

EDITORIAL

Most of the current issue of *NRDO* (an article and eight texts gathered in the DOCUMENTARY "Repressing Sacred Eroticism") is inspired by the panel "Storming Zion` Revisited: Militarized Raids and the Resurgence of Brainwashing Theory-Emic and Ethical Perspectives" that took place on the afternoon of June 12, 2024, during the annual CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions) conference. The series of interventions, testimonies and analyses selected by the journal look at religious movements that promoted sacred eroticism. This term would also apply to the Movement for Spiritual Integration in the Absolute (MISA), according to the Italian researcher Massimo Introvigne in his volume published in 2022, the result of a lengthy investigation into the Movement¹. Introvigne studies the subject from the perspective of a sociologist and theorist of religions.

He and all the speakers on the "Storming Zion Revisited" panel treated the theme and the religious lexicon with an emphasis on human rights issues, as the researchers had documented a disturbing phenomenon, repeated in eerily similar ways in Chile, the Czech Republic, Italy, France and Romania: large-scale repressive actions involving police and gendarmerie forces, preceded by mobilizations of surveillance services, against members of groups practicing sacred eroticism, who were ultimately brought before judicial bodies that had become guilt-manufacturers. The intervention of the security forces in these cases amounted to inhuman and degrading treatment. In all cases, the traditional principles of the presumption of innocence, the obligation to assist the accused and to grant them the right to defense were denied to a degree incompatible with the rule of law. These illegitimate repressive actions have destroyed the lives of many members of small religious groups.

The paradox of the phenomenon is that those subjected to repression were non-violent and committed to spirituality. Beyond any discussion of the nature or consistency of the beliefs of these devotees, their defining attributes contrasted with the cruel, primitive, parochial, and short-sighted behavior of the forces of law and order. The claim that the brutal police actions were legitimate as attempts to rescue 'victims of abuse' is shocking, as in all cases the law enforcers were the ones who were causing tragedies. It is shocking that widespread and even encouraged practices such as voluntary work or erotic education were treated as human trafficking and rape. It is also incredible that those responsible for the public campaigns blaming small community leaders for indoctrinating their followers were politicians; who had built their careers and attained power by manipulating the feelings and the reasoning of millions of citizen voters.

There is nothing mysterious in the way the authorities in Chile, the Czech Republic, Italy, France, and Romania (countries with different histories of societal development, yet all democracies) had planned to harass communities they have labeled as cults. Based on the case of MISA, Massimo Introvigne proposed a general explanation:

¹ According to the glossary of terms of MISA: "Sacred Eros names an occult process of resonance (the flow of energy from a source to a receiver) through which the energy of Pure Eros (a sublime and subtle energy that comes from God) and the energy of Love, another Godly Attribute, are attracted and accumulated within a human being" (Massimo Introvigne, *Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration Into the Absolute (MISA)*, Milan and Udine: Mimesis International, 2022, p. 123). The MISA school of yoga promotes the notion of "sacred eros" (instead of "eroticism") to which it associates three Attributes: Pure Eros, Love, and Holiness.

International anti-cult movements were thrilled to add MISA to their lists of "dangerous cults". One of their main arguments against "cults" has always been that they are sexually deviant. MISA's celebration of the body, eroticism, and nudity were rhetorically separated from their Tantric roots and context and used as a supposed typical example of "sectarian sexual abuse" [...] A global alliance against MISA was thus consolidated, including religious people, mostly from the Romanian Orthodox Church, Romanian intelligence officers, journalists and politicians, as well as international anti-cult militants able to mobilize their police and media connections. For religious anti-cultists, the presentation of eroticism as part of religion was an intolerable scandal. Secularist anti-cultists, unlike religious ones, are often politically liberal and critical of traditional religious morality, but this has not made them more tolerant of MISA. For them, the collapse of the boundaries between religion, culture, everyday life, and eroticism was a sin not against the Christian concept of religion and morality, but against secularism.

We emphasize three observations of the Italian professor. First, the existence of an international network of anti-cult actors. Their solidarity across frontiers, presented as an expression of concern for possible victims, shows the attraction of hunting the weakly defended without constraints. The civic and state anti-cult network has managed to defeat the principles of prudence and reasonability that are at the basis of a functioning democracy².

The "alliance against MISA" referred to by Massimo Introvigne highlights the multitude of local factors involved in the pursuit and repression of religious movements that practice sacred eroticism. It is hard for someone who has not studied the deep and long history of yoga repression in Romania to perceive how much it matters that the Securitate officers who arrested and tortured Gregorian Bivolaru (the initiator of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute) in the 1980s became intelligence officers in the 1990s and participated in the surveillance of MISA; or the fact that the prosecutor who decided on Bivolaru's internment in a psychiatric hospital in 1989³ rose to become, after the regime change, the Prosecutor General of Romania, and then rose to the position of power of a judge of the Constitutional Court; or the fact that the generals who participated in the harassment of MISA members had histories that made them dependent on Prime Minister Adrian Nastase, the leader of the Romanian state during the culmination of attacks on the Movement in 2004. Therefore, the repression of MISA is a "specifically Romanian" phenomenon. Similarly, the police actions in France in 2023 are specifically linked to the history of the anti-cult movement there. The BAYS repression seems connected either to a certain "way of being" of Argentinean society (see the traditional role of the Catholic Church) or to a way of being of states that follow "the Franco-Spanish model of accusing cults of "brainwashing"⁴.

Massimo Introvigne adds a third thesis, the most attractive since it explains the repression of sacred eroticism in a manner that synthesizes and unifies the various cases: even

² An example of the breakdown of the standards of law in this network is the collaboration of the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects [2] (FECRIS) with its Russian branch, one of the largest and most active. The Russian branch's dangerous connections with Putin's regime and support for the bloody repression of minority religions in Russia and China did not affect collaboration with FECRIS until 2023. It was only then that *tous azimuts* protests forced the Federation to sever ties with the affiliate (<https://hrwf.eu/russia-russia-and-fecris-when-a-picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words/>). We give the example of FECRIS-Russia as it is the most visible example of criminal cooperations that rely on behind-closed-doors kind of machinations.

³ It is a typical case of political use of psychiatry.

⁴ Massimo Introvigne, "The Great Cult Scare in Argentina and the Buenos Aires Yoga School," *CESNUR Journal* 7/3 2023, p. 7 (https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/tjoc_7_3_1_introvigne.pdf).

democratic societies prohibit the mixing of religious and sexual freedom. Did this lead to the development of an international anti-cult network? Did "forbidden mixing" produce the very specific forms of national police attacks?

Beyond the "yes" or "no" answer, the fact remains that sacred eroticism faces a type of dual state violence, physical and moral⁵ that insults our idea of what is right, of justice, and the dignity of human beings. While the repression is essentially national, the issue has become international. The *New Journal of Human Rights* has given this topic its rightful attention in the past and it is giving it now, and will follow the issue in the future.

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⁵ Physical violence is accompanied by the public discrediting of its victims and their social marginalization.