

Book Reviews

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.

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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 disfellowshipping.

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.