

MISA: Spiritual Explorations and Experiences in the Practice of Esoteric Yoga

Raffaella Di Marzio

Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion Belief and Conscience (LIREC)

raffaelladimarzio@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes the experiences of ten practitioners from different yoga centers, all members of the International Federation of Yoga and Meditation ATMAN. The objective is to detect the meanings that the interviewed members attribute to their experience based on their autobiographical reconstructions. They are examined in the light of a multidisciplinary model developed within the framework of the psychology of religion for the study of the conversion/affiliation process. This model will be complemented by the perspectives of humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Based on the data collected, an evaluation of the psychological consequences of attending schools following the teachings of Gregorian Bivolaru on the personality of the informants will be proposed. This project is also aimed at verifying whether, in the experiences of the informants interviewed, factors and elements of the above-mentioned multidisciplinary model are detected, which I already identified in previous surveys carried out with twenty-three members of five other religious and spiritual movements—and, if yes, to what extent.

KEYWORDS: Religious Movements: Affiliation, Yoga, Sacred Eroticism, Gregorian Bivolaru, Tantra, Erotic Continence, MISA, Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, International Federation of Yoga and Meditation ATMAN.

1. Methodology and Framework

Methodological issues have always been debated in the psychological literature. They are connected with defining the very object of psychology, as is generally the case with all social sciences. The variety of concrete ways in which religious experience is expressed in contemporary culture is well known and, for Italy, is demonstrated by the data published by CESNUR (Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2024). They show a very varied picture of groups and movements present on the Italian territory. Some are born in the wake of Eastern religions and philosophies, part of Hinduism and Buddhism with contaminations of other religious and esoteric paths. The pluralistic society and the multiplicity of religious offerings facilitate this phenomenon, as do the attitudes of many individuals who

are in constant search of new spiritual experiences. The great variety and broad spectrum of spiritual forms foster personal and social transformations and continuous migrations between very different movements and groups. The perspective in which I place myself when examining the experiences of those involved is that of the psychology of religion. This discipline understands the spiritual and religious conduct of the individual in a dynamic sense, since it constantly evolves, in relation to all other aspects and dynamisms of human conduct, that is, to the individual's personal history and maturation (Milanesi and Aletti 1973, 13). According to Aletti, psychologists are interested

in the subjective movement by which humans lean beyond the boundaries of their earthly existence and phenomenal experience with an attitude of hope, search, and/or attribution of meaning. Spirituality and religion name this leaning out of desire and hope, and the response that the believer sees in it. However, this signifying intentionality is anchored in a cultural datum (Aletti 2010, 32).

Thus, the psychology of religion is not based on ontological principles. It refrains from making judgments about truths of faith. Its main purpose is to offer psychological value judgments about a given spiritual or religious experience taking into account personal experience, the individual's beliefs, and the historical and cultural context in which the experience occurs (Milanesi and Aletti 1973, 9-13). It is from this perspective that I intend to examine the experiences of the informants of this investigation, referring to differentiated and integrated approaches within a multidisciplinary framework. The reference model chosen for this purpose is the one elaborated by Lewis R. Rambo (Rambo 1993), taken up and developed by this author and Steven C. Bauman (Rambo and Bauman 2012) in their article "Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation." The text is the result of the reflections that have emerged during more than twenty years of study and research on the phenomenon of conversion.

A first new element pointed out by Rambo and Bauman is that, in the most recent scientific literature, the term "spirituality" has been added to that of "religion." The change is due to the transformation of the very notion of "faith." In the present age, belief is often no longer linked to a specific religious affiliation. It assumes the features of a generic tendency toward spirituality and a yearning for something beyond the material, which does not necessarily imply adherence to codified rites, doctrines, and practices.

With this in mind, since the 2000s, a number of psychologists (see, e.g., Paloutzian 2014; Pargament and Mahoney 2002), have oriented their studies

toward unconventional spiritual and religious experiences. They consider the category of “spirituality” broader and more inclusive than that of “religion,” under which adherences to traditional religious institutions are primarily included (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 880).

I also take into account the classification of psychological approaches to the study of conversion elaborated by Rambo (1993, 4–7). They are divided into four basic orientations (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 880–81): psychoanalytic, behaviorist or experimental, humanistic and transpersonal (James 1945), and social-holistic (as defined by Rambo 1993, 7–8). The latter orientation is more difficult to define, as scholars who place themselves in this category prefer an eclectic and holistic approach, which would like to synthesize the other three within the broader and more complex scope of human change processes. The most representative authors of this fourth approach, who strongly influenced Rambo’s (1993) holistic perspective, are Robert C. Ziller (1924–2022: Ziller 1971), and Theodore R. Sarbin (1911–2005) and Nathan Adler (1911–1994: Sarbin and Adler 1970).

According to Rambo and Bauman (2012), although each of these approaches allows for the investigation of some important elements, related to the process of religious or spiritual transformation, none of them can provide a complete understanding of the phenomenon. Conversion is a process that occurs within a field of forces in which complex people, institutions, events, ideas, and experiences act together.

Hence the need to study the religious or spiritual choice of individuals by taking into consideration not only the person but also the social, cultural, and religious dynamics involved in the transformation process. In this sense, the “heuristic model of conversion” (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 881) seeks to take into account this complexity. It is configured in seven different stages and understands the phenomenon of religious or spiritual change as a *process* that leads a person to socially and culturally distancing herself from her social environment. It is this “distancing” that qualifies her as a “convert” (Rambo 1993, 13).

Since the 1990s, Rambo had departed from the tendency present in previous decades to deal only with conversions to mainline religious institutions, first and foremost Christianity in its various denominations. He had also taken into consideration a large amount of research on minority religious and spiritual groups. In the 1970s and 1980s, they started being studied because they

were considered controversial. Rambo was thus aligning himself with the trend of most psychologists of religion, who had devoted themselves to the study of these groups whose proselytizing was very successful, especially among young people.

Unlike the position of some scholars, who attributed the success of new religious movements to undue techniques of persuasion and deceptive forms of proselytizing and who defined them as “cults” in a criminological sense (Singer and Lalich 1995), and in line with the mainline scholarly approach to the phenomenon (Hood et al. 2001; Introvigne 2022b; Di Marzio 2014), Rambo’s attitude values the complexity of the dynamics involved by offering a useful paradigm of reference for testing the validity of his position. For this reason, I have already chosen his model in previous exploratory investigations as a framework for examining the experiences of twenty-three individuals who had joined five different movements (the Italian branch of Soka Gakkai, Damanhur, the Church of Scientology, the Hare Krishna movement, and the Archeosophical Association) to verify whether the essential elements of the model could actually be traced, and to what extent, in their experiences (Di Marzio 2023a).

In this investigation, I intend to apply this perspective to some concrete experiences to elaborate an interpretative hypothesis of the process of adherence to a particular spiritual path. I would describe it as a complex dynamism that is not interpreted as the uncritical adherence of an individual subjected to various forms of pressure (or undue influence) but, rather, as the continuously developing outcome of the internal dynamisms and needs that the individuals experience when they are in the situation of a “search for meaning.” In addition, the peculiarity of the narratives of the yoga practitioners interviewed in this survey, compared to my previous studies of other groups, calls for a closer examination of the psychological meaning and significance of the term “spirituality,” which seems more suitable to define their experiences.

The concept of “spirituality” has long been a subject of debate among psychologists of religion. Several scholars have proposed a distinction between religion and spirituality. They consider the former as a phenomenon that would refer to a given object identifiable within a culture while,

Spirituality would better lend itself to a definition in terms of functionality for the purposes of existential self-realization, internal potential, and facilitation of relationships with others. Ultimately, according to some, spirituality would better respond to the “psychological” dimension. Religion would be more static, anchored in tradition, while spirituality would be more dynamic and personal, creative, based on experience and the world of emotions, open to research and critical spirit (Aletti 2010, 33).

Aletti criticizes this polarization of meanings and points out that in fact in the psychology of religion there has long existed the approach of humanistic psychology, which includes, among others, authors such as Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and Gordon Allport (1897–1967). This current is articulated around the concept of “religious experience.” By emphasizing emotion and “religious feeling,” it “paves the way for the contemporary concept of spirituality” (Aletti 2010, 34).

Among the authors who have made significant contributions to the definition of this concept is Kenneth I. Pargament. He considers spirituality as the “search for the sacred” and places it at the center of religion, as its true soul and essential feature (Pargament 1999). The outcome of a long and articulate debate on the point, which accepted his position, was the decision of the American Psychological Association (APA) to change the title of its Division 36 from “Psychology of Religion” to “Psychology of Religion and Spirituality.”

In relation to these transformations, the psychology of religion, in recent decades, has been increasingly moving toward a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach (Rambo and Haar Farris 2012). The new attitude is particularly suited to furthering the understanding of the experiences of the informants of this investigation, in an attempt to understand a phenomenon as vast and multifaceted as conversion to “new” religions or spiritualities. For this reason, in addition to the approach of humanistic psychology, additional keys suitable for understanding the spiritual experiences described here come from transpersonal psychology. Its precursors include William James (1842–1910), Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) and Abraham Maslow (1908–1970). We owe to them the study of altered states of consciousness, the effects on the body of religious experience (McGuire 1990), brain activity during meditation, and the characteristics of different states of consciousness (Kasamatsu and Hirai 2008).

This survey, which takes into consideration the experiences of ten practitioners from different yoga centers, all members of the International Federation of Yoga and Meditation ATMAN, is in continuity with my previous ones. It aims to provide additional data that can, on the one hand, confirm the presence, in the ten yoga practitioners interviewed as well, of factors and elements of the Rambo model already found in previous surveys (Di Marzio 2023a). On the other hand, it can identify the peculiar characteristics and benefits offered by the wide range of knowledge and activities offered by the yoga schools considered here.

The goal is to understand what factors have contributed to the consolidation and integration of this peculiar spiritual experience into the personality structure of practitioners, with outcomes that they describe, interpret, and evaluate in a positive way, as will be shown in the part devoted to the analysis of the interviews. The phenomenon we are concerned with, in addition to manifesting itself as a process of transformation of the self and personal spiritual conduct (Rambo 1993, 183), is also characterized as an active and conscious adherence to a school and association of individuals who share experiential goals and methodologies, in the wake of the teachings of founder Gregorian Bivolaru (Introvigne 2022a). As will be seen below, the existential transformation of individuals is not limited to the personal sphere. It includes a strong motivation to deepen and experience the inner and outer spiritual dimension and also influences the social context of reference.

2. Conversion in the Model of Rambo et al.

The model developed by Rambo and his colleagues (Rambo and Bauman 2012; Rambo and Haar Farris 2012; Rambo and Farhadian 2014) is structured in stages. Unlike in the model of Lofland and Stark (1965), in which the stages were thought of in temporal sequence, Rambo's approach is not unidirectional. In fact, his seven stages do not always follow one another temporally and may also interact with each other. The term "model" refers to an intellectual construction aimed at organizing complex data and processes. Although this "model" has been developed through research, and its usefulness has thus been demonstrated, it should not be regarded as universal and immutable, but, rather, as an attempt to organize complex data and the vast literature on conversion (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 881).

The first stage is the *context*, that is, the dynamic force field in which the individual lives. In Rambo's model, the role of context in the conversion process is decisive. It represents not only a stage through which conversion occurs, but is the very environment in which it happens. Its influence constantly permeates the other six stages. Moreover, context should be understood not only in an "external" but also in an "internal" sense. The "external" context encompasses two domains, the macro-context and the micro-context. The first is the general environment, which includes the political system, religious organizations, transnational corporations, and economic systems. The second is the environment closest to the

informant: family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, and neighborhood. The “internal” context includes the complex of the individual’s motivations, experiences, and aspirations. Conversion depends on all of these factors. Those who would not consider both internal and external contexts would arrive only at a partial understanding of the conversion process (Rambo 1993, 20). There are four dimensions that constitute the context: culture, society, the person, and religion, all aspects of human existence that cannot be separated from each other, as they act synergistically.

The second stage is *crisis* (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 883–84), a phenomenon that sometimes precedes conversion and can take on different connotations: religious, political, psychological, cultural, and so on. It can cause either a sense of disorientation and loss or, on the contrary, a tendency to search for new solutions to revitalize one’s existence. According to their supporters, the research of humanist and transpersonal psychologists offers an alternative viewpoint to that of psychoanalysis, which generally sees conversion as an attempt to overcome emotional problems. In fact, in addition to these reasons, there is also a different, proactive motivation for self-realization that spiritual seekers are continually growing, learning, developing, and maturing (Allison 1969).

The third stage is *seeking*. Human beings are constantly striving to find meaning in their world, actively constructing and reconstructing it to better adapt to change and safeguard their psychophysical balance. Religious or spiritual choice is part of this search dynamism, which generally intensifies at times of crisis. Rambo and Bauman define searching as a process in which people take action to give meaning and purpose to their lives and find those resources that are useful for their human growth and development, in order to “fill the void” (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 884).

The fourth stage is that of *encounter*, which involves contact between the potential convert and the recruiter or missionary engaged in proselytizing. This encounter occurs in a particular setting. Its outcome is influenced by many factors, among which a determining element is the interrelationship between the affective, intellectual, and cognitive needs of the potential convert and those of the missionary (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 885–86). Studies going in this direction emphasize the importance, in achieving conversion, of three factors: the influence of friendship networks, affinities with already affiliated members (Stark and Bainbridge 1980; Rambo 1982; Palmer 2003), and the strategy used by the

missionary in the proselytizing stage. The latter, according to Rambo, has four components: the level of emphasis, the strategic style, the method of contact, and the possible benefits to the convert.

The fifth stage is the *interaction* stage, which refers to the period after the meeting, when the potential convert gets to know the group better. This is a particularly intense stage, so much so that it resembles a rebirth process in which, thanks to encapsulation techniques, new relationships are developed and new rituals, languages and roles are learned (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 887).

The sixth stage is that of *commitment*, in which converts make explicit and public their involvement and participation in a new religious choice (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 888–89). In the process culminating in the decision to affiliate, an important consolidating function is played by the acquisition of new roles, learning and practicing the rituals and initiations that the individual undergoes (Galanter 1993, 135–37).

Finally, the seventh stage is that of the *consequences* of conversion, the nature of which depends on the intensity and duration of the process. According to Rambo and Bauman, the initial change in the convert is only the first stage of a transformation that may last longer or shorter. The process of change is not always linear and occurs with varying intensity. In the psychological evaluation of the consequences of affiliation, the problem concerning the influence that the evaluator's point of view might have is also pointed out. In particular, the psychologist's attitude toward the religious or spiritual choice, which could positively or negatively influence the psychological assessment of the individual case (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 889–90), should be taken into account.

The proposed multidisciplinary paradigm of Rambo and his colleagues (Rambo 1993; Rambo and Bauman 2012; Rambo and Haar Farris 2012; Rambo and Farhadian 2014) does not have the ambition to be universally valid. However, it is a useful tool for organizing and interpreting complex data and building on the results already obtained by previous psychological research in the field.

3. *Methodological Issues*

The methodological choice made for data collection prefers an observational approach, in line with that of the psychology of religion. It intends to observe the psychic act in its concrete intentional exercise, noting the ways in which individuals describe the genesis of a given religious or spiritual experience. Its aim is to

understand how that experience influences the development of their personality and, in particular, religious behavior (James 1945).

The psychology of religion studies the religious phenomenon understood as observable and quantifiable conduct:

This discipline studies the psychological constants and variables of religious conduct, such as can be grasped by the methods of positive observation (Milanesi and Aletti 1973, 10).

Studying religion from an empirical point of view means, therefore, relying on observation, acquiring objective knowledge, and finding data that are accessible, understandable, and reproducible by other researchers. This methodological approach was further clarified by Antoine Vergote (1921–2013), who argued that psychologists should use the same methods as cultural anthropologists. They should study the religious conduct of those who adhere to a particular religion in their cultural context, taking into account the specific characteristics of that particular form of religiosity. This methodology is also important to safeguard the neutrality of the psychologist when proposing psychological data and interpretations of religious conduct (Vergote 1993).

A first consideration to be made, with reference to the limitations of this survey, is related to the characteristics of the sample of interviewed informants. They were all volunteers, who have been attending for years different yoga centers, all affiliated with the International Federation of Yoga and Meditation ATMAN. Their accounts take the form of autobiographical reconstructions, which, as such, cannot be considered representative of a generality of cases. However, in relation to some factors of Rambo's model, they present common aspects comparable to each other. It is clear that the conclusions reached refer only to this specific group of informants. This limitation is found widely in research conducted on the process of conversion and deconversion. Researchers use samples that are easier to find because they are uniform, including only satisfied members, or only critical ex-members, or only ex-members with psychological distress, or only ex-members deprogrammed or forced out of the movement in various ways, and so on. Such a choice makes it possible to obtain useful data, but which concern, as in this case, only selected groups of informants.

This survey is exploratory in nature. Although the results cannot be generalized, they could nevertheless be useful in identifying factors, dynamics, and categories

appropriate for initiating further research, including quantitative studies, aimed at a representative sample of informants from a given population.

3.1. The Interview

In the context of qualitative research, the instrument chosen for this investigation is the interview. In the face-to-face form, it is presented as a dyadic interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, flexible in the sequence and form in which questions are asked. The pattern is flexible and based on a defined, but not rigid, outline. The plasticity of the interview makes it a tool capable of achieving high levels of insight for understanding the causes of a given behavior and the connections between that behavior and an individual's beliefs (Bichi 2002).

In addition, the choice of the semi-structured interview, with open-ended questions, makes it possible to use a proper psychological approach to the religious issue. Eugenio Fizzotti (1946–2018) pointed this out referring to the ideas of William James (1842–1910), who believed that the best way to proceed was the existential one (James 1945).

To understand the psychological importance of religion, researchers should not start from their own cultural needs using them as models in which to place, classify, and evaluate different human experiences, but should stick to the experiences they encounter and which are described to them, letting them speak for themselves in a way that allows them to let their lived values emerge (Fizzotti 1996, 169).

Moreover, this type of interview also allows for the collection of data, due to the type of relationship that is established between the interviewee and the interviewer, an important element in the process of knowledge construction through the collection of individual testimonies (Bichi 2002, 2007). In this special form of conversation, the interviewee and the interviewer engage in a verbal interaction aimed at achieving cognitive goals previously defined by the interviewer. Individual histories can be reconstructed by paying attention mainly to the past, that is, to the period in which the choice to attend this specific yoga school matured, retrospectively, without neglecting its repercussions on the present and spillovers to other social contexts.

The general themes on the basis of which the objectives and questions of the interview were developed are: religious or nonreligious context pre-existing the choice, first contact with the movement, motivations behind the choice to attend

classes, results already achieved and those potentially attainable in the future, conceivable consequences for one's life without the movement, motivations for personal commitment to the betterment of the group, any second thoughts about the choice made, description of the reactions of social reference groups (family and friends), attitude toward the founder, meaning of Tantra Yoga and erotic continence.

To articulate the general objective of the interview, that of prompting informants to describe their experience of affiliation, eight specific targets were identified, on the basis of which twelve questions were formulated. The time allotted for the interviews was not rigidly fixed. In general, thirty minutes were sufficient, during which interviewees had the opportunity to add additional reflections on their experience. The data collected from the examination of the responses correspond to the seven stages of the aforementioned model of Rambo and his colleagues.

3.2. Specific Objectives and Questions

The general purpose of the interview is to facilitate informants in the verbal expression of their experience. Within this general purpose, eight specific objectives were identified, on the basis of which twelve questions were formulated.

Each objective allows for the collection of information on these aspects:

1. religious or nonreligious background prior to affiliation;
2. first contact with the movement;
3. motivations for membership;
4. assessment of correspondence between expectations and achievements;
5. degree of importance of the movement in the informant's life;
6. reactions observed in social reference groups (family and friends);
7. attitude toward the founder;
8. significance of Tantra Yoga and erotic continence.

Questions:

1. How long have you been practicing yoga in this school under the ATMAN Federation?
2. Have you received a religious education?
3. How did you become acquainted with it?
4. Why did you decide to attend the first meeting?

5. Why did you decide to continue?
6. What did it give you?
7. What do you think it can give you in the future?
8. What would happen to you if tomorrow all the yoga schools in this federation disappeared?
9. Were there times when you thought about discontinuing this experience?
10. How did your family and the people you hang out with react when you started practicing?
11. Who is Gregorian Bivolaru to you?
12. Can you explain what Tantra Yoga is according to the teachings of this school?

3.3. Finding Volunteer Informants and Conducting Interviews

To better clarify the context and purpose of the interviews, I contacted a manager of the MISA school who pointed me to the Spanda Yoga Center in Rome as a reference. Thanks to the cooperation of the head of this center, I was able to contact nine other yoga practitioners and teachers who were willing to be interviewed, based on these characteristics: people of both sexes, aged between thirty-three and sixty years, and who had been attending for at least three years. The interviews were all conducted on a Zoom platform, on March 5–11, 2024, audio-recorded with the consent of those involved, and then transcribed. It is also important to specify that none of the movement leaders or informants were previously aware of the questions they would answer, and no one else was present during the interviews.

In this article, when I quote from the transcripts of the interviews, I reproduce the answers of the informants verbatim. It cannot be expected that they always use the rigorous terminology of Bivolaru's writings. For instance, in the spoken conversations, they sometimes refer to "sexuality" where Bivolaru would rather use the word "eroticism." However, they are well aware of the distinction, and the general context is clear.

The names I use here are different from the biographical ones, while the age given is the actual age. The interviewees attend schools operating in different cities in Italy and abroad. In detail: two attend the Tripura Sundari School in Bologna, one the Amrita Yoga Center in Milan, four the Spanda Yoga Center in Rome, one the ATMAN Yoga Center in Genoa, one Tara Yoga in Modena, and one the MISA School in Bucharest. All these yoga centers are affiliated with the International

Federation of Yoga and Meditation ATMAN. Below I indicate name (fictitious), age, education level, profession, and time of attendance at the ATMAN-affiliated school:

Paolo: 40, high school diploma, holistic practitioner, 20

Gabriella: 60, bachelor's degree, literature professor and yoga teacher, 34

Giorgia: 48, bachelor's degree, counselor, 9

Laura: 33, bachelor's degree, teacher, 11

Giulio: 52, bachelor's degree, teacher, 23

Violetta: 39, bachelor's degree, research biologist, 3

Agata: 47, bachelor's and doctoral degrees, dentist, 3

Giacomo: 55, bachelor's degree, business executive, 3

Eleonora: 46, bachelor's degree, yoga teacher, 23

Vera: 40, bachelor's degree, translator, 11

The International Federation of Yoga and Meditation ATMAN recognizes Gregorian Bivolaru (Grieg) as its master and the initiator of a new school of spiritual realization (Introvigne 2022a; Melton 2017; Introvigne, Zoccatelli and Di Marzio 2017). The organization's website lists "personal development and spiritual growth" as the goal of teaching in the ATMAN tradition and clarifies the lineage to which they are connected.

From the perspective of the yoga tradition, the integral esoteric yoga courses offered by the member schools of the International Federation of Yoga and Meditation ATMAN are aligned with the Gupta Maha Siddha Yoga lineage, described as an esoteric tradition of high spiritual achievement and deep, ineffable communion with God (ATMAN Centro Yoga 2024).

4. Critical Analysis of the Experiences of Ten Yoga Practitioners

An initial considered and critical reading of the interviews allowed me to identify, in the responses to the twelve questions, dimensions and factors that can be traced, to varying degrees, to the seven stages of the Rambo model illustrated above. Their systematization was simplified into three stages:

1. First contact with the school, which includes data from the interviews related to the first four stages of the model: context, crisis, search, encounter.
2. Consolidation of personal and community experience, which includes data related to the fifth and sixth stages: interaction and engagement.

3. Outcomes of the journey taken, which includes data related to the seventh stage: consequences.

4.1. First Contact

Data related to the pre-affiliation and first contact stage will be first considered, compiled from the first four questions formulated based on the first three objectives. All informants came into contact with the association in their youth and adulthood, between the ages of twenty and fifty-two. The responses identified some key elements that Rambo and his colleagues place predominantly in the first stage of their model: context. However, since, as Rambo and his co-workers themselves point out, the stages are in a circular relationship with each other and interact dynamically, the examination of the responses allowed me to identify concepts and factors that are also found in the next three stages: crisis, search, and encounter.

4.1.1. Stages of Context, Crisis, and Search

As mentioned earlier, the context stage manifests itself as micro- and macro-context and has four dimensions, which act interdependently through the operation of four mechanisms. Starting from the comparative examination of the interviews, an attempt was made to see whether, in the informants' accounts, some of the elements described by Rambo can actually be found. My question was whether their presence can help to understand the choice to share the teachings and participate in the activities of the yoga school, relative to the initial stage. The separate description of the four dimensions of context proposed by Rambo—social, cultural, personal, and religious—is only a search tool, as they are closely related to each other. However, it can be useful to make the presentation of the data collected easier. In addition, to further simplify the presentation of the results, I have chosen three summary definitions to indicate the four dimensions. The term “trends” refers to the personal dimension of the context, the term “society” to the socio-cultural dimension (macro-context), and the term “family” to the socio-religious dimension, i.e., the type of religious education received in the family (micro-context).

Personal dimension (trends). By the term “trends,” I mean the personal dispositions, preferences, aspirations, desires, and conditions of discomfort, of

various kinds, that informants attribute to themselves in the biographical reconstruction of their personal situation at the time when the first contact occurred and attendance at the school courses began. Three different groups of trends emerged from the responses, as had been found in the twenty-three informants of my previous surveys (Di Marzio 2023a). They are “Self-improvement,” “Desire to cultivate alternative interests,” and “Personal difficulties due to health problems, psychological distress, or tragic events.”

The examination of the responses revealed an additional trend that is distinguished from the previous ones because the informants emphasize its importance: “Search for authentic spirituality.” In the biographical reconstruction of the period of first contact with the movement, these four tendencies are always present, although each informant would give greater emphasis to one of them rather than to the others.

Self-improvement and desire to cultivate alternative interests. These two tendencies are found in the responses of all informants. Some examples: Paolo comes to know the school at a time when he wants “to know himself, understand who he is, and is looking for answers.” Violetta describes herself as a “seeker” and sees in the school a chance for greater knowledge of herself and the world. Agata feels a strong intellectual curiosity and sees in the school a chance to improve “by going back to the true essence of things, even to ancient teachings.” Vera “is curious to explore other states of consciousness.”

Personal difficulties due to health problems, psychological distress, or tragic events. This is something the informants talk about when referring to their emotional state at the time they first came into contact with the school. It is found in the reconstructions of six out of ten informants. Some examples: Paolo saw attending the courses also as a way to “continue the psychotherapy” he had undertaken and suspended. Gabriella felt “confused and in pain,” felt inadequate, and “did not like her body.” Giorgia experienced a “sense of emptiness and loneliness.” Laura noted that in her case “psychotherapy did not work” and approached the school at a time when she felt deeply dissatisfied. Eleonora came out of a “love affliction,” “felt bad about things she had done,” and “was not serene.” Vera suffered from a sort of “depression.”

It should be clarified that none of the informants was in a situation a forensic psychologist would qualify as “weakness” or “vulnerability” capable of compromising the subject’s free judgement. They were going through the personal

difficulties that very often exist in the process leading to a change of worldview or a religious conversion. As we will see, their choices were free and not the result of an external manipulation exploiting their problems.

Search for authentic spirituality. This tendency is present in all the informants' experiences, and is most emphasized in five of them. Some examples: Gabriella and Laura were "dissatisfied with Catholic religious practice" and felt a "desire for authentic spirituality." Laura specified that she was in "search of a personal spirituality" and rejected the Catholic religion because of its dogmas and because it is "too boxed in." Giorgia sought "emotional and spiritual experience." Agata would like to recover "ancient teachings of the church such as reincarnation." Eleonora "missed the father figure and God."

Socio-cultural dimension (society). Regarding the second dimension, "society," it refers to what Rambo calls the "macro-context." In this investigation, "society" means all those influences, coming from the social and cultural environment that have, in some way, influenced the choice to practice yoga, in the peculiar form proposed by the ATMAN Federation. From the results of my previous exploratory surveys on other groups (Di Marzio 2023a, 111–12), the importance of this factor in the informants' responses had become evident, as the historical, social, and cultural context significantly influences individual choices.

The ten yoga practitioners all affiliated in the period from 2001 to 2021, with one exception, Gabriella, whose attendance dates back to 1990. Eight informants, during the period of their first contact with the ATMAN school, report that they found themselves in a social context that had fostered their approach to yoga practice. They had been "intrigued" by yoga, but for different reasons: as a "fad" at the time, because of the proximity of a gym to their place of work, because they attended gyms where yoga was used as a relaxation technique, or because family members had already been practicing for some time. As for Giorgia and Eleonora, however, the social environment in which contact with the ATMAN school had occurred was, for the former, Biodance, and for the latter, a Catholic social context experienced as restrictive, from which she felt the need to break free.

Family dimension (family). This refers to what Rambo calls the "micro-context," i.e., the environment closest to the informant: family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, neighborhood, and so on, which can greatly influence the process of spiritual transformation. Also in this investigation, as in the previous ones, analyzing the biographical reconstructions of the informants, I chose to consider only the family unit, and no other social groups of belonging,

such as peer groups, school, and circles of friends. In fact, the family is the only social environment that the informants discuss as they trace the process that led them to attend ATMAN school courses. In particular, the element that stands out the most is the religious upbringing received in the family, which is, for all informants, Catholic. They all received a Catholic education and the sacraments of Christian initiation.

The role of pre-existing tendencies and inclinations at accession. At the end of these initial considerations, it is important to emphasize an element that emerges in the experiences of all informants. They perceive and describe the choice to participate in the multiple activities promoted by the ATMAN school as the “response” and fulfillment of pre-existing desires and inclinations that were “in germ” or only partially realized.

Here are some examples of responses as informants expressed what they had learned through yoga practice, meditation, and the study of texts and handouts by the founder. Giorgia had already experienced the bodily and emotional experience in Biodance, but the yoga school finally gave her the opportunity to “live the emotional-spiritual experience” in a “spiritual group.” Laura, when she started attending the ATMAN school, had already undertaken a change in eating habits, had become vegan, and had been urged by some family members to practice yoga. Choosing this particular type of practice allowed her to “clearly understand and apply” knowledge and methodologies she had already heard about. Violetta was “dissatisfied with the yoga schools she had attended” and was “looking for new things in yoga.”

Finally, an aspect emerges from the accounts of most of the informants, which will be discussed later, about the transformations that have occurred in their way of living out their faith and relationship with the transcendent, without necessarily abandoning the Catholic religion in which they were all educated.

4.1.2. Encounter Stage

In the “encounter” stage, contact takes place between the seeker and the one who offers a possible resource, spiritual proposal, or methodology such as to arouse the other’s interest. This encounter occurs in a particular setting and its outcome is influenced by the interrelationship between the affective, intellectual, and cognitive needs of the persons involved in this exchange (Rambo and Bauman

2012, 885). Rambo (1993, 80–2) identifies several components present in this stage of the process. Only two were noted in the informants' accounts: the *method of contact* and the *benefits to the convert*.

Method of contact. The interviews offered detailed information from which differentiated types of contact emerged (Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980). In our case, five informants were involved through public channels (mediated contact). Violetta, Giacomo, Paolo, Giorgia, and Laura found the yoga school's course offerings through advertisements that appeared on Facebook or were received by email, by using certain applications, or through a web search. The other five informants were invited to attend classes by friends, classmates, or relatives. This finding confirms how important the role of people who already attend classes and know about the movement is in the process of encouraging individuals to practice and learn more about them.

This is confirmed by a fact that emerges from the accounts of all the informants. At some point in their reconstruction, they always point to an event that stimulated them (in different ways) to start an active process that ended, after a varying amount of time, with the decision to attend the courses. This is a “triggering event” that is embedded in the individual's particular personal and social situation. It represents a kind of catalyst capable of triggering a process of change that will end with the decision to attend the courses. It is not always identified with an external person's promotional action. As it turned out, this was true for five informants only.

For the other five, the triggering event took different forms, as already specified. However, for some of the informants interviewed, these external stimuli were accompanied by an incentive of another nature. This is worth noting since it is of great interest from a psychological point of view. Just to give one example, Giorgia, who learned about the courses through an email advertisement she received, recalls an event from her past that she considers important:

It was two or three years before [joining]. I remember that I passed on the street, saw a sign that said “Tantra” and thought inside myself, as much as I was not at all specifically interested... “I will come here one day.” I don't know why and how, however I felt like this on that day, definitely, “I will come here.” But then, though, when I went to get the massage from C. and he said, “Ah, I think you could start the Tantra course,” I wasn't looking for that. There were a series of events, let's say, which somehow I felt led me there.

Laura tells of hearing from a person, not from the ATMAN school, the word “Tantra,” which stimulated her curiosity:

I got on Google, I said, what is that? Then precisely, maybe I had written “Tantra in Bologna,” and so I found it like that. I felt like a memory. I said: but I like this thing... Because there was maybe an event?... Or maybe it was explained on the website that this meeting was for women and from the description, just, it seemed like something that could help me. I said to myself, let’s try, and yes... I booked it. I went, three hours of meeting and I still remember minute by minute... And from there then it all started.

Giacomo remembers the first lesson after finding the contact on the Internet. He immediately noticed something new:

It was something different, it wasn’t just yoga, like stretching, doing gymnastics. Because even though in the private classes there wasn’t the theory part, which they did in the group classes in the school, still the method was what we use in the school. That is, you do the awareness after each asana. I mean, yes, it’s all there, you can see that it’s not just one dimension, it’s not just physical. And this immediately attracted me.

Similar feelings and emotional states were experienced by all informants during the first class, the first massage they received. or the first time they attended a movement gathering. They certainly played an important role in the decision to continue the path they had started. In conclusion, in spite of the different modes of contact, for these informants, as for others interviewed in other surveys, the encounter between the individuals in search and the person who motivates and encourages them to get involved always remains decisive. In fact, there is no conversion without encounter (Rambo 1993, 86).

Benefits for the convert. Possible benefits for the convert are another component identified by Rambo, who distinguishes five basic categories (Rambo 1993, 81–6). Three of these were identified in the informants’ accounts and were also present in the interviews of previous surveys (Di Marzio 2023a, 116–24): *meaning system*, *emotional gratifications*, and *new ways of living*. The analysis of the responses, however, revealed an additional category of benefits that was thus added to the other three: *physical well-being*.

The first category relates to the *meaning system* and includes benefits at the *cognitive* level. The ability to understand the human enigma, the origin and destiny of the world, is a strong incentive to choose to become a yoga practitioner and delve deeper into the ancient teachings and, in particular, those transmitted by the founder. This benefit is described in different but convergent ways. The ATMAN school is defined by Violetta as a complete and at the same time always new experience, capable of providing the appropriate tools “to understand problems in depth and overcome them.”

Agata, since she started attending, felt an ever more intense “mental well-being.” Vera appreciates the “discovery of the mysteries of the universe.” Giacomo states that the school “teaches spirituality through personal experience.” Eleonora mentions some techniques that have enabled her to achieve a deep knowledge of herself and the world: “consecration,” “blessing,” and “erotic continence.” Paolo says he is able to “center more on problems to solve them,” and also to make sense of the grief over the bereavements that have affected him.

Gabriella insists that, in addition to the exercises,

the school gave us a lot of information about yoga, about the principles of yoga, about how the universe works, the basic principles of the universe which are those of “correspondence,” “resonance”... Being a fairly mental person, I needed this knowledge, but also needed the practice.

Laura received the knowledge that “everything is One.” Giulio appreciates that the school integrates other teachings, such as “Chinese medicine” and “Christian angelology.”

The second category of benefits concerns the *emotional rewards* offered by the spiritual path proposed by the yoga school (Rambo 1993, 83–4). This type of benefit was also mentioned by members of other religious or spiritual groups I had previously interviewed (Di Marzio 2023a). However, it was emphasized even more by the ten informants in the ATMAN survey.

One of the most significant examples is the experience of Giorgia who, referring to the emotion of anger, stated:

When you have such a strong emotion, the risk is to be trapped in this emotion. And so somehow it’s like, I don’t know, a horse without reins. It drags you, it drags you, blind rage... maybe at one moment I see everything dark... That is, the light is nowhere to be seen at that moment. And instead the possibility of transformation really means to transform that energy. So, okay, I stay inside that anger and that anger makes me feel in that moment my suffering. So I get reacquainted with me and somehow I feel that it’s my thing, I feel where it’s coming from, I feel what I really miss in that moment. So, everything is transformed. It’s no longer the other. I feel that thing is of me and I can take care of it. Or even just sublimation techniques, where you know very well that if you start doing yogic practices, where you can sublimate energies, all those heavy energies that you have, it can be anger, it can be fatigue, it can be anything that anyway in that moment doesn’t make you feel good, you can detach yourselves from them. In some way you live in a state of detachment. It doesn’t mean I don’t care about anything, but I don’t identify with that feeling anymore, which maybe before I felt as totalizing.

Reflections similar to this one, related to the emotional state and the control of instinctive reactions in the face of daily events, also emerged from the experiences

of other informants such as Paolo, Violetta, Agata, Giacomo, Eleonora, and Vera. They emphasize the effect of the yoga practice on their ability to face reality with “detachment,” governing it, without feeling “at the mercy” of events, as had been the case in their past.

Another benefit present in the experiences of all informants is exemplified in the words of Paolo. He describes this feeling he experienced upon returning home after the first evening’s practice at the yoga school:

Something happened inside me. This thing worked on me and really gave me the feeling of purifying myself in some way, purifying a certain aspect, getting rid of something that had been there, and then I felt good. I felt like I released a weight. I didn’t know which one. I had not become aware of what it was. However, I felt that it had done me good. It was really a deep experience on a physical level.

Emotional states and phenomena also emerge in the experiences, which the informants describe with intensity, participation, and an emotion that in some of them was manifested through crying. Below are three emblematic examples. Giorgia described in this way the benefits she gained from attending the school:

Another view of life, access to a deeper meaning of life... I have also experienced states that I never thought I would experience, inner states I mean... that made me feel unimaginable love and states of expansion.

Giacomo states:

Of the yoga sphere I have experienced, I have really personally experienced things that I previously thought did not exist: sensations, inner states, and so on... This is a first aspect, really quite shocking because I have also seen cases where it seemed almost as if there was like a telepathic connection between people... that is, hand movements that, without touching, cause physical reactions in somebody else’s body.

Vera reports receiving insights and revelations through dreams and personally experiencing paranormal phenomena. Other emotions that the informants link to attending the school and participating in activities there include: enthusiasm for life, the ability to empathize, joy in life, hope, mental and physical balance, confidence, and a sense of self-worth and security.

The third category of benefits refers to *physical well-being*. All informants attribute numerous and obvious health benefits to the yoga school. Six of them claim to have overcome for years, and without relapse, addictions to alcohol, drugs, smoking, and coffee. Emblematic in this regard is Eleonora’s experience:

I started a kind of spontaneous purification whereby I started to stop drinking coffee, I didn’t feel like eating meat, drinking alcohol, and taking substances, just absolutely nothing. But it was not like I was forced.

These are some of the effects that the informants experienced through the practice of the exercises, massages, and other activities. Paolo mentioned “physical purification.” Laura said: “I immediately feel great with this group of women and I start to feel a lot of sensations at the physical level and at the mental level, even vibrations.” Violetta added:

In this last period I had the intuition that it was time to practice more, so to intensify my yoga activity and I notice improvements first of all, of course, physical. However, they go beyond that, because the transformation, the improvement I notice is also very much at the emotional, spiritual level.

According to Agata,

I do here three different types of yoga. So I felt anyway in doing precisely these postures, I felt an opening of the chakras and so I really felt, I physically felt it was okay.

Regarding the change in eating habits, Paolo, Gabriella, Giacomo, Eleonora, and Vera became vegetarians or vegans after they started attending the ATMAN school. The other five already had “healthy” eating habits before they started attending and were vegetarians or vegans.

The fourth category of benefits referred to by all interviewees is the one I called *new ways of living*. It is the belief that the path taken is a global progress, affecting all aspects of existence, including especially spiritual growth. Considering the peculiarity of the school’s teachings regarding Tantrism and erotic continence, the topic was further explored during the interviews through a specific question on this issue.

The positive effects described by the informants can be divided into a few categories.

- Acquisition of a new frame of reference.

In general, all informants express themselves, describing the positive effects on their lives due to the participation in the yoga school activities, with expressions that indicate a change in perspective, the acquisition of a new frame of reference, and a new key to understanding reality.

For all, the new frame of reference mainly refers to their own spiritual experience. The Catholic faith in which they were educated was not abandoned. Being Catholic remained a sticking point, and the yoga school was not seen as an alternative, but as an aid, a “possibility to recover the relationship with God” (Paolo). Gabriella said she found in the school

a way to understand more of my being Catholic... Relaxation, centering, inner concentration, detachment from everything around us makes us move to a much deeper prayer, which clearly gives you satisfaction.

According to Laura,

ATMAN generally proposes an integrated approach of all the various faiths. So, actually by taking ATMAN's courses I have only amplified that base that was already there and for which I am very grateful. And now here I don't deny the Christian God, Jesus, the saints, or the Virgin Mary.

Violetta confirmed that

In our school the connection with God is amplified a lot. I think that is the main reason why... I am sure that the school is suitable for me, because I have always had a strong connection with God.

Giacomo said that, "Precisely the world of spirituality opened up to me because yoga teaches you spirituality through personal experience." Eleonora added that,

Thanks to the school and thanks to the teachings of Grieg, who is a Tantric master, I started to hear about God again in another way. I heard that the erotic fusion is actually a moment of communion with God, if it is experienced in a certain way.

Regarding other aspects of existence, many benefits are attributed to attending the ATMAN school. Paolo reported: "It has helped me develop a perspective on life that is not, as it were, linear, but more three-dimensional." Gabriella said: "All this practice, all this knowledge has given me this harmony, balance with myself first and then with others, a social integration." Laura mentioned "new perspectives, new answers to questions I used to ask myself," a "rebirth every day." Giulio found a "school of life. Exploring, that's just that one phrase that kind of sums up the motto of the [ATMAN] Federation." For Vera, "the school has been a way of salvation."

- Tantra, sacred eroticism and erotic continence

In their responses to the question about Tantrism and erotic continence, practitioners expressed what these teachings and related practice mean to them. Below are the informants' reflections on this aspect.

Paolo: In the meantime I would tell you that Tantra as it is presented is not just sexuality. And this already in my opinion is a very important aspect, because very often even at the level of the collective unconscious, the collective imagination, there is a lot of insistence on this aspect that Tantra is sex. In fact, it is as if we want to limit the existence of human life only to the sexual function. Tantra is a path that helps you to bring consciousness to all your components, not just about sexual energy, and we are not just made of that. However, it is also true that this is the strongest energy we have because it is the energy

that is able to generate life. So what Tantra proposes, it seems to me that actually Christianity also talked about it. If one goes to study Jesus well, Jesus also talked about it. It brings attention to this energy, to use this energy consciously. It can create life, but it is also an energy that can nourish other aspects of our being, if used correctly through what [Sigmund] Freud [1856–1939] called sublimation. So, it can be channeled, reintegrated, channeled in specific ways, without being dispersed anymore, because clearly it is not that we have children every day... And most of the time, when we don't have children, we take this energy and waste it because we don't know what to do with it. Actually, Tantra tells us that this energy is very, very important. It is a potential, that is, precisely, it is capable of giving life. Imagine how strong it is. So, instead of wasting it, when we don't have children, this energy can also be used properly in the context of amorous fusion. So, there is a conscious use of this energy to transform it, so that it can be used for purposes that are not sexual. That is, the same energy, controlled even during the amorous fusion, can amplify, for example, our willpower, our ability to love, our communion with God. Normally, we give it a downward direction, but here it is given an upward direction. This aspect of the teaching that Tantra insists on a lot is not so much sexuality as eroticism, and this is an important aspect because it involves love. This is the starting point and it is a key teaching, that is, the starting point to really learn how to use this sexual energy correctly, is love. And this, from a social point of view, can be somewhat revolutionary, because today this energy is untied. Not necessarily when people come together in a fusion, they are making love, and very often love is excluded, it is more a genital drive. Tantra is not about having sex, it starts from the physical, but it goes to a more soulful, deeper level.

Gabriella: The real meaning is the spiritualization of the erotic manifestation, in all senses. But the manifestation of the erotic plane is in a spiritual way, it is a means. It's not a purpose. It's a means to speed up your spiritual evolution and realization, because Tantra is not only erotic practice, it's also your whole way of life. Because in the end, if I understand correctly, before yoga was Tantra. Yoga would be a branch of Tantra. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's how I see Tantra, it's life itself, all of it. Yoga includes Tantra, they are one.

Giorgia: Now I was coming up with definitions. When you say Tantra, you say yes to life. I think it is life. Tantra is understood as a network, it is the possibility of connections, of experiences between us and life. The sexual aspect can be part of Tantra, of course, and it is actually what strikes us the most, because it is the most usable, consumable in some way. This is like saying: of the cake I like the cherry, but the cherry alone is not the cake and it is absolutely not that, in the sense that sexuality is a way to get to deep states of connection with God.

Laura: First of all, I would start by not going to deny what is already known about Tantra. It's true, Tantra also includes an aspect of erotic energy. It's true that in Tantra this kind of erotic energy is used. Tantra is so well-known precisely for this aspect. However, Tantra is making us aware that in addition to sexual energy, there are many other kinds of energy. The erotic energy is definitely the strongest one and helps us to govern energy along with all the others. So we become aware of all the other energies with the erotic one, because that is the one we are also made of—we are here in this world.

Violetta: I start from the end and then get to the beginning. Tantra for me is a discovery, in the sense that initially I also didn't know what Tantra was. In Modena, in our school, we don't do Tantra classes because there is no Tantra teacher. So we only do esoteric integral yoga. I had not had a chance to approach Tantra, let alone take a class in the course to be able to understand what it was. I knew it was a very important discipline, though, and by the way, it's one of the main ones in our school, but I didn't know anything else until I started a class last year. Anyway, I'm now part of a Tantra group for women, so I got closer to Tantra and in fact today we have our meeting. And I must say that for me it is a rediscovery, because we all think that Tantra is something taboo. Actually it is not so for me, the way I am experiencing it and especially in the Tantra groups for women, the Shakti groups that our school gives us the opportunity to join. It is a way first of all to rediscover one's own femininity, and that is a very important aspect, especially in the age we live in. So in itself the term Tantra indicates a discipline, which allows us first of all to recognize our erotic energy and amplify it, sublimate it, and then transform it. This is a very theoretical aspect, very complex, but important. However, if we want to get a little bit more practical, Tantra for women, as I see it, I experience it, is a discipline that allows us to amplify our femininity, but at the same time our sisterhood, and to rediscover our erotic energy, but at a sublime level, that is, in a very gentle way. And this is absolutely not taboo.

Agata: I would say that Tantra is definitely a form of pure love, that is, it has nothing to do with sex. In the sense that, currently, in the year 2024, in this modern age, sex is a vulgar thing. Instead, Tantra is really the union of two people trying together to achieve a form of ecstasy. This loving fusion is Tantra. I am convinced of the fact that, however, we really have to go back to a long time ago. I mean, we have not evolved, we have regressed, I think, on everything. Nutrition is bad, we eat bad, industrialized, over-processed foods. We need to go back to a simpler diet, and the same thing I think is true about love, because love is not what we are being fed in porn movies or on the Internet. This is also part of my quest to want to come to an evolution. Tantra is an attempt to go back to an age-old tradition that presented the love relationship in a completely different way, very spiritual. In my opinion, the problem of the modern age is its quest for just a momentary pleasure. And instead this is very different, it is much more, a union on all levels, including the spiritual one, between two people—physical and spiritual.

Giacomo: Tantra means “technique,” so it is an even older doctrine than yoga. Tantric texts go back before yogic texts and are still texts that teach ways of spiritual realization. In many cases, though, spiritual realization comes through asceticism. In the case of Tantra, however, spiritual realization does not necessarily come through asceticism. The sex drive, which at its own low level is very strong, can be used to get to higher states. The idea of Tantra is to take these, which are primal drives, therefore extremely powerful, and channel them to higher ideals. One interesting thing about Tantra is the intimate moment of love fusion. The relationship between a man and a woman is always a sacred moment. It is not that it is done so, just for fun, lightly, but it is preceded anyway by a series of stages in which one is oriented toward the divine, in which one transfigures another person. Thus, a dimension is reached that is certainly very beautiful, very elevated, very noble. Yoga in general, apart from Tantra yoga, focuses on always being super conscious, so at a higher level of awareness than normal. With appropriate techniques this concept can also be carried within the erotic sphere.

And then there's a whole discourse that I couldn't even explain to you well, because I'm not that good at it, of the importance of male and female polarity, of the fact that all of us have our own opposite. I have my inner woman as you [as a woman] have your inner man. If the Tantric couple relationship really reaches the highest stages, you are also able through that channel to reach your own completion, that is, to find the androgynous state. You will then realize that sense of completeness that the humans have, which is the drive that mobilizes all the various spiritual quests.

Eleonora: Tantra, because yoga is derived from Tantra, is a thousand-year-old philosophical system that encompasses all aspects of life: life at three hundred and sixty degrees, including the erotic aspect, because it is an aspect of life. What has happened is that because other spiritual paths normally pretend that eroticism doesn't exist, and Tantra doesn't do this, over time it has become famous only for that. But it is actually a spiritual path that includes all aspects, including the erotic one, which is important because eros is the very energy of life, it is perhaps the greatest energy we have. Tantra teaches us not to squander this potential, but to use it for non-sexual purposes. It also teaches techniques of erotic continence, of loving fusion that are used to get to God. From there, for example, comes the fact of not ejaculating for the man, not having explosive orgasms for the woman, because those are forms of energy that one wastes by emitting them externally. Tantra teaches us not only not to waste, but also to accumulate those energies to use them on other levels. So it is an extremely enriching path. Personally, my strongest spiritual experiences have all been erotic experiences. When you learn to integrate that aspect into your life, it also transforms you so much. We already in the first year, after ten weeks of the course we talk about erotic continence. Then we teach techniques of so-called transmutation and sublimation. Because you use this energy, if you don't disperse it, you still have to transform it because otherwise it stays there. People when they start working on themselves, and they start to feel these energies going up and filling the other levels of their being, intellectual level, affective level, etc., most of them stay interested and then want to go deeper.

Vera: Tantra is a spiritual path. That would be the dry answer if I take into account the points you made about Tantra being associated with sex. I could say that it is a spiritual path that includes eroticism and love fusions as a means to achieve enlightenment. Eroticism is not sex, or you can say it is similar from the physical point of view, it is the exercise of the sexual function of the physical body. However, it is not sex from the point of view of, as it were, the animalistic, instinctual connotation, but it is the sublimation, the elevation of so-called sex into a loving fusion. The instinctual aspect is at the bottom, it is in the form of attraction. However, it is not the animalistic sexual aspect, it is what brings us close to each other for the purpose of procreation. What we consider, if we are on a Tantric spiritual path, is, when we feel affinity toward another human being, it is attraction from the sexual and erotic point of view. We should not give in to this first impulse of attraction, but wait and see if there is the love component that is combined with this feeling of attraction. Only then do we say that the love fusion takes place. Then it can be said that it is no longer merely instinctual. It is already a more conscious choice. It is very complex. If we really want to practice Tantric lovemaking, it means not jumping into lovemaking with a person, as so many people do to have casual relationships. It means waiting some time for the true nature of the relationship to be revealed. Tantra, as a spiritual path, is one

that requires the practitioner to be, as the master says, in full control of all his or her energies. To let oneself go into spurts like that would not be part of the spiritual path. If it happens to us, it would be a deviation, a mistake.

Giulio: In general, that Tantra equals sexuality, that's already what Grieg showed us [as wrong]: the term "Tantric sex," for example, is improper because only if it is eros can it be Tantric. Sometimes it is said: Tantra is amoral, so it does not distinguish between an energy, a lower emotion, and a higher one. Tantra says: where there is a lot of energy there is more possibility of transformation, and therefore it can be a dangerous path, because you are on the threshold. Classical yoga was the yoga of renunciation: the world is illusion, and this body is illusory, so I close myself in the cave and meditate. It was saying no to everything. People recognized that most of the misfortunes in their lives were also the occasions that led them to make important decisions and that they actually then improved because of those crises. So eventually those misfortunes became, in hindsight, blessings. So Tantra is like it's telling you from the beginning: don't call them misfortunes, even the lower emotions, become aware of them, don't deny them, and try to see what they are actually hiding, what they want to communicate to you always from the perspective of a possible growth. And so that, in my opinion, is the really great message of acceptance. When Osho [Rajneesh, 1931–1990] said, "Do whatever you want," then people forgot the second part: "But be aware of it." He would say, Do you want to smoke? Light your cigarette, feel everything. Stay aware of that, then yes you can be free, because you are not only on a pattern that goes into reaction, but also because from there you realize: everything is possible, but not everything is allowed. This is said in Tantra: where there is so much energy, there is so much possibility for transformation. In those couples where the sexual aspect is very important or where there is a certain intensity on that side, you move a lot more energies, but you move mostly the aspect of the lower chakras, meaning the animal instinctual part. It is the classic dimension of the couple with possessiveness and jealousy. Today all this is amplified, sex has become violent. Just as sex has become even more vulgar, the dynamics operate much more on a low plane of consciousness.

Practitioners' reflections on sacred eroticism, a pillar of Bivolaru's teachings (Introvigne 2022a, 59–99) indicate a deep conviction, based on direct experience, of the validity of the theories and techniques taught by the ATMAN school. The informants also show a sincere desire to disseminate these teachings as much as possible. They consider them indispensable for improving people's existence and their interpersonal relationships and, consequently, for promoting physical and mental well-being in society.

4.2. Consolidation of the Experience

After the first contact with the group, a period of intensified interaction begins, during which the student has a deeper experience of the yoga practice and the knowledge of the teachings on which it is based. In this part, processed data are

collected from the fifth to tenth questions formulated on the basis of the fourth, fifth, and sixth objectives. This stage, in which informants consolidate and confirm their decision to attend the ATMAN school, has many elements that Rambo includes in the fifth and sixth stages: interaction and commitment (Rambo 1993, 102–41).

4.2.1. Interaction Stage

A number of processes identified by Rambo are found in the informants' experiences. One of them is *encapsulation*, which Greil and Rudy (1984) noted in new religious movements, but which can, partially and differently, also be applied to the case of the informants of this investigation. Encapsulation fosters the involvement of individuals in group activities and has four interacting components: *relationships*, *roles*, *rituals*, and *rhetoric*, which Rambo (1993, 107–8) borrows from the studies of Ziller (1971) and Sarbin and Adler (1970). In this part, only *relationships* and *roles* will be considered, as the *rhetorical* component was examined at the “first contact” stage about “new ways of living,” while the *ritual* component will be examined in relation to the *commitment* stage.

- Components of encapsulation

Relationships have the function of creating and consolidating cognitive and emotional ties. The type and importance of new relationships established while attending a school were inferred from the informants' descriptions of their emotional experiences and interpersonal relationships developed during school activities.

To indicate the type of relationship established with other practitioners, Giorgia uses the expression “spiritual family.” Giulio mentions a “sense of fraternity and connection with others.” Giacomo uses the words “fellowship, support.” Eleonora attaches great importance to the collective experiences she had during the gatherings and conferences she attended in Romania. She reports her feelings about the course she attended:

I felt an authenticity, something very, very intense... Tales of experiences of people who nevertheless experienced transformations. I realized that what I was basically looking for was that. It's not just a course, it's much more than that.

Laura said:

For me, it's important to meet people who resonate with me. We realize we have a certain kind of common goals, cultivate a spirituality, and also a certain kind of attitude, not a fatalistic or pessimistic attitude to life, but a joyful attitude of responsibility.

Giulio also recalls gatherings in Romania:

Being at gatherings or activities with thousands of people, extremely simple-hearted people, was really a connection, and I felt totally comfortable in a fraternal condition.

For all informants, the founder played and still plays a relevant role in the decision to join and remain in the school that is based on his teachings. Throughout the interviews, most informants referred to the importance of the relationship with the founder and constant “communication” with him. The peculiar aspect of this relationship lies in the fact that this “communication” is not necessarily to be understood in a “physical” and personal sense, but is experienced in a spiritual way, “at a distance,” without, however, losing intensity and effectiveness.

The founder of MISA, in fact, has not been physically reachable by most students since 2004, when the police raid on the school's headquarters in Bucharest occurred (Di Marzio 2017). The persecution against him has had alternating phases and has involved years of exile and isolation. For this reason, only four of the ten practitioners interviewed knew him personally.

Nevertheless, the attitude toward the founder, whom the practitioners call “Grieg,” inferred from the answers to the question “Who is Gregorian Bivolaru to you?” is positive for all informants. It is also marked by deep feelings of affection and esteem.

According to Paolo, who has met Grieg only once, he is his “spiritual guide,” in the traditional sense of the term, that is, the one referred to in all Eastern literature and actually also in the Western tradition, a spiritual guide, that is, the one who guides you.

For Gabriella, who also met him personally, Grieg is the “master.”

He is the master because—and I am speaking personally, but I think this is true for everybody, although some maybe don't even realize it—the master is present at all times in your consciousness. If you think of him, you feel he is near you and he helps you, he supports you, but this happens only if you want it to happen.

Giorgia, who has never met Bivolaru in person, said: “I perceive him as a guide, a guide understood as the one who can help me and has helped me to live and improve aspects of me.” For Laura, Grieg is the one who was able to develop theories, applied in the school's courses, that come from a “very very ancient” Indian tradition. Therefore, she insisted, Bivolaru has not discovered anything, he

has only “studied before us and reported and essentialized for us, from the very ancient Indian tradition.”

Giulio met Grieg in person in Romania in 2001:

I see him as a father, so as a loving figure. He is a guide, although I have not established an intimate relationship with him, in the sense of dealing with him in more personal moments.

For Violetta, Grieg is the students’ guide, although she has not met him personally:

He is our guide, so I follow his lectures and I also follow the activities that are proposed. For example, we now have an online spiritual retreat, an online spiritual camp, so I’m following him.

Agata does not know the founder personally and was also disturbed by the news about his arrest. However, she has great confidence in the head of the ATMAN school she attends, who instead has known Grieg personally. Thanks to her, she has been able to overcome the moment of crisis related to the scandalous reports in the media.

Giacomo, who has not met Grieg in person, said:

I think he is an authentic guide, because that’s what exudes, emerges, from his writings, from his thoughts. And I liken him quite a bit to what I’ve read, of other realized masters of the twentieth century, who left so many writings, like [Paramahansa] Yogananda [1893–1952], there is consistency at the level of content.

For Eleonora, who personally met Grieg during a gathering in Romania, he is a “Tantric master”: “He is the person who filled the void of love I had all my life.” Of the words she heard from him, she particularly remembers these, “Remember that the tree is seen by its fruits, the man by his actions, and the yogi by his states of mind.” For Vera, Grieg is the “spiritual master,” “in the sense that he is my person of reference, toward whom I have total trust, much respect, and whom I take as a model.”

All informants, therefore, regardless of whether they have met Grieg in person, claim to consider him a “spiritual guide,” a “teacher,” a “Tantric master,” and to place the utmost trust in him. This element, at a stage such as the interaction, when the decision to affiliate is taking shape, is decisive in motivating the person to definitely commit to the group. This peculiar relationship of the practitioners with Grieg will be explored further in section five.

The interaction stage also defines the *roles* people play in the movement. They solidify involvement by reinforcing the belief that their role contributes to the school’s aims for the benefit of the practitioners who attend it. The examination of

the experiences revealed the description of well-defined roles in all informants, who always characterize themselves as practitioners. In addition, four of them, Paolo, Gabriella, Giulio, and Eleonora, are yoga teachers and run yoga centers in Italy. Giacomo is starting the course to become a teacher. Two of them, Paolo in Bologna and Vera in Bucharest, have chosen to live in an ashram.

- Types of encapsulation

Greil and Rudy (1984, 266–67) distinguish three types of encapsulation: *physical*, *social*, and *ideological*. To detect whether these types emerge in the informants' accounts, responses to questions about family's and friends' reactions to their decision to attend the ATMAN school were examined. Through the informants' comprehensive and detailed responses, it was also possible to infer information about the occurrence of conflicts and how they were dealt with.

First, the presence of a form of *physical* isolation from the outside world does not appear. On the contrary, the experience of these people suggests the opposite scenario, even for the two living in an ashram. *Social* encapsulation, which, in some movements, manifests itself as a strategy aimed at limiting the members' contact with people outside the group, also does not emerge from the analysis of the interviews.

Here are a few examples. Paolo has not only experienced no negative reactions from his family, but has been encouraged by his sister to continue his attendance. His father often turns to him for advice on a healthier eating style. In addition, his relations with his relatives have improved because they see improvements in him that they attribute precisely to his attending the yoga school. Gabriella's parents have noticed that their daughter is more serene and are happy with the effect the school has on her. Giorgia's parents consider her "strange" because of her eating habits and the fact that she has images of Hindu deities in her home, but they see her as "more harmonious," and they respect her choices. In her case, despite the difficulty in meeting her parents, who live in another region, her relationship with them has improved thanks to the path she has taken in the school, partly because she is now able to deal with them on topics that were taboo in a way before, such as death and illness.

Laura is supported by the whole family who, like her, are vegetarians. Some attend yoga schools other than ATMAN. Her parents are reassured because they see her as happy. Giulio's mother has expressed fears in the past that her son would be "manipulated," but she did not show hostility. Her fears were

extinguished when she saw the positive effects of the school on her son. Violetta and her husband both attend the ATMAN school and this unites them. Some of their friends also attend the classes. Their parents have not shown any reservations, apart from a certain curiosity generated by the fact that the ATMAN school engages them a lot.

Agata's parents have never criticized her choices. Giacomo's parents sometimes express irony about his abstinence from alcohol and smoking and his eating habits. However, they see him convinced of what he does, and their reaction is positive. Giacomo has two young children and reports that his relationships with them, thanks to the path he took, have improved significantly in the last couple of years. Eleonora, before starting the path in the ATMAN school, no longer communicated with her parents. She later started talking to them again, and after eight years of practice, her parents started attending the school as well. She believes that sharing these experiences helped to reestablish relations between them. Vera also reports no conflict, and in fact says that her mother always encouraged her to continue attending.

The third type of encapsulation, *ideological*, consists of the indoctrination of the potential convert to strengthen his or her faith in an "oppositional" mode in relation to the outside world (Greil and Rudy 1984, 267–68). It is carried out by some movements through an almost total involvement of members in group activities, which would occupy all their time.

Regarding this aspect, the informants did state that they have changed their attendance and habits since their journey in the ATMAN school began. However, they also clearly expressed the reasons for their choices about the amount of time to devote to school activities and changes in their friendships.

Here are some examples. Laura, over time, has decreased hanging out with people who have habits like the ones she had before she started this path, including evenings at clubs with alcohol consumption. She feels that this is a natural occurrence and not an attitude of reject toward those who do not share her life choices:

Perhaps it may sound a little snobbish. I say: I only want to hang out with people who are part of ATMAN. However, I realize that's really the attitude, the purpose. And so honestly to go out at night to go drinking, no, thank you, that's not something I'm interested in.

Violetta adds:

Definitely when you enter this school it's like you open up a world, in the sense that it then becomes automatic to insist on some actions, some activities that you know are good for

you and abandon others that are unnecessary. This is not obvious, and initially may be even difficult. But then, over time, it becomes automatic to devote weekends to doing yoga activities rather than going to a restaurant or going to a movie. That is, it becomes automatic to prioritize some yoga activities rather than some recreational activities.

Gabriella agrees:

After the end of the second year of yoga, I changed all my friendships, all of them. So my friends, the ones I went to see every weeks to drink coffee, to smoke, to chat, to waste time... to put it simply, after two years, it is not that I quarreled with them, but slowly I didn't feel the need to meet these people anymore. I made other friendships with people engaged in much more serious and deeper inner searches, because those were the ones that satisfied me, nourished me.

For the informants of this survey, then, attending the ATMAN school and participating in its multifaceted activities, which involve not only classes or meditation times, but also gatherings, ceremonies, festivals, conferences, and so on, reinforced their sense of belonging to a movement that offers them a spiritual path in tune with their expectations and needs. It is something we have already seen in the examination of the motivations for membership. However, none of them experienced conflicts with their family or friends caused by attending the school. On the contrary, in many cases the opposite occurred.

In addition, a consideration that often emerged from the responses concerns the fact that their personal transformation also elicited other changes, such as that of the type of friendships. It is an entirely normal effect that occurs in anyone who, at some point in his or her life, decides to embark on a different path from the one previously traveled.

4.2.2. Commitment Stage

The interaction stage culminates in the next stage, commitment (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 888–89), in which Rambo identifies five elements: *decision*, *witnessing*, *rituals*, *abandonment*, and *reformulation of motivations*. To test the correspondence with these five factors, the informants' responses to questions about their assessment of their achievements and the degree of importance of the movement in their lives were examined. With the exception of *abandonment*, the other four factors all emerged from the responses. The factors "decision" and "witnessing" have already been extensively explained in the summary of the responses to the question "Why did you decide to continue attending?" discussed in the section on benefits as part of the *new ways of living*.

Rituals. Individual and collective rituals make available integrative strategies for people to identify and connect with the new way of understanding life offered by the group. In the informants' experiences, the importance attached to numerous activities that take place in the ATMAN school, both individually and as a group, emerges widely. They include exercises, meditations, seminars, lectures, ceremonies related to annual or religious holidays, festivals, performances, and similar, whose meanings are described by the informants in different but converging ways.

Among the "rites" on which informants have dwelt most is that of *consecration* (Introvigne 2022a, 64). Here are some examples, emblematic in their own way: "Every day, when I get up, I consecrate the day to God and offer him what will be the actions of the day" (Giacomo); "Thanks to some techniques that have been taught, such as consecration, the art of blessing, I have begun to have my own relationship with God again" (Eleonora).

Giulio offers more details on the practice of *consecration*, which has helped him more than others in his spiritual transformation:

I find consecration to be a really important thing that helps us in our daily lives to be more centered and feel part of something larger... Consecration is a practice that is not an invention of the school, because it is present in various traditions. It is indicated in the *Bhagavadgītā*. Orthodox monks also practice it. It is the way we, before we start something, whether it is starting the day, starting work, starting the course, or even before we eat, we consecrate. So we bring a state of sacredness to what we are about to start doing, but offering the fruits, that is, detaching from the results. It is what is called karma yoga, which is the mode in which we act by trying to be instruments of service.

Giacomo also attaches great importance to *consecration*:

I wanted to tell you that I have found that during the class, although of course I teach people who have been doing yoga for a short time, because I'm in my third year myself, however, you can feel that a special atmosphere is created and what you do, maybe alone at home, when you do class has a dimension, a different response. It is a communion, I think also a support, a part of energies coming from the universe. Clearly we consecrate every lesson, so it's not that we do it so much for... and I think a response comes. We have a little invocation formula that we repeat inwardly, so it's not said out loud. Then, again inwardly, we offer all the results of the yoga class to God after we say this thing. Always with a certain formula, in silence, we wait to receive a response. This is a short thing, not particularly structured, however, it works. We also use it in other contexts, that is, in other areas. For example, if one has something in front of him at a particularly challenging time, if he has to speak, has an important talk with someone dear to him, things like that, he does it.

Giulio, learned about the MISA school in 2001, when it was the only yoga school available to him. He had gone to Romania for a social project dedicated to abandoned minors, and had the opportunity to attend workshops when there were “spiral meditations” (Introvigne 2022a, 29). Here is his account:

I in that meditation there felt as if my heart was uncorked like a bottle and suddenly my perspective was transformed by one hundred and eighty degrees. And I could understand, I mean I could really get that vision of the deeper meaning than what I was seeing before, of why certain things were being done, or why certain practices were given and so on... When we are in the heart, there is one vision and often, when we are in the mind, it's a wholly different thing. It is said that the heart has the unifying vision. Instead of looking at differences and separation, it embraces, so it is much more loving and welcoming, less doubtful.

In sharing these experiences, all informants described an effect frequently noted in studies on the importance of ritual in the religious or spiritual experience. In the life of the convert, the power of ritual informs one's attitude toward life, other people, the world, and God (Rambo 1993, 115).

Reformulation of motivations. The last element present in the commitment stage is the reformulation of the motivations why the informants decided to persevere in their journey along the path laid out by the founder's teachings. All the informants interviewed look at the present and future of their spiritual journey dynamically. This is evident across the board by examining the answers to the question, “What do you think the school can still give you in the future?” Following are some significant excerpts from the responses.

Paolo: There are still parts of me that somehow I haven't fully explored... every once in a while, I stop and look back and say, look at everything I've done so far, and marvel at the fact of how I feel that actually so much still can be done. Considering how this inner transformation, this self-knowledge works, in fact, there is no limit, so it is a journey that will go on and cannot end.

Gabriella: First of all, in my opinion, [it can give me] health. Honestly, even though I am only sixty years old, I am convinced of my intention to acquire that wisdom of the older woman, the female balance, to be prepared to realize this passage after the so-called death. This is a moment that I look forward to very serenely. I want to do it as harmoniously and spiritually and consciously as possible.

Giorgia: The possibility of continuing to transform things about me that I feel are not yet harmonious, primarily my relationship with my femininity. Being on a spiritual path for me means deciding that I want to see what is holding me back from happiness, which means there is a new challenge every time. And so that's what I expect: somehow to amplify more and more certain harmonious resonances in my life, and gain more and more confidence,

and surrender to something bigger than myself. Somehow I feel that this school has helped me amplify a sense of trust toward life.

Laura: I don't know, in the sense that what it could definitely give me, because I'm working on it, even applying techniques that I learned through the courses, is definitely a greater stability from the point of view of emotions, working on my anger. So precisely a basic serenity, and also work on my femininity.

Giulio: I hope to grow in wisdom and understanding, so to continue to work on aspects that are still the limiting parts and the fears or the dark parts of each of us. I see this as my path. And then as a teacher. The day I found myself leading a class I said, I get it, this is what I want to do. This is the reason I also work as a translator. One thing that I really enjoy is producing these books or translating the books and so I mainly hope that the school can grow and get to be known especially for the effectiveness of its courses.

Violetta: I don't know, because I am convinced that the school can give me even more than what it has given me so far, in the sense that it is a continuous discovery. I am obviously different from three years ago, when I started the school, and different from two years ago, when I had just integrated a little more into the school. I am convinced that as I continue this path, I will be different in the years to come and obviously with the same spirit, that is, the spirit of transforming myself into a better person. So I think the school will give me this chance. Of course I have to be able to take it and continue to practice, that is, to put into practice all the notions that are given to us.

Agata: For me one point is fundamental, which is the evolution of my soul. So I think this school helps me in this evolution, in the sense that it gives you tools to be balanced, centered, to try to be as positive as possible towards others. It also gives you weapons, meaning good weapons, for becoming a better person, and this every day.

Giacomo: In my opinion, it can still give me a lot, because I realize that I have discovered the spiritual dimension, but that I am absolutely at the beginning of the path, both in the yoga course and even more so in the Shivaism course. Actually with the practice of yoga, with the whole meditation part, but not only that, I actually believe that I am getting much closer to true peacefulness of mind, the ability to take in what comes from the world so that I am not too, how should I say, disrupted, overwhelmed by it? There is this concept that I really like: that of being detached while remaining within the world, but not sucked in by the world.

Eleonora: If I speak ideally, I hope to achieve the state, between brackets, of "perfection," when you get to fully awaken and live in the spiritual plane, as in the so-called state of holiness, which we will achieve sooner or later. I would like to merge with God in this state of eternity.

Vera: Every day gives me so many things, So what I hope is to one day get to the level of consciousness of my spiritual guide. That would be my greatest hope.

Trying to summarize these comments, we can conclude that all practitioners are united by the confidence in the validity of the path they have taken and the enthusiasm resulting from the discovery of new possibilities for inner research and personal development. In addition, another interesting and cross-cutting aspect is

that of the dynamism of motivations. The reason that initially prompted informants to begin yoga practice gradually transforms over time in connection with the progress made and the results achieved.

Degree of importance of the movement. To encourage the verbal expression of the degree of importance of the path taken in the ATMAN school, informants were asked a question about the consequences of a hypothetical demise of the group: “What would happen to you if tomorrow all the yoga schools in this federation disappeared?” Following are some significant excerpts from the responses.

Vera: I have full faith that God would show me, give me signs of what’s to come next. No, I mean, I am also quite certain that before this hypothetical demise abruptly happens, the signs and insights would come to me that I would already have an alternative.

Paolo: I think that I received tools that allow me to walk alone, principles, points of reference that would still allow me to continue doing what I am doing beyond the school. Because this quest that I can also call precisely a spiritual quest is, first of all, a personal quest. That is, first of all this relationship that I have, that has been created with God, is a relationship that is mine, it is his, there is a relationship between us, regardless of school, context, space, and time.

Giorgia: On the one hand, I would definitely feel very disoriented because for me it’s really a spiritual family. On the other hand, I would say I would try to treasure everything I had, because anyway my relationship with God goes beyond that. It’s also important for me in this journey to have confrontations with people. On the other side, I think anyway what it gave me I have, I think I would use the tools that I have.

Agata: I think it would be a sign that I may stop, in the sense that nothing bad would happen to me. Maybe I would keep practicing the asanas, but on the physical level of course, there would not be the theoretical part. We have handouts. I could just reread those, I mean.

Eleonora: I would go forward with my personal practice, let’s say we received so many techniques, many more than we could work with. I would go ahead with my spiritual practice, and if anyone wants to join anyway, I will put people together.

Laura: Initially I would be like if I were on a map, in the middle is me, and this map at a certain point, that is at a moment, you open it and it becomes white. There is no point of reference anymore. That was also the first reaction I had to your question. But now I say to you: no, it would not matter. Maybe it will be more complicated for me to “redraw,” so to speak, that map. However, I know that inside me that map is there. It is inescapable. I realize that I can no longer do some things unless I integrate them with a certain kind of spirituality that I have, with methods that I have acquired, with techniques that I have, because they are mine now.

Violetta: I actually have a hard time thinking about the school disappearing. In fact, I struggle a lot. More than imagining that the school might disappear, I imagine that maybe I might end up in a part of the world where there is no school, for example. I actually think

that for me and for everyone who started a path in this school, if you imagine a limited period of physical absence from the school you can still go on. So I don't see this problem.

Giacomo: I of course would be sorry, but I think I would continue in the track that was laid out. In these three years of information, of inputs, of texts to read I've really received a lot, so I might as well spend some time, I think even a few years, digging in and assimilating better what I've been offered so far. And then, being almost at the end of my path to become a teacher, of course a teacher is not a master, so I don't have any claim to replace anybody, however, I think I might also still try to start the school again. To somehow start doing things again, recreating the school. I mean, a new foundation by starting again from the beginning.

Giulio: I don't know, because that would be something, as it were, that only by living it one can experience. Surely, I would lack that support and yet at the same time I think I would still continue. That is, I practice every day precisely because I feel that it is good for me and the fact of teaching for me was mainly the fact of sharing something that I saw that is good for me. So I would miss that nourishment that comes from the various gatherings, the various materials that are continually offered. However, I hope that because of all that I have already acquired, I will continue.

Gabriella: Nothing wrong with that. Because right now I have a flood of tools to continue, to go on my way. This school has given me everything, everything I have received, and it has given me diamonds, and gold, and treasures of this world, of this universe. So I am so rich. I have received so much. I have everything I need, even in the case of a world catastrophe. I would never give up these accomplishments of mine, achievements that will remain in me even beyond death. No one can steal anything from me.

What certainly emerges from these responses is the enormous importance that the school has in the lives of practitioners and the gratitude they feel for all the benefits they have received. However, the eventual "disappearance" of the school would not mean for any of them the end of an experience or a fall into discouragement and despair. Each of them will find a way to continue the journey individually, thanks to the teachings they have already received and assimilated. Some may even try to recreate the school experience with other people.

4.3. Psychological Consequences of Yoga Practice

In the last stage elaborated by Rambo, that of consequences (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 889–90), a psychological assessment of the repercussions of the religious or spiritual choice on the informants' existence is attempted, starting from their autobiographical reconstructions. At this stage, Rambo suggests that the psychologists should ask themselves some questions. They can be answered by starting, first of all, with the persons and their experiences. Secondly, psychologists should place themselves in the positions of external observers who,

in light of the data collected, try to evaluate the effects of the spiritual path the persons observed have chosen.

Some of the questions to be asked are: what aspects of existence have been affected? What changes have occurred in personality and interpersonal relationships? To what extent has the individual become isolated or reconciled with the world? Does the effect of spiritual choice on the person represent progress or regression in a psychological sense? In the line of these indications, and taking the ten interviewees' experiences as a starting point, it is possible to conduct a reflection, in a psychological sense, on the consequences that yoga practice and adherence to the founder's teachings had on them.

First, the decision they made was reconstructed and interpreted by all of them as a choice that was grafted into their lives and inclinations, as if it were the crowning of a path, or the integral development of potentialities present in germ. In particular, the choice to attend the ATMAN school was not experienced as a "change" or an "opposition" to the religious upbringing received in the family, which for all was Catholic, but as an enrichment and deepening of a faith and practice that, previously, were formal and lukewarm. All the informants received the sacraments of Christian initiation, most of them define their families as "practicing Catholics," and some still go to Catholic churches to attend services or to pray in solitude. In their reconstructions, however, there emerges an awareness that their membership, by birth and upbringing in the Catholic Church, was not really deep and conscious.

The yoga school gave the possibility to these persons, for whom the relationship with the Absolute and spirituality play a decisive role, to recover that personal relationship with God that had been lost over time or even to deepen their Catholic faith that had become exterior and superficial. In addition, relaxation techniques, meditation, inner concentration and detachment enable a deep prayer in which the person inwardly perceives the "presence" of God. In general, a conception of God as "One" emerges in the informants' experiences and is manifested in various spiritual ways, all of which they declare authentic, including Christianity. God, therefore, does not have a defined identity, but is considered the "principle" of all spiritual manifestations of which each person is a part.

For this reason, the spirituality of these practitioners is inclusive and open to all possibilities. The ATMAN school offers an integrated approach to all religious and spiritual experiences, even traditional ones such as the Catholic faith.

Jesus, Mary, and the saints of the Catholic tradition remain in the faith of these individuals as “spiritual lights” to look at while grasping dimensions and aspects that can be grafted into ancient spiritual traditions of Hindu and Buddhist origins. Lived spirituality is essentially experiential, and is an integral part of their daily existence, including the sphere of affective and loving relationships.

This is particularly evident in the way the informants express the meaning of Tantrism, their personal experiences, what they have learned from the founder’s teachings, and the practice of erotic continence, aspects that have been amply illustrated in the section devoted to the fourth category of benefits called by Rambo “new ways of living.” Just to give one example, Eleonora states that she understood, thanks to the school’s teachings, that the “loving fusion is actually a moment of communion with God, if it is lived in a certain way.”

The informants’ responses are very articulate and thorough, revealing a deep conviction of the theoretical and practical validity of the founder’s teachings, which he himself summarized in 37 points (Bivolaru 2020–21):

In 2021, Bivolaru presented a synthesis in 37 points of the difference between what he called respectively “raw sexuality” and “pure eroticism.” It was a useful primer of how, for MISA, true eroticism lies outside the sphere of sexuality and is something totally different. (Introvigne 2022a, 78).

The concepts expressed by Bivolaru return frequently in the experiences of the ten students. This means that, over the years of attendance, an interesting transformation occurred from a psychological point of view. The founder’s teachings, the benefits of which the informants personally verified, became a pillar of their existence and life project, grafting itself, where it was still present, into the Catholic education they had received. Informants attribute to the founder the extraordinary wisdom of having understood, taking cues from ancient Eastern wisdom, how energy should be sublimated and oriented to the spiritual dimension. Tantra is the spiritualization of every action, and it manifests itself through all the senses, which become the “keys” to open the doors of spirituality.

Gabriella, for example, reports:

Even if you eat an orange, at that moment, you experience an orgasm of pleasure, that is Tantra. To reduce it only to the sexual sphere is a very serious mistake, because it is much more, it is a way of living, practically every act of yours, even when you go to the bathroom to pee, that is a sacred spiritual act and that is Tantra. In yoga classes, for more than one year we talk about Tibetan Tantrism, and there they say that we are a diamond in the beginning, but we are covered with mud, and just by being aware of that you can burn that mud and clean yourself, just by sublimation. It is an alchemy.

All informants have developed an attitude that ascribes to the inner and outer world and to the entire existence a spiritual value and meaning, even to aspects commonly considered secondary or reprehensible. This effect is most evident in those who have been in the school the longest, but is also present in the others. It is an inner disposition that involves both a cognitive and an emotional factor, psychologically adaptive. It is able to dilute, and in some way soothe, the suffering resulting from guilt and shame generated by the internal or external factors that, in some way, have affected one's self-esteem.

Another interesting effect, discernible from the examination of the responses, is closely related to the complex articulation and decisive importance, in Bivolaru's teachings, of the concepts of "Tantra" as a set of energies governing the microcosm and macrocosm, aimed at improving personal and social life, and of "erotic continence." In Giulio's words,

Tantra embraces everything, especially at the level of inner work. One begins to understand this relationship between microcosm and macrocosm in stages, and it is important to use the practices of postures and become aware of the energies coming from the states of mind.

These ideas, shared by the practitioners, and put into practice through yoga, enable them to feel like active and awakened individuals who face difficult or stressful situations rather than merely suffering them. The psychological consequence that can be observed, examining their responses, is the strengthening of a sense of security. The individual feels able to achieve the balance necessary to manage even the most instinctive drives and intense emotions.

Examining, however, the totality of the experiences shared during the interviews, it was possible to detect an even deeper and more significant consequence that these beliefs had, and still have, on the informants' personalities. This is what Allport described as the sixth and most important capacity of the individual who has reached psychological maturity: the unifying conception of life (Allport 1973). Bivolaru's teachings, particularly those on Tantra and erotic continence, provide a unifying frame of reference for the ten practitioners, into which the physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of their personalities converge.

Giulio's experience is an example of the psychological process just described. He places Tantra at the basis of the fundamental principle of the universe possessing two qualities: consciousness and energy, which he relates to the "play" between Shiva and Shakti. Based on this awareness he states that

everything that happens always has meaning. The more we are able to grasp it, the more that experience is no longer a good or bad experience, but an opportunity for transformation. Grieg says it is a necessity.

The firm belief in the truth of this teaching guides the students in their daily choices and balances emotional reactions to situations that are out of their control. On the one hand, one can do without the pleasant ones, without suffering. On the other hand, one does not reject the unpleasant ones because, as Tantric teachings state:

Stay, observe and try to remain centered because, if that situation is happening, there is a reason. But that reason is, in a way, always related to a higher purpose.

In this way, misfortunes have become, in hindsight, blessings, and even the lower emotions, once students become aware of their existence without denying them, can communicate something useful for their personal growth to those who experience them.

This way of dealing with reality, even and especially when it is conflictual, stressful, or painful, undoubtedly has consequences for the lives of individuals. It can certainly contribute to attributing meaning to suffering and, in general, to the problems of existence. Research on this process represents one of the most important areas of investigation in contemporary psychology that studies different religious or spiritual experiences. It concerns the relationship between adherence to religious or spiritual movements and *coping*, a term introduced into psychology by Richard S. Lazarus (1922–2002; Lazarus 1966).

The concept is closely related to that of stress. It indicates the set of cognitive (or mental) and behavioral strategies implemented by a person to cope with a difficult situation. There is much research on the correlation between specific individual characteristics and needs, and the benefits offered by certain types of new religious or spiritual movements. The results of this research can help to better understand the motivations that lead people to choose to affiliate with a particular movement among the many existing ones, or to start practicing disciplines related to spiritualities of different philosophical and historical origins (Namini and Murken 2008, 2009; Di Marzio 2016, 2023).

Another important area of psychological research concerns the positive effect that faith, spirituality, or practices such as meditation, Zen, and yoga have in overcoming various types of addiction (Tiebout 1944a, 1944b, 1949). These positive effects emerged very clearly from the experiences of five students who attributed their decision of attending the ATMAN school to their desire of

overcoming addiction, more or less pronounced, to alcohol, narcotics and excitants, smoking, and sex. Some recalled previous unsuccessful attempts undertaken with the help of professionals in the relevant fields. They claim that the ATMAN school's activities, exercises, meditation, and even reading the founder's teachings, helped them to strengthen the decision to abandon old habits. They acquired a new vision of themselves and the world, of which they feel they are an active part. Now, they say, they intend to help release those energies that help spread well-being and happiness not only for themselves but also for others.

A further impetus for this personal transformation is the belief that for all there is a God who unifies the energies of the universe, with whom it is possible to have a deep personal relationship, in which infinite love is given and received. In this particular psychological context, renouncing something to which one was previously addicted becomes less difficult. The goal to be achieved is not limited to that particular outcome. It goes beyond it and becomes the yearning for a profound transformation of the self, in which the spiritual dimension takes on a decisive importance.

The ATMAN school has consistently influenced the way practitioners experience eroticism and sexuality, an area in which "it is not possible to hide what one is" and it is very important to become "aware of one's dark sides." In the words of Giulio:

There we bare ourselves, and there, things also come out, because the body does not lie and therefore you cannot hide. They say: as you make love so you are in life and so is the way we relate to problems, to situations, to the way we want to create something together or we want instead to consume it, use it, and then when we are fed up we move on to something else. And so, the sphere of sexuality is important because there the most powerful laws are revealed.

The way practitioners experience the couple relationship, from the affective and erotic point of view, has transformed substantially as a result of attending the ATMAN school and studying the founder's teachings. Once the new perspective is embraced, the couple encounter becomes the union not only of two bodies, but also of two divine parts, in a state of deep respect and love. This can take place even if the erotic act does not occur. The latter becomes marginal, just a means, and is no longer understood as pleasure in and of itself.

In their experiences, the informants frequently pause to insist on the meaning of "erotic continence" and the "erotic revolution" that the school would like to bring about. They know it meets with opposition, especially in some cultural and

religious contexts (Di Marzio 2017). In summary, they define erotic continence as “a way of making love, but without the man losing the seed.” It is not, however, simply a matter of “withholding” but rather of “amplifying” and “sublimating.”

These comments can only be understood if one refers to the distinction that Bivolaru makes between “erotic energy” and “sexual energy” (Introvigne 2022a, 64–6) and the consequences that this teaching has on the lives of the practitioners who share it and try to put it into practice. They claim it allows them to live in harmony, health, and to make the couple relationship something much deeper, not only in terms of what concerns the physical union. Eros is present, for them, in everything that is realized, in life projects and important choices that allow us to fully realize our spiritual potential.

It is, however, a path that is not understandable and possible for everyone, but only for those who follow a certain spiritual discipline. Transformations in couple life, according to the experiences of the informants, occur through the acceptance of “male and female polarities,” and the recovery of reciprocity, which makes the experience of both partners more satisfying by elevating it to a higher level. In fact, erotic continence can only be practiced if both partners are aware that a loving act involves several planes: physical, etheric, mental, and spiritual. Only when all these dimensions are involved does an authentic loving fusion take place.

Particularly interesting and dense with meaning in this regard is the reflection of Giulio. In his ATMAN school, he leads a group of men and thus has the experience necessary to communicate effectively about what is happening there. He states:

With the typical ejaculation what happens is an energetic short circuit. One moment before the man was all happy, eager. Then the next moment it is as if there were a sudden, drastic lowering of energy. This energetic short circuit generates a polarization between the man and the woman over time. If the semen is not emitted for procreative purposes and is lost, over time it causes an energetic alteration that undermines the relationship by making it unsatisfactory and conflictual. With sacred eroticism, the perspective changes radically, since the partners are aware that it is souls that meet each other. The pleasure experienced does not remain as such on the physical level only. It penetrates into the depths of the souls. Then, in addition to becoming secondary, getting to a certain point causes the energies, especially for the man, instead of remaining focused at the level of the genital area, to spread, that is, to expand throughout the whole body and even beyond it. So there is no longer that need that the man has at a certain point to let out the semen. There is this energy exchange that happens by making love, and at some point you decide together that you can end it.

Giulio calls this process “transmutation and sublimation.” It occurs spontaneously and, in the case of the person in love, the energies, at least in part, are sublimated at the level of the heart. Sublimation, however, can occur in very different ways depending on the persons experiencing them, their inclinations, and the state they are in. The recurring concept in Tantra is that where there is so much energy, there is so much possibility of transformation, and if humans constantly, unknowingly continue to lose their energies, then they do not have anything to transform.

Giulio emphasizes that erotic continence is possible only within a path that provides practical tools, such as the techniques of hatha yoga. They are useful for amplifying energies, for transforming them, and bringing them to higher planes. The “energy meltdown,” that is, the feeling of “emptying and exhaustion” that practitioners experience after ejaculation, does not occur. The exhaustion happens if the most powerful energies available to men and women are not used with sacredness and awareness. In this case, the sexual act is reduced to the instinctual level, as mere satisfaction of a physical need. In the Tantric vision, the love encounter, on the contrary, is an expression, in a small way, of what can be achieved when encountering the divine. Those who experience the love fusion can compare it to a mystical experience. Giulio, in reporting these intimate feelings and experiences states:

One thing that I have experienced, which brings me so much joy, is precisely the fact of considering God as love. Starting from pleasure, even gross pleasure, which can be even the pleasure of enjoying a chocolate, sublimating it into something that refines consciousness, we become aware that everything that exists originates from a creative principle. Therefore, every experience can become a bridge that brings us back to the One.

In the reflections of the students, the dissimilarity often emerges between Bivolaru’s teachings on sacred eroticism and the conception, which some of them encountered in the Catholic education they received, in which sexuality is considered a sinful act if not aimed at procreation. On the other hand, they are also capable of self-criticism by admitting the inadequacy of their past experiences. Their existence, they say, was punctuated by short and troubled emotional relationships or casual sexual relations with people who were almost or completely unknown. The two opposing ways of looking at love relationships and sexuality, as taboo or “sin” and as pleasure without restraints and inhibitions, are both excluded in the new perspective, which wholeheartedly follows the founder’s

teachings, the validity of which is constantly affirmed by the practitioners. By attending the ATMAN school, they learned a “method,” which is also a “discipline” through classes, yoga exercises, meditation, theoretical lectures, and so on.

Also overcome in Bivolaru’s teachings is the antithesis between “spirit” and “body,” an idea, rooted in the Greek conception, that the pleasures of the spirit had a higher dignity than those of the body. This concept was sometimes equated with the theory that the body was corruptible, while the exercise of the mental faculties, through reason, constituted the path to enlightenment (Bottomley 1979). Early Christian ascetics added to this the idea that the body could interfere with the attainment of mystical union with the divine.

The consequence of this process was the association of the body with sexuality and the denial of reason and, ultimately, with evil and sin, which, by definition, are opposed to reason (Hood et al. 2001, 157).

In the vision of MISA’s founder, shared by the practitioners I interviewed, this philosophical paradigm is abandoned to be replaced by the notion of “sacred eroticism” (Introvigne 2022a). It is an esoteric discipline in which the loving fusion not only is not “sinful,” but becomes a privileged way to achieve union with God. Tantra is a spiritual path, and sacred eroticism and the amorous fusion are means to achieve enlightenment.

Pure Eros for MISA is a Godly Attribute. It is a sublime subtle energy coming from God, and has its distinct frequency of vibration. Sacred eroticism is the occult resonance process through which the energy of Pure Eros and the energy of Love, another and indeed a key Godly Attribute, are attracted and accumulated in the student’s inner field (Introvigne 2022a, 61).

Sexual identity is also rediscovered and valued. Interesting, in this regard, is the experience of the group of female practitioners attending the Tantra course for women. They feel comfortable there, and their experiences in the wake of ancient teachings and practices allow them, to some extent, to identify with the figures of ancient Tantric priestesses. In this new frame of reference, they feel that their gender identity is valued as a means to higher spiritual states. In the meetings dedicated to women, there is no “vulgarization” of Tantra, as is the case when it is understood only as learning positions to assume during the sexual act. In the course of these meetings, the practitioners rediscover the importance of their own erotic energy and the way, pure and delicate, in which to manifest it. They feel more

aware of their femininity, of the meaning of the masculine-feminine archetypes, and of sisterhood.

From the experiences of the teachers and leaders of the different schools, there also emerges the positive reaction they have observed in the people who start attending the school.

Another element that emerges from the analysis of the interviews, is that attending the ATMAN school and transforming the habits of life and the way of living one's spirituality did not result in difficulties or conflicts in interpersonal relationships. Social relations and insertion into the work environment do not seem to have been affected, except for the need to carry out all the activities related to the purposes of the path undertaken, a commitment that requires dedicated time and strategies. Such a commitment, however, not only does not preclude other interests and friendships outside of school, but seems to have improved the life of the informants. They speak widely of the progress perceived by them and observed by relatives and friends, and of benefits and gratifications at the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical levels and in their work relationships.

Belonging to a community that aims to achieve universal spiritual progress is a powerful motivation that drives practitioners to strive, every day, for the betterment of themselves and, consequently, of the entire universe conceived as "One." Taking Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) theory as a reference, the adherence of these individuals to the ATMAN school was the result of different motivations: "intellectual," "experimental," and "affective," converging and enhanced by a "mystical" motivation. The latter adds to an undoubtedly positive and psychologically enriching experience a peculiar spiritual connotation.

When spiritual or religious choices take place on the basis of these motivations, it is possible to say that they are essentially free, that practitioners play an active role, and do not passively submit to pressure from the leader or group. In these cases, encapsulation (Greil and Rudy 1984) occurs in a way that respects the individual. In this type of movements, members are encouraged to independently seek their spiritual goals. In his model, Rambo calls them intellectual and experiential conversions, in which involvement within the spiritual community occurs in an active and creative way (Rambo 1993, 105).

5. Ineffable and Totalizing Spiritual Experiences

The ten practitioners interviewed shared numerous experiences they had during the courses, gatherings, celebrations, and various activities offered by the ATMAN school. They attribute to them a very important significance in relation not only to the spiritual path they are on, but also, more generally, to their existence. As they describe these experiences, they always include physical sensations and intense emotional reactions that they describe as “shocking,” “unthinkable,” “overwhelming,” “exciting,” and “surprising.”

To understand what factors contributed to the consolidation and integration of these peculiar cognitive-emotional experiences into the personality structure of practitioners, with outcomes that they describe, interpret, and evaluate as substantially positive, reference will be made in this part to the theories of other branches of psychology, i.e., the humanistic and transpersonal ones.

The following are descriptions of some particular spiritual experiences that the informants shared during the interviews. They relate both to situations connected with the school’s activities and some that occurred outside of them. In this part, we chose to call them “ineffable” and “totalizing” to summarize the multifaceted definitions that informants shared when describing them.

Here are some examples. Paolo, once back home at the end of a rehearsal evening at the yoga school, had this experience:

During the rehearsal class we did some yoga practice in which a massage is included, more or less at the mouth of the stomach, which is a point where a specific meridian passes. There is an energy channel there. As a result of this massage, I really felt a liberation, a kind of physical purification as well, and I had a gag reflex, just that. I really had the inner physical feeling that my body was letting me know that there was something that was being purified. So it was really a very bodily experience. Somehow it affected me on a deeper level, it made me realize that there was something working on me.

Giorgia approached the ATMAN school after receiving a massage from a teacher:

I received this massage and it was a very powerful experience for me. I felt I had to go there. I don’t know why, but I just felt it... I had a feeling. And then on June 21, so about a month later, there was the international yoga festival organized by the school in Bologna, and the various schools. I had gone to this festival and there had been a show, they had done exercises, or experiences. During one of them, called the tunnel of angels, where you go through and all the people are stroking your face and your hair, Paolo put his hand on my head and I felt a sensation that I have never felt in my life.

Agata, describing the different types of yoga she practices at the school, dwells on hatha yoga to emphasize the effect it had on her: “In doing these postures I felt an opening of the chakras, I felt physically that it was okay.” Giacomo recounts witnessing in classes what he calls

telepathic connection between people, that is, hand movements that, without touching, cause physical reactions in someone else’s body. Things of this kind that, frankly, I never thought were possible.

Vera reports this episode:

The practical class always begins with warm-up exercises. The first two or three are head rotations in which we focus on feeling the energies in a certain area. When it was time to feel the neck area, the activation of what we now know is the chakra force center, I just felt this magnetic manifestation, these vibrations, and I was surprised. And then I don’t know if it was at that very moment or during the class that I had this inner intuition that said: here we discover the mysteries of the universe.

Experiences similar to these, though much more intense and emotionally engaging, were described by the informants when they answered the question about their relationship with the founder, mentioned earlier. Among those who met Grieg personally was Paolo. There was only one meeting, in 2004, and, thereafter, he had an epistolary correspondence with him, or received his answers on audiotapes:

I can tell you something that particularly touched me, the fact that when there were situations where I asked for advice, it was always given to me and in a free way, so never as an imposition, but always as a suggestion of practice. So I never felt compelled to do what he suggested I do. It was just a suggestion where I really felt that he was leaving me free to choose, and for me that aspect of inner freedom is extremely important. And the thing that particularly touches me is also the fact that I have always felt loved for who I am.

Gabriella met Bivolaru and had a few meetings with him in Romania as she has been attending the school since 1990. Thereafter, for many years she continued to feel his presence, which she described as “an inner spiritual presence”:

The master is present at all times in your consciousness, if you think of him, you feel him being near you and helping you, supporting you, but it is only if you want him. Otherwise he never comes and pulls your ears. When I think of him or ask him for inspiration, for support, I feel him. And I would add that it is an infinite grace to have a master alive with us, because he is an authentic master. He remains a human being with an extraordinary, spiritual realization, a continuous channel of inspiration, of energy that supports you, that protects you even. But that always comes from God, it doesn’t come from him as a person.

Gabriella also recalled in great detail a car accident in 2007, in which she was severely burned. She recalled that while she was in a medically induced coma, her consciousness awakened and she asked Grieg for help:

To him I said, I implore you, I beg you, help me now or never. And in fact I felt him right away and he guided me in some actions while I was in coma: dreams, strange trips I felt that he worked on my whole body also energetically, on the chakras, that he helped me to heal. For example, he took me to Tibet, I was feeling the ice coldness of Tibet. That was my interpretation at that time. In that level of consciousness, he fed me with yak milk to revitalize. But all these we have to look at as symbols. So, he was working on me to help me at that time. Finally, I received a letter in which he said, congratulations, you have passed your test and I am giving you a house. And he was giving me a house in the Tibetan meadows, which had been a Tibetan monastery, which was mine. I knew that it was a symbol because the house is a symbol of the soul. The soul is him. So, he was helping me at that time to awaken my soul. These are states that I cannot forget, and I really experienced them. Despite the tranquilizers and everything they were giving me for eighteen days, because basically the first five days they didn't even know if I would survive, they didn't know the reaction of the internal organs. I am convinced, though, that his help was there. But the condition was that I, on the plane of consciousness, realized that I needed his help—it was me.

Giulio knew the MISA school well because he stayed five years in Romania. He recounted his experience during a spiral meditation in which he felt “connected” to Grieg: “In that situation there was really a passage in the heart, and I realized that if I connected to him I felt peace.” After returning to Italy, he continued his correspondence with Grieg from a distance, whenever he needed to ask questions, to which he always received precise answers.

Being a yoga teacher, before starting the class, Giulio seeks Grieg’s “presence”:

I really feel that the class has a special quality in which I am much more inspired and understand sometimes things that, when I try to prepare them, maybe are not so clear.

At particular times when he felt unable to answer students’ questions, he would suddenly get the answer. Giulio attributes this phenomenon to his initiation:

Yoga and spiritual paths need this initiation that allows us to be channels. So, not only those who have reached the status of master can teach, but also those who have the initiation, because in that way there we are on the path.

Eleonora began attending the school in 2001. After a year and a half she traveled to Romania to attend Grieg’s lectures and gatherings. At that time she was not sure she would continue that experience, but the trip and meeting Grieg solidified her choice:

The Romania of twenty years ago was not the Romania of now. I met Grieg there, to attend one of his lectures and participate in the gathering. The first time I saw him, I decided

to stay. It was a kind of, I can't explain it... electrocution. Maybe that's a big word, however, I felt that he was that person I was looking for. I can't tell you why. You know, when your heart tells you: it's him. I felt that he gave off a special energy, a lot of love. I can't explain... a very strong impact and I would tell you that probably if I had not met him, I don't know if I would have continued the weekly course. I tended to be a very skeptical person and I will tell you that when they talked about Grieg it also bothered me a little bit... at that time they called him master, it almost bothered me, I rebelled against it.

Three other practitioners, despite never having met him, claim to be “connecting” with him in different ways. Giorgia is in communication with Grieg through correspondence. She claims that Grieg “guides” her:

He gives me guidance, I really feel a love from him as well. I feel that when I connect with him somehow consciousnesses comes and healings also come to me, not physical but spiritual. I also felt it when we go to gatherings, where we stay a week, eight days. What we feel is that there is an exceptionally strong field. Maybe you can't do a posture normally, you go there and you can do it not because there is magic, but you feel that there is a kind of resonance. You feel that even the insights, the things you have are much stronger. Already when I write him a letter I feel his support. There were situations where I felt his presence. I really felt this love a lot.

Vera is also corresponding with Grieg and had, like other practitioners, some peculiar experiences, including what she calls “paranormal manifestations.”

I also had paranormal manifestations from him. I dreamed about him and they were extremely revealing dreams that helped me. Not only me, but also my mother. I mean, for example, one time a very miraculous thing happened. I had written him a letter that I didn't send. I just wrote it, in which I asked him to help my mother, who was in need at that time. She had left the school at that time and so I had asked him by letter to give support. I had not sent that letter later or the next day or a few days later. My mother told me that she had dreamed about him and that he conveyed this state of unconditional love to her, to my mom. She told me: a love that I had never felt before and that I could never, I would never be able to experience on my own. And so these kinds of manifestations I had them, several times I had dreams... I mean, these impulses came through dreams, which did not remain just dream experiences, but just changed the perspective on certain things, in my life, and helped me to solve difficult situations I was in. For example, once I was about to officially start a relationship with a man. He [Bivolaru] in the dream asked me, “And how is it going with that guy?” And I realized in the dream that in fact I was not happy, that I should not start this relationship. When I communicate with him it is an intuition, or a revelation that comes to me as a result of a contact with his sphere of consciousness.

In the face of this type of phenomena, psychologists have long since abandoned reductive explanations. They once included them among phenomena caused solely by the fervid imagination of informants or resulting from pathologies and mental disorders of various kinds. Observational methodologies more respectful of individual experiences were developed in the discipline. Instead of necessarily

considering them as “symptoms” of some disease, a new scientific study described these phenomena without prejudice. Psychologists placed themselves within a neutral and “benevolent” perspective of reference, opposed to theories that, like the Freudian one, distrust

the spiritual-religious potentialities of humans to be able to authentically realize religious relationships, which are not necessarily infantile or pathological deformations of their personalities (Stickler 2002, 5).

Gertrud Stickler (1929–2015) was a scholar to whom the psychology of religion in Italy owes much. She was a very prominent protagonist in the birth and development of the discipline (Aletti 2000). In her article “La psicologia di fronte alla scelta religiosa del soggetto: competenza e limite di competenza” (Psychology in the Face of the Subject’s Religious Belief: Competence and the Limit of Competence: Stickler 2002), she makes an interesting examination of this development. Stickler discusses the contribution of two luminaries, Carl Gustav Jung and Abraham Maslow, who consider religion as a natural and intrinsic dimension of the human person. Regarding Jung’s contribution, Stickler states:

For Jung, religion consists not in a relationship of humans to a transcendent being, but in a perfect psychic realization, the fulfillment of the process of individuation and attainment of *Selbst*. God is not to be regarded as an otherness, but a “psychological state or value,” the “personification of an unconscious content.” Referring to Rudolf Otto [1869–1937], he applies the concept of the *numinous* to the innate and constitutive symbolic forms of the *collective* unconscious, the *archetypes* (Stickler 2002, 6).

From this perspective, as summarized by Stickler, Jung concludes that:

The various religions can be seen as culturally differentiated ways of expressing archetypes and becoming aware of their numinous power. The psychic archetype can be interpreted itself according to time, place, and environment. We thus understand that Atman, Buddha, and Christ are different representatives of one reality, the *symbol of the Self* or the *archetype of totality* that unifies *the conscious and the unconscious human being*. It follows that the contents of religion explain psychic dynamisms and conflicts. they are therefore *truths* because and insofar as they confirm *psychological truths* (Stickler 2002, 7).

Maslow, who founded the *third* branch of psychology, *Humanistic Psychology* or the *Third Force* (Maslow 1971), also stands in opposition to positivist and reductionist psychology, which excludes the study of spiritual values. As summarized, again, by Stickler, Maslow

proposes an *expanded science*, taking the position of a *holistic, integrative, inclusive* thinking, capable of recovering *transcendent experiences*. Maslow intends to recapture subjective-mystical religious experiences, which are a natural occurrence. The sacred, in fact, lies in everyday life, because and insofar as it is the result of the “actualization of the

Self” in “fully functioning” persons. Indeed, he finds that people full of health, physical strength and well-being are also serene, optimistic and good, capable of living at the *level of being*, corresponding to all that has always been called the eternal truths, the “Being Values,” spiritual and religious. Maslow therefore believes that spiritual values, as proper to human nature, have a *naturalistic significance* and cannot be the exclusive domain of organized churches. They are a responsibility of all humanity. In fact, according to him, the mystical enlightenment of prophets, and the revelation or ecstasy of seers, peculiar to religions, can also be found in the so-called “peak-experiences,” psychic experiences *at the apex or dilation of being*, which can be observed even in *nonreligious* people and in some who have rejected traditional religion (Stickler 2002, 8).

The differing but converging perspectives of Jung and Maslow, summarized in this way by Stickler, provide a useful framework for understanding and giving the correct psychological interpretation to the “ineffable and totalizing” experiences reported by the ten practitioners. There, the relationship and communication (physical and/or spiritual) with Grieg, the person whom all informants recognize as their master and spiritual guide, is crucial. The detection of this type of phenomena in a large number of very different spiritual experiences has prompted psychologists of religion (and of other branches of the discipline) to formulate interpretative hypotheses verified through studies, observations, and research, using the scientific method, quantitative and qualitative, as is the case in all other areas of research.

In particular, the function of the body in religious or spiritual experiences was explored in depth. McGuire (1990, 285) spoke of the “mindful body,” the “body endowed with memory” and urged psychologists, and particularly those dealing with religious experiences, not to downplay the importance of the body by considering it only as an object of study of physiological processes. The involvement of the body in religious experience does not diminish its value; on the contrary, it helps the psychologist to interpret and contextualize it without prejudice.

It is in this context that the study of altered states of consciousness emerged in the 1960s. A number of researchers carried out numerous empirical studies on experiences that, previously, had been considered pathological or abnormal. They included hypnosis, dreaming, meditation, drug-induced experiences, along with a number of other “borderline” topics, such as parapsychology and near-death experiences. Based on the data collected in research and observations, the attitude of psychologists toward this type of spiritual-religious experiences

has changed. They have chosen to approach their study with a scientific objective, that is, to research their meaning and value, without excluding their reality.

A significant example of this orientation is Viktor Frankl (1905–1997), who attached great importance to dream interpretation in psychotherapy.

Viktor Frankl pointed out that each level of the person (dimensional ontology)—biological, psychological, and spiritual—is characterized by the three psychic systems identified by Sigmund Freud’s first approach: conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. In this sense, the founder of Existential Analysis affirms, alongside a psychological traumatic unconscious, the existence of an unconscious of a spiritual nature, in which it would always be possible for the person to access spiritual and/or religious meanings, for example, by working on the content of dreams (Bellantoni 2017).

However, it has been modern *transpersonal psychology*—an area that has not yet been clearly defined and has not yet won general support—that has developed some interpretative criteria for the phenomena we are studying here (Hood et al. 2001, 242). Among the many authors who have made significant contributions in this area is Charles T. Tart (1969, 1975). He hypothesized a link between transpersonal psychology and altered states of consciousness:

Basically, an altered state of consciousness is characterized by an introspective awareness of a different way of experiencing the world. With some approximation, we can, for example, say that each of us experiences dreaming as an altered state of consciousness in relation to the normal waking state (Hood et al. 2001, 242).

In this context, it seems easier in psychological evaluation to understand the benefits received by the informants of this investigation during meditation, a practice that, psychologically, has common elements with prayer, which is

an attempt to leave the normal state of consciousness that distinguishes the waking state, as well as a strong interest in practices that allow one to turn one’s attention to another reality, often considered transcendent... Prayer and meditation are significant ways of engaging with a “deeper” and “higher” reality, or perhaps simply a way of fully embracing reality as it really is (Hood et al. 2001, 235).

Moreover, what emerges from the results of numerous research findings on both yoga practitioners—for the pursuit of samadhi or zazen—and those engaged in Christian contemplative prayer, is that, in these states, authentic religious experiences, in a broad sense of the term, occur only when individuals are able to ascribe meaning to them within an interpretive—religious or spiritual—frame of reference (Hood et al. 2001, 240). In the case of the students of the ATMAN school, the frame of reference is the teachings of the founder and the ancient traditions from which he draws inspiration. In a specific context, such as that of the

ATMAN school, phenomena that might seem “strange” or a figment of the imagination to those who observe them outside the context in which they occur, are considered “extraordinary,” but entirely “real” and “true,” by those who experience them in a particular state of consciousness.

Since not all individuals have the same attitudes or inclinations, the incidence and frequency of altered states of consciousness depends on individual characteristics. In general, those who are more open to certain experiences may go through a higher number of altered states of consciousness. The informants of this survey seem to fall into this typology. The knowledge and experiences they find in the ATMAN school reinforce their inclinations by providing them with a broad and consistent body of knowledge and a methodology that “works.” They thus have the opportunity to attach deep meanings to everything they experience in the school on a physical, intellectual, and emotional level. The positive effects of meditation also play a role in confirming the validity of the knowledge and methodology developed by the founder.

The experiences mentioned above can also be interpreted in light of studies on the significance of rituals in religious or spiritual communities. According to Rambo (1993), rituals help confirm the choice that individuals and the group have made in deciding to follow a particular spiritual path (Sarbin and Adler 1970; Ziller 1971). The word “ritual” also includes, according to Rambo, other behaviors that have the function of marking and publicizing the individual’s transformation. Changes in diet, manner of dress, management of leisure time, use of money, and, in general, daily habits are, for the group, evidence that the newcomer has abandoned the previous life and is beginning another one, permeated and directed by the new values and beliefs (see also Gerlach and Hine 1970; Hine 1970).

Moreover, rituals enable the worshipper to acquire a type of knowledge other than the cognitive-rational one, which Rambo calls embodied or holistic knowledge (Rambo 1993, 114). Theodore W. Jennings (1942–2020) also attached great importance to the ritual component of religion and argued that ritual action is a way through which participants discover who they are and how to be in the world (Jennings 1982, 113). Rituals, moreover, help convey the fundamental features of the new way of life and act as reinforcers. Standing or kneeling, or relating to the priest, rabbi, or guru, help the convert understand the liturgy, exercise obedience, and properly perform the celebration. The spiritual or

religious meaning of the gesture, word, or silence, once understood and shared, affects our attitude toward life, others, and the transcendent.

The ritual also serves to consolidate community and unity. The singing, recitation, and gestures performed in unison instill in the devotees a sense of belonging and, at the same time, are a distinguishing mark from those who are not part of it. According to Rambo, ritual experience also serves to confirm the validity of professed beliefs. For example, meditation can provide those who practice it with direct experience of spiritual phenomena, interpreted by the group as confirmation of a shared professed doctrine. Taking up the research of Hine (1970), Rambo distinguishes rituals into two types: reconstructive and deconstructive (Rambo 1993, 115).

The experiences addressed in this survey fall into the first type, “constructive rituals,” which contribute to the growth and well-being of the person. One example, often cited by some of those interviewed, is the spontaneous prayer that occurs at times and places that the individual considers sacred, among which some have included Catholic churches. Rambo considers spontaneous prayer to be one of the most important rituals, since it succeeds in creating a sense of intimacy between the devotees and the deity, generating in the believers a deep sense of security and trust in themselves, in the community to which they belong, and above all in God.

In movements that develop within the currents interested in Eastern religion and alternative healing techniques, yoga practices, vegetarianism, and certain forms of meditation and fasting, as well as the regulation of sleep-wake phases, are of paramount importance in marking the demarcation between the affiliated and the unaffiliated, but also in verifying the stability and truth of the path taken. These visible effects, which, as noted above, are characterized by the involvement of the bodily dimension in religious or spiritual choices, have in recent times attracted more interest from scholars. They recognize the importance of the human body as the place and physical space in which conversion takes place and develops. For this reason, a number of contemporary scholars consider the ritual and, in general, the way of manifesting one’s faith to the outside world to be more important than the cognitive elements related to religious belief (see, e.g., Rambo and Farhadian 2014; McGuire 1990; Coakley 1997).

Confronted with the “ineffable and totalizing spiritual experiences” reported by the informants of this investigation, the psychologist of religion “seeks the truth of the person speaking, not that of the object of the profession of faith” (Aletti

1994, 19). The scholar may only observe the subjective dimension of the spiritual experience, since the interpretation and definition of phenomena, even that of paranormal phenomena, depends on our frame of reference:

For example, the so-called paranormal, by definition, would be a quasi-normal, a non-normal. But the normal exists as a mental construct [...] and could it not be said, then, that, in truth, the para-normal is a not-yet-normal? [...] The paranormal is not something that goes against the laws of nature. It is something that has not yet been scientifically observed, but insofar as it exists it is certainly natural (Aletti 1994, 20).

Moreover, although the experiences shared in this survey are wholly original, characterized by beliefs and teachings related to particular traditions, “paranormal phenomena,” “revelatory dreams,” “remote” communications, perception of “energies,” “telepathic connections,” or “inner presences” are events experienced by many who are part of a great variety of spiritual and religious traditions. Sometimes, they are defined in different words than those used by our ten practitioners, but their importance and the belief in their “reality,” for those who experience them, are the same.

6. Conclusion

At the end of this paper, it is possible to draw some psychological conclusions and evaluations, starting from the analysis of our data in the light of Rambo and Bauman’s (2012) holistic model. There, the perspectives of humanistic and transpersonal psychology converge. This is necessary to complete the interpretation of the “ineffable and totalizing” experiences shared by the ten practitioners during the interviews.

A first assessment concerns the validity of the model that I have also chosen in previous exploratory investigations (Di Marzio 2023a). The hypothesis enunciated, in line with the results of a vast contemporary literature on the phenomenon and corroborated by the data collected, had already highlighted how joining new religious movements and highly diverse spiritual groups eschews simplistic explanations such as “brainwashing” or “mental manipulation,” which see the individual as “passive” in the face of others’ charismatic power (Di Marzio 2014). Moreover, since the informants surveyed turned out to be affiliated with very different religious and spiritual movements, an additional interesting aspect that emerged from the comparative data analysis is that, to some

extent, similar processes of affiliation/disaffiliation can be identified, despite the great diversity of contexts, beliefs, and practices (Di Marzio 2023a).

This survey aims to understand and evaluate the psychological dynamics and processes that led the practitioners interviewed to choose to join and practice in the ATMAN school, which they consider to be a true spiritual path. Comparing the data that emerged from the previous surveys, which had covered people affiliated with five different religious or spiritual movements, and those related to the informants of this survey, it is possible to conclude that the factors and dynamisms involved in the process of adherence are very similar to each other.

The objectives of the interview, on the basis of which the questions were developed, were achieved and allowed us to verify the validity of the chosen model and the factors that are included in the seven stages. The validity of the model, which emerges across the board, is closely linked to its fundamental characteristic, that of being configured as an interdisciplinary paradigm, in which the individual stages should not be understood as temporal and unidirectional sequences. Rather, they interact with each other in a process that should be understood in a “circular” and interactional frame of reference (Rambo 1993; Rambo and Bauman 2012, 882–90). Indeed, the way all interviewees describe and trace their affiliation history confirms the effectiveness of an “integral” approach to the phenomenon, which has three perspectives: descriptive, inductive, and historical.

The *descriptive* perspective stands as an alternative to the normative approach that defines conversion according to the beliefs of a particular religious group. The authors I rely on prefer this perspective because it is the only one that allows them to observe the nature of the process regardless of a particular theological orientation. By using the descriptive approach, we can treat conversion as a dynamic and many-sided process of transformation. For some, this change is sudden and radical. For others, it appears as a gradual transformation whose effects emerge only over time (Rambo 1993, 6). The descriptive approach requires, on the part of the researcher, an attitude that is fair, impartial, and respectful of the ideas of the believers, regardless of what religion or spiritual path they choose to pursue. As the psychologists are engaged in interpreting the data collected, their assessment will be all the more valid the more it will be based on accurate, fair, and impartial descriptions of the religious groups they are dealing with.

The *inductive* perspective, according to Rambo, is the most suitable for understanding the phenomenon of conversion as it manifests itself in the contemporary world. It allows psychologists to look at the process of

transformation occurring in the spiritual dimension as a significant opportunity to make sense of existence within a faith community, valuing the diversity and complexity that are specific to the object of study (Berger 1979, 58).

It must, however, be complemented by also taking into consideration the *historical* component that takes into account how transformation occurs over time. The study of this component is very important. It makes it possible to overcome the synchronicity of the psychological approach when it focuses exclusively on a particular experiential moment without referring to what happened previously. The diachronic component, present in the historical approach, takes on the other hand into account the difference in conversion processes that occur at different times and places, even when this happens within the same religious tradition. In fact, also in the examination of the ten interviews, as well as for the other twenty-three I conducted earlier, it emerged that all informants carefully trace their personal history. They logically place the choice to affiliate within the temporal succession of personal, familial, and social events that they consider decisive for their existence. The description of the affiliation process involves, for all interviewees, a backward journey, in which each fact has its own reason for being and its peculiar role in a complex decision-making process that has deep roots and relevant consequences for the individual (Di Marzio 2023a).

The usefulness of the model can, moreover, be related to two underlying ideas that characterize it and that are, to some extent, confirmed by examining the interviews of all informants: *change* and *free choice*. Regarding the former, change is a concept that Rambo systematically emphasizes. Affiliation, permanence, and eventual disaffiliation from a religious or spiritual group are peculiar aspects and stages of a process that governs human and social development itself, and enables individuals and societies to survive at critical moments: change (Rambo 1993, 2–3). As with all other areas, transformation can have many causes and determinants, be accompanied by emotional and cognitive conflicts and discomforts of varying degrees, and resolve itself positively or negatively, promoting or hindering personal and social fulfillment.

Taking the narratives of the ten informants in this research as an example, it is evident that the idea of personal *change* and *transformation* emerges repeatedly. The spiritual journey undertaken in the ATMAN school is perceived as a personal transformation that occurred gradually, over the years, in continuous interaction with a community that was able to offer them a new, different, and

original experience. It did not conflict with their pre-existing social, cultural, and religious background, but enhanced and further developed it. From the interviews, therefore, an effective interrelationship emerged between each informant and the school, which in turn was in constant transformation to adapt to and be accepted by the social context in which it operated.

Additionally, all informants understand their conversion dynamically. They emphasize their conviction that they are constantly on a journey and experience continual progress and research. They are aware that knowledge has no end, as “spiritual knowledge” that places no limits on the divine. The experience the informants go through is a transformative and interactive dynamism. It emerges crosswise in people having religious and spiritual experiences in very different groups and movements.

The second basic idea refers to the *degree of freedom* exercised by informants in their choice. The most recent orientations in psychology and the social sciences view the choice to embark on a religious or spiritual journey as a process along a continuum, ranging from complete passivity to intentional, conscious, and autonomous activity. The experiences of the ten informants in this survey certainly go in the “active” and conscious direction. They chose the ATMAN school because they were convinced that their choice would have positive effects on their lives, after having had other unsatisfactory religious or spiritual experiences. Most report having abandoned the religious practice in which they had been educated because it did not give them the answers to fundamental questions, or because it did not produce practical effects on their lives.

The teachings of the founder and the activities of the ATMAN school have, on the other hand, satisfied their needs, without requiring them to abandon the values in which they were educated, or to reject other forms of spirituality to which they were attracted (Rambo 1993, 58). It is, therefore, a choice that, from a psychological point of view, can be considered essentially free and conscious. For the ten ATMAN yoga center practitioners interviewed, the decision to embark on this particular spiritual path was a complex and free act, to the extent that any human choice can be.

From a psychological point of view, it is important to identify both liberating and limiting elements in religious-spiritual growth and free choice, psychological development or regression to a state of subservience. If I would be asked to evaluate these experiences, I would say that I did not detect in them the nefarious consequences of accessions to religious or spiritual groups obtained through real

or alleged coercive techniques, where the influence of the leader or the group exerts a pressure that sometimes succeeds in limiting the individual's freedom of self-determination (Di Marzio 2023b). In the case of the informants interviewed in this survey, no evidence emerges to suggest manipulative mechanisms put in place to "induce" them to make "non-conscious" choices. Both the nonverbal attitudes and the verbalization of lived experiences and choices hint at a deep awareness of the decisions they made, even those they evaluated in a negative sense, referring to the past or the present.

The informants manifest a great capacity for self-criticism and an appreciation for the freedom they enjoy within the movement founded by Gregorian Bivolaru, who, while considered a guide and teacher, is never accused of "interfering" or "forcing" the individual and personal choices of the practitioners. The movement to which these individuals belong does not seem to have the proverbial "cultic" characteristics such as isolation from the outside world, strict control of members, obligation to perform certain actions, total separation from those who are not members, deceptive or abusive behavior towards practitioners. On the other hand, the very structure and relative functioning of the International Federation of Yoga and Meditation ATMAN, articulated in many yoga centers, scattered all over the world, would make it very difficult to have a "central control," over individual groups, an indispensable feature in so-called "cultic" groups within which the leader or a narrow leadership can exercise total control over individual members.

Bearing in mind the limitations of this work, which is of an "exploratory" type and therefore not generalizable, it is possible, as far as my informants are concerned, to come to a psychological assessment of their choice. It appears to be entirely free and conscious, as well as open to reaching new goals and knowledge. It includes a respectful approach to other religious or spiritual choices and experiences. At the same time, it maintains a strong sense of identity, inextricably linked to what has been transmitted with his life and teachings by the founder Gregorian Bivolaru.

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