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Review

Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA) by Massimo Introvigne, Mimesis 2022

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The sociologist of religion and a leading expert in the field of new religious movements, Massimo Introvigne, has repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to engage with controversial topics. He delves into matters of religion veiled under additional taboos, whether they pertain to esotericism, Satanism, criminal accusations, or the amalgamation of spirituality and sexuality. This time, his analysis focuses on a subject encompassing new religions, esotericism, art, sacred eroticism (often referred to as sex magic), and even pornography. Moreover, the additional context, which includes various legal controversies, also highlights the discussed movement as one of the intriguing contemporary examples of entanglement and interweaving of occultism and politics in Central and Eastern Europe, serving as the central theme of this journal issue.

The subject of the work is the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (M.I.S.A.), founded in 1990 in Romania by the charismatic leader Gregorian Bivolaru (born 1952). Bivolaru is

believed to have had some spiritually-related experiences as a child, which led him to study yoga as a young man. Spending his early years in Communist Romania, he had limited access to books, but as we learn, he read texts by Paramahansa Yogananda, Swami Sivananda Saraswati, Sri Ramakrishna, and, last but not least, Mircea Eliade, with whom he even corresponded. He was teaching yoga since the age of 18 in 1970. The needed political context is that yoga was banned in the country since 1982, which caused the first arrests of Bivolaru in 1982 and 1989. After the regime changed, he was freed and founded the movement, which became a spectacular success in a few years, operating in forty ashrams and involving 750 full members and around 40,000 members of MISA in total. Soon, the movement spread to several other countries. At the same time, Romanian media attacked Bivolaru as “the sex guru,” followed by various tabloids and finally, also by police and judicial intervention. Due to constant harassment, the number of members decreased over the years, but it is still an active movement and nowadays includes approximately 20,000 people. Bivolaru was officially the leader until 1995, and now the movement is led by his students. I won’t dwell on the details of the political context here, but MISA was one of the movements raided by the police in Italy. After the raids, the media panic was raised, yet no accusations were ever brought to court, or wrongdoings demonstrated, which is unfortunately a common approach to dealing with “cults”. In Romania, MISA became a target of a large media campaign targeted as a cult and even a paramilitary organization, but it was especially targeted because of its focus on eroticism. A series of raids with machine guns in 2004, called “Operation Christ”, fell on the members. However, as Introvigne explains, attempts at prosecuting MISA in subsequent years invariably failed. The author also explains in detail the complex legal case of Bivolaru himself and recalls the words of Raffaella Di Marzio, highlighting an intricate web of relationships between the law, the anti-cult movements, and esotericism.

In the description of the MISA ideas and practices, the author proposes the category of “radical aesthetics” (“drawing on Eastern spiritualities, Western esotericism, and modernist art, the revolution of the 1960s built a radical aesthetics, where the boundaries between art, religion, everyday life, and eroticism started to collapse”). The book also explores reactionary counter-movements, which partially explains the further development of the MISA case. It demonstrates the wide range of elements drawn from various esoteric currents and religious traditions that compose MISA’s syncretic teachings, as well as relations, including criticism, towards other contemporary movements.



An interesting thread that Introvigne takes up is conspiratoriness, which alone is rather typically seen as a part of esoteric currents but discussed mainly in the context of the reaction of Bivolaru and the movement to the COVID-19 pandemic. Esotericism and healing often intersect, even if esotericism does not necessarily deal with physical health. Yet, as Hanegraaff argued in his “New Age Religion and Western Culture”, in modern esoteric groups, “therapy and religious ‘salvation’ tend to merge to an extent perhaps unprecedented in other traditions” (Hanegraaff 1996, 46). In the case of MISA, the reaction to the pandemic went two ways. On one hand, the group adapted to the applicable regulations and organized its meetings online. On the other hand, Bivolaru shared a vast criticism about the restrictions, pharmaceutical industry, and regarded quarantines as periods of ‘lethargy’, ‘fear’, and even ‘idiocy’ (p. 39). Bivolaru also argued that his herbal and esoteric methods are effective prophylaxis for COVID-19, including a variety of eleven meanings, including esoteric prophylaxis (p. 42-52). Later, MISA’s focus shifted from prophylaxis to the rejection of vaccines (p. 52-54). But the story doesn’t end there. From the study, we also learn about MISA’s quest against Illuminati, their views on Donald Trump, and last but not least, about Bivolaru’s “No to the Apocalypse!!!” Urgent Action Planetary Program, to avoid world catastrophes that were supposed to be foretold by Virgin Mary in the Fatima miraculous appearance in 1917. All of these traits, from anti-vaccine discourse, Freemasons and Illuminati, or Trump, can also be found, even if marginally, in mainstream churches. Yet, showing many contradictions in contemporary culture, Introvigne argues that a sizable minority of the Western population approaches “questions of health in a way that implies a criticism of modern science and looks to spirituality, perhaps even ‘conspiratoriness’”, for alternatives, and that “this is a mirror of deep contradictions in our culture, which are not solved by simply ridiculing the ‘conspiracy theories’” (p. 57).

Even if MISA is not solely about sacred eroticism, or it is not even the core of it, this is for sure the element which has attracted the most attention since the beginning of the movement. The book shows us, though, that the topic should not be simplified, and to understand MISA’s work, we need to understand their general view of Godly Attributes. In their view, “The essential aspect, revealed for the first time on this planet, is that in reality, each Godly Attribute is and remains forever a subtle energy, which presents a certain frequency of vibration that never changes!” (p. 59). Not only can humans recognize the Godly Attributes, but they can also capture and accumulate their energy through an “occult resonance process”. Bivolaru and MISA’s members are convinced that they were given many signs that their way is right. They believe they can connect to several Godly Attributes at



one time. While getting in touch with the Attributes is possible alone, the work in a group helps and makes it stronger, and the effects resonate well for the whole world.

Pure Eros is one of the Godly Attributes. Bivolaru discusses Eros following Plato and Plotinus, but also draws from the meaning of the god Kama in Hinduism. How does the Eros attribute work? Following MISA's teachings, Introvigne explains:

Abundantly capturing into the human inner universe the sublime subtle energy of Pure Eros, a Godly Attribute embodied in the Greek god Eros and the Hindu god Kama, triggers several effects. Hindu texts speak of 'godly luminosity', an 'extraordinary state of lucidity', and 'an amazing intensification of spiritual discernment'. [...] MISA students report that their 'hair becomes shinier, the skin more glowing', the bones 'regenerate and get stronger', 'the body has an immense energy', and 'the aging process is slowed down'. They also experience an 'euphoric expansion from finite to 'infinite', and 'mysterious phenomena' (Introvigne 62).

One of the most interesting features of the MISA's system is the dissociation of lovemaking from sex, so Pure Eros, that is erotic energy, from sexual energy. They are not synonymous, and sexual energy is regarded as inferior due to its different vibration. It is a paradox, as Introvigne underlines, that MISA "is often described by outsiders as a 'sex magic movement,' when, in fact, it teaches that 'intimate relationships of any kind that have a sexual orientation are completely forbidden'" (Bivolaru 2018–21, VIII, Introvigne 65). The difference comes with a different understanding and very specific practical differences, which are described in detail in further paragraphs.

The explored subject matter is particularly important because nominally 'tantric' movements are gaining increasing popularity in the West and attracting new waves of followers. However, despite the sustained interest in these ideas, the same level of academic attention has not been dedicated to them and related topics. A striking example is the role of pornography, which is either treated marginally or omitted entirely in academic studies, and which, in the context of MISA's eroticism and radical aesthetics, becomes an indispensable element of analysis. It is worth noting that the book is supplemented with a glossary of terms related to the terminology used within the framework of the sacred eroticism of the MISA system.

On a personal note, I have been following the development of the MISA case by listening to the author year after year at religious studies congresses, and I am delighted that he has summarized the topic in the form of a



monograph. He has captured the entire process observed over the years exceptionally well. Last but not least, this is a very good piece of scholarly work, which, due to its language and construction, is incredibly engaging and a pleasure to read.

Introvigne's superpower lies in his ability to condense complex phenomena into concise, clear, and engaging introductions. This skill creates the impression that he is discussing topics that are well-known, at least among his fellow academics, although that is not always the case. These introductory sections, such as the one about the history of sacred eroticism in Western circles, serve as invaluable and robust starting points for any work concerning the interplay of spirituality and sexuality. The whole MISA case is grasped multidimensionally and includes optics from many different perspectives, and yet, as a sociological work, it refrains from normative approaches so typical in the literature about NRMs (most often incorrectly referred to as cults or sects). The book is a must-read for anyone interested in New Religious Movements, religiosity and sexuality, Western esotericism, religion in Central and Eastern Europe, and, more broadly, for all those intrigued by contemporary religious phenomena.

