduction of the repealed crime of “plagio” declared unconstitutional in Italy in 1981. In fact, they do not achieve their goal because the sentences handed down by the judges in these trials on the basis of the existing laws are exemplary and adequately motivated. It follows that there is no need to introduce new laws to remedy a deficiency that does not exist, or to go back to “plagio,” a crime that the Constitutional Court has called a “loose cannon in the Italian legal system.” The legitimate criticism of the above-mentioned judgments described as being too “mild” or coming too late, with the consequence that the victims were not able to receive just compensation for the damages they had suffered in a reasonable time, stems from the structural problems of the Italian justice system. They affect all court cases, not only those against “cults.”

A second consideration concerns the cavalier treatment of sources. The authors cite parts of judgments that confirm their views on the “cult” involved in the trial, but they do not give the reader access to the official and integral documents. Only an access to these documents would make it possible to ascertain how much of the testimonies given during the trials, cited in the book, were considered by the judges as “evidence” of abuses suffered, and how many were not even taken into consideration because they were completely unsubstantiated. Moreover, the reconstruction of the four events is riddled with numerous serious inconsistencies,

partial truths, and omissions. A timely examination of each case would require much more space. For this reason, we will have to be content to make only a few critical remarks, foregoing the due study they would deserve.

The first chapter “‘I am Wanna Marchi and Who Are You?’ Soft Mental Manipulation” is one of the “significant cases” that should prove the existence of the “cult phenomenon.” The court case in question concerned a conspiracy to commit fraud, which, as the authors themselves make clear, “is quite different from cultic phenomena.” The reader is correctly informed of the definition of the crime of fraud according to the Italian Criminal Code, and the reasons why the defendants were convicted on the basis of that definition. However, what remains utterly obscure is the rationale for the authors’ claim that “between these two equally criminal realities [fraud and ‘cultic phenomena’] there is a nexus.” The “nexus” is allegedly to be found in the fact that it is “possible to equate, at least in general characters, a fraudster with a manipulator” (p. 26).

The association between the crime of fraud, whose specific characteristics are well defined by the Criminal Code, and “manipulation,” a phenomenon that is part of everyday human existence, starting with advertising strategies and ending with the relationships that exist between people bound by emotional ties or relationships of affection or education, assistance, care, and so on, does not hold up because it is completely illogical. Moreover, the claim that within religious and non-religious groups defined as “cults” there exists a form of mental manipulation or coercive persuasion different from what is observed in other relational contexts has never been accepted by the APA (American Psychological Association), which published an official statement on the subject over thirty years ago.

In their chapter devoted to the Forteto community, the authors even call for the introduction in our penal code of “a definition as precise and stringent as possible of ‘cult’... as an autonomous crime.” They are thus asking the legislators to intervene in the scientific debate on a complex and controversial phenomenon by deciding, by law, which religion is licit and which is not, and therefore deserves the punitive definition of “cult.” It would amount to adding in our penal code an even more haphazard crime than “mental manipulation,” for the simple reason that when “cults” are mentioned no one knows what they exactly are. The proof of this lies in the fact that the disparaging appellation of “cult” is applied, by anti-cult groups and hostile ex-members, to the most diverse organizations: the nuns of Mother Teresa (1910–1997), Opus Dei, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Peoples

Temple, Arkeon, Soka Gakkai, the Forteto community, the Neocatechumenal Way, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Solar Temple, Falun Gong, Aum Shinrikyo, the Universal Peace Federation, several Pentecostal Christian Churches, and many others.

Among the groups mentioned above there are some in which serious crimes occurred, and were properly prosecuted and punished by the courts without the need to define whether or not they were “cults.” In others, one or more members committed crimes just as it may happen in any religious or non-religious organization. Among the groups mentioned above, there are also some in which no criminal incidents of any kind have occurred. They are criticized only because they propose practices and doctrines that differ from those of the majority.

In the next six chapters the authors describe: the central figure of the leader, the process of entering and leaving a “cult”, strategies for defending a “cult”, and strategies for protecting oneself from recruitment.

In this part of the book they repetitively return to the same ideas they have already extensively illustrated with the addition of other, often anonymous, testimonies of victims, sometimes dating back to events in the 1970s. In addition, the authors cite studies mostly from anti-cult sources. It is true that some scientific literature is cited in the book by authors such as Philip Zimbardo and Stanley Milgram (1933–1984). They conducted useful research to understand how ordinary people who are well adapted to their environment can perform reprehensible actions, even very serious ones, against themselves and others, stifling the most deeply rooted instincts in human beings, such as that of survival and defense of offspring. The authors refer to these contributions in the chapter on the “central figure of the leader” to demonstrate the destructive effects of the power exercised by “cult” leaders over their followers and society. However, the search for authoritative support for the authors’ theses does not succeed because the context in which Zimbardo and Milgram’s studies were conducted, and their purpose, is much more general. They investigate the phenomenon not only in religiously and spiritually motivated organizations, but also in political and social ones.

Zimbardo (in Arthur Miller, ed., *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil: Understanding Our Capacity for Kindness and Cruelty*, New York: Guilford, 2004), for example, applies his research findings to the case of the millions of “good” people who expressed hatred toward Jews during Nazism and admired the

apparent strength of their dictator. To explain this, he mentions the school curricula of the time that indoctrinated Germans from childhood to see Jews as an inferior and dangerous race. According to his theory of “deindividuation,” individuals who are part of a cohesive group tend to lose their personal identity, awareness, and sense of responsibility, fueling the emergence of antisocial impulses. This theory applies to society in general and to any type of group. It can also help to understand the torture to which Iraqi prisoners were subjected in the Abu Ghraib prison by U.S. military personnel during the occupation of Iraq. The role of the leader in these circumstances (political, military, religious, and so on) is decisive, but it is (just as it happens with what the authors call “mental manipulation”) a phenomenon that can unfortunately occur in the most diverse circumstances and contexts rather than a characteristic that distinguishes “cults” from other groups.

The authors do not seem to have really understood Zimbardo’s argument and conclusion. They relate his theory to some testimonies of victims reported in court cases or outside official contexts, belonging to groups whose leaders do not appear to have ever induced their worshippers to commit evil deeds, such as Vito Carlo Moccia and Matteo Valdambri, convicted respectively for practicing psychology without a license, and for enslavement and sexual violence. To these examples the authors add others whose “dangerousness” would be found solely in their role as spiritual leaders within communities where the faithful freely decide to follow a “different” spiritual path or alternative medical practices.

To demonstrate the criminal nature of this type of leader, the authors cite the case of Paolo Bendinelli. He is the founder and leader of the Anidra Center. Roberta Repetto (1980–2020), to whom Tinelli and Marzari’s book is dedicated, was a yoga teacher at Anidra who died of metastases from a melanoma in 2020. The authors cite Bendinelli’s first-degree conviction for manslaughter, where he was sentenced to a jail term of three years and four months. They see there a confirmation of their thesis that Bendinelli was responsible for Roberta’s death by mentally manipulating her into refusing treatment. What the authors could not have imagined is that the ruling would be overturned on appeal, with Bendinelli acquitted of all charges. The appeal judges concluded that Repetto “independently chose alternative remedies without turning to a hospital’s emergency department for her ailments,” thus ruling out any manipulation.

One of the leaders mentioned as actually committing serious abuses within his community is David Berg (1919–1994), founder in the 1960s of the Children of God, later known as The Family. The authors make an extensive examination of incidents dating back to several decades ago. They are now less important, taking into account the significant change that has taken place in that organization in the decades since. The movement publicly admitted the abuses perpetrated within it, not only by the leader but also by other members, made amends, and began a path of transformation, to eliminate the doctrines that had justified the abuses. Over the years, however, some schismatic groups did not accept the changes and continued the abuses. Where this has occurred, the perpetrators have been appropriately punished by the justice of the different countries, as happened, for example, to the “New Horizons” group in Italy.

Another very significant example of serious crimes concerns the movement founded in Japan by Shoko Asahara (1955–2018), Aum Shinrikyo. Its leader, and some followers, caused numerous deaths and injuries in a sarin gas attack against the Tokyo subway in 1995, discussed by the authors (p.19). If, however, one does not limit oneself to anti-cult sources and also consults the site run by Shoko Asahara’s former followers, which, since 2002, has been online although in Japanese only, one acquires an important piece of information. The new organization, Aleph, established by Aum’s former members after Aum’s attack on the Tokyo subway, was formed having among its aims to financially compensate the victims of the attack, to which not only all of Aum’s funds and real estate, but also the private property of innocent members, those who knew nothing about the criminal activities of the leader and other followers, were donated. Aleph, from 2002 to 2018, compensated victims with more than six million euros (969 million yen) (see <https://info.aleph.to/index.html>).

The authors’ typical anti-cult strategy of retelling past events insisting only on the abuse or crimes perpetrated by leaders and/or members of an organization does not allow the reader to make distinctions between a group’s past and present. In some cases, it is possible that abuses have ceased due to the efforts of the “cult” members themselves, who have brought them to light. It is not true, then, as the book claims, that only former members should be credited with exposing the alleged or actual crimes perpetrated in their groups. In numerous cases it were the members themselves who initiated and brought about a radical change in the movement. The authors’ choice, moreover, is in its own way “dangerous.”

By depriving the readers of the geographical and historical context in which the crimes occurred and of the overall picture of very complex events, it risks arousing aversion and hatred toward the named groups, and “cults” in general. This is a serious consequence of the anti-cult rhetoric, and unfortunately one that happens often.

Still in the context of the alleged abusive and punitive behavior of leaders against followers who do not comply with established norms and doctrines, the authors name the Jehovah’s Witnesses Judicial Committees and their role in three cases (p.127–28). They report the testimonies of former members about what happened after they received summons by a Judicial Committee. One of them refers to the disassociation of a female believer who had decided to separate from her husband to start a new life with another man. In such cases, regarded by the Jehovah’s Witnesses as sinful, if even after several attempts by the elders, the persons do not repent by deciding to change their behaviors according to biblical precepts and congregational rules, the sin committed requires that they can no longer be part of the congregation. The authors point out that because of her choice, the woman was forced to leave the house where she lived with her Jehovah’s Witness parents.

In the absence of more information and the testimony of the other sides, namely the congregation and the woman’s parents themselves, this case can be understood simply in light of the doctrines and rules of Jehovah’s Witnesses, which are public. The Judicial Committee is not “aimed at control and punishment” as the authors claim, but takes note of the choice of the believers and the resulting consequences, which since they joined the Jehovah’s Witnesses they are well aware of. If a Catholic priest were to deny the Eucharist to a married man who is living with a woman who is not his wife and does not intend to leave her, he would not do so out of “control and punishment” but to comply with the rules of the Catholic Church that he believes are based on the Bible and the Magisterium. The Catholic Church also uses a form of sanction, excommunication, which is, like disassociation for Jehovah’s Witnesses, a measure aimed not so much and not only at punishing but primarily at “correcting” the sinners in the hope of their return to the faith.

These behaviors of the religious authorities are not “abusive” and do not infringe on the rights of the faithful because, when joining the organization, the latter have been adequately informed about the doctrines, practices, and rules of the community, which they have freely accepted. In the case of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, they include the provision that, once the faithful’s willingness not to



repent is established, the entire congregation is informed of the disfellowshipment.

The chapter “The Way Out: How One Can Get Out of a Cult” deserves some remarks on the process of disaffiliation, which is not necessarily an “escape,” and has different characteristics depending on the type of group abandoned. The authors claim that “cases of permanence for dozens of years have occurred in groups that have been examined as a result of judicial investigations” (p. 124) and that “many people, once they join a cult, never leave” (p.125). The reliability of this statement is unknown since it speaks generally of groups (which ones?) that have been subject to judicial investigation (which ones?).

Another problem raised by this claim is the generalization that follows from it. Hundreds of studies conducted by sociologists and psychologists inside numerous religious and nonreligious communities, even very cohesive ones with rigid and restrictive doctrines, show that a high percentage of members leave the movement in a more or less short time to join another group or to pursue other affiliations. Researchers have called the new religious movements they have studied “revolving doors.” The repeated and alarmist claim about the danger of remaining “prisoners of a cult” for decades, unsupported by reliable data or statistics, has the questionable function of creating moral panics. It is especially dangerous considering the purpose of this publication, openly stated by the authors: to push institutions to enact special laws. Such political decisions, on the contrary, would require reliable data and clear definitions of what is to be punished, with due distinctions and caution.

Citing non-final rulings overturned on appeal, as in the case of Paolo Bendinelli, is not the only serious mistake made by the authors. They also quote excerpts from judgments, chosen *ad hoc*, to support their theses. An example of this unethical methodology is the excerpt from a final judgment of the Tribunal of Termini Imerese (p.152), in which Lorita Tinelli, acting as an expert consultant on the Jehovah’s Witnesses, explained to the judges that the congregation’s rules include “also what is called ‘theocratic lie or theocratic falsehood,’ which consists in falsely accusing—knowing that the accusation is false—the unbelieving spouse who constitutes a demonic obstacle to proper family living” (Tribunal of Termini Imerese, judgment no. 804/2020). The existence of this “rule” has no reference in the Jehovah’s Witness literature. To corroborate its existence, a publication by the same Lorita Tinelli, dating back to 1998, is cited in the footnote. It lacks a full

reference to the ruling and, above all, it lacks any indication of the primary source, i.e., the publications of Jehovah's Witnesses in which this rule is allegedly codified. The existence of such a rule was denied by the Jehovah's Witnesses immediately after the ruling, which was reported extensively in the press.

The authors, therefore, repeatedly go to great lengths in reporting testimonies of hostile ex-members, but seem uninterested in verifying whether what they claim is actually codified and taught by the groups they accuse. Moreover, it is not enough for a rule such as "theocratic lying" to be cited in a ruling that is based on the statements of one of the book's authors to make it "true." These considerations apply generally to any other statement or theory held by the authors that is not supported by reliable sources, whether primary or secondary.

The chapter "Cult Defense Strategies" would require an extensive critical examination, but in this review we will limit ourselves to only a few observations, regarding the paragraph in which the authors describe what would be the role of "cult apologists." "Cults and their apologists," they write, "work together to plead in the same ways the common cause, as if it were a struggle for 'religious freedom,' disavowing a priori the conditioning and abuse that members would receive within these groups. But in reality, apologists seem to be opportunistically interested in only one thing: the vile money. Together with the cultic groups, they discredit the work of other scholars and all those who attempt to bring light to the phenomenon from a point of view other than their own" (pp. 157–58). These few lines further reiterate the distinctive style of the authors. Instead of presenting scientific definitions, data, and hypotheses to corroborate their theories, they dogmatically defend them and insult scholars with views different from their own by accusing them of corruption.

Moreover, by avoiding naming names, they effectively prevent so-called "cult apologists" from protecting themselves in whatever forum they would see fit to do so, a choice that is certainly unethical, although very useful in terms of not having to suffer the consequences of numerous possible lawsuits for defamation. A quite different approach was chosen in the late 1990s by the world's most prominent cult-watching association: the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), which clearly expressed, after decades of "cult wars," the importance of dialogue with both scholars and academics who disagree with anti-cult theses and with "cults" ("Dialogue and Cultic Studies: Why Dialogue Benefits the Cultic Studies Field. A Message from the Directors of ICSA," *ICSA Today*, vol. 4, no. 3,

2013, p. 2–7). This shift in perspective has produced many fruits, including a dialogue with movements such as ISKCON (the Hare Krishna), which was also supported by ICSA in the transformation phase to prevent the child abuse incidents that had been occurring in the group for many years.

The last notes of this review concern the concluding chapter, which has a title that is in its own way “mysterious,” in the sense that probably only the authors understand its meaning: “The Geopolitics of the Cultic Phenomenon.” Geopolitics actually has nothing to do with the subject matter of this chapter, which contains some information on the pronouncements of the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, interspersed with a list of some serious incidents of murders and suicides that occurred in religious or spiritual groups that did, according to the authors, alarm the European institutions about the phenomenon of “cults” and their dangerousness. Indeed, the concern that prompted the Council of Europe, in 1999, to intervene with a recommendation, was real, but the final document that was sent to all member states, turned out to be balanced and faithful to all previous pronouncements on the right to freedom of religion, belief, and conscience, the right to free association and that of parents’ freedom in the field of religious education of their children. Only partial and terse excerpts of the important document approved by the Council of Europe are reported in the interview with anti-cultist Luigi Corvaglia.

In addition to the call to strengthen the prevention of the phenomenon and support victims, the authors omit to report that in the recommendation the Council of Europe also asked member states not to use the word “cult” because it is discriminatory, to “have reliable information on these groups that emanates neither exclusively from the cults themselves nor from associations set up to defend the victims of cults,” to “use the normal procedures of criminal and civil law against illegal practices carried out in the name of groups of a religious, esoteric or spiritual nature,” to “encourage an approach to religious groups which will bring about understanding, tolerance, dialogue and resolution of conflicts,” to “take firm steps against any action which is discriminatory or which marginalizes religious or spiritual minority groups.”

These important recommendations do not appear in the pages of the book, while the initiatives of some states, such as France, which have implemented measures that go in the opposite direction to those recommended by the Council of Europe, are widely cited and described in laudatory tones. The reader who is inadequately

informed on this issue might be led to look to France, the notorious anti-cult organization FECRIS (the already mentioned European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), and the French MIVILUDES (Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances) as examples of commendable efforts by state authorities and privates, to be taken as “models” by other states. In reality, France, which funds FECRIS and has established MIVILUDES, has for years been the subject of criticism by leading international institutions for its continued violations of rights to freedom of religion, belief, and conscience.

This book may be of some interest only to those who intend to learn about the positions and activities of anti-cult groups and of a small minority of ex-members who have traumatically left the groups with which they were affiliated. It does not offer any useful contribution to the study of “cults” that could help define this category of groups and prevent crimes or abuses perpetrated against members, a phenomenon that, in exceptional cases, has occurred in the past and, unfortunately, may still occur.

Furthermore, the book offers no contribution to the study of those organizations that the Council of Europe, in its 1999 Recommendation defines as “religious, esoteric or spiritual groups” and academics call “new religious movements,” alternative religious movements,” “spiritual communities,” “philosophical organizations,” and so on. Similarly, it does not provide the reader with a reliable understanding of the phenomenon of disaffiliation, which affects a considerable number of members, most of whom do not become “enemies” of the group they left while continuing, at times, to maintain friendly or cooperative relations with the remaining affiliated members for shared activities.

The methodology used to examine the phenomenon by “illustrating significant case studies, through legal cases, documents, judgments, and stories, that demonstrate the existence of such realities. with all the serious and disturbing consequences that follow” (p.23) is inadequate because it lacks data, primary and secondary sources. It relies only on negative experiences of former members or on excerpts extrapolated from judicial investigations and convictions of people accused of crimes of various kinds while they were affiliates or leaders of a religious or spiritual community.

In conclusion, the authors have undoubtedly achieved their goal of “bringing attention back to the phenomenon of cults, which [they believe] is much discussed and studied but in practice difficult to curb” (p.23). However, their publication succeeds in attracting only sensationalist and alarmist attention to this phenomenon without touching at all on its causes, complexity, historical and geographical evolution, and possible ways to prevent potential deviations. For this reason, it cannot be considered a source that institutions could draw on to set up commissions of inquiry or draft new “special” laws.

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