

Editorial

In September 2024, a group of scholars in religious studies and new religious movements and human rights defenders sent an appeal to the Georgian authorities demanding to free on bail two yogis detained after France had requested their extradition. The motivation was “complicity to rape” performed by “mental manipulation” and “abuse of weakness” of women they allegedly persuaded to embrace the beliefs of the Romanian yoga group MISA. The authors of the appeal brought as main arguments

- that “mental manipulation” and “abuse of weakness” are imaginary crimes and are therefore not part of international law
- that they are defined as crimes in France but not in most other democratic countries

The French authorities had issued the international arrest warrant that led to the arrest of the two yogis in Georgia, as part of the police action launched in France on November 28, 2023 against MISA members. The forceful intervention had followed a pattern well known to the signatories of the Appeal: assaults on homes by units of armed gendarmes who were violent towards those who lived in them, the gratuitous destruction of property, the arrest of women and men well integrated into society, peaceful not only by temperament, but because their discipline was one of non-violence; pressure during arrest to confess acts with which they had no connection, a fact confirmed by the release of most of them after a few days, as victims. Brutal actions with the same pattern took place in 2004 in Romania (targeting MISA); in October 2010 in the Czech Republic (targeting Path of Guru Jára); in Italy in 2012, against members of a branch of the Atman Federation (where the investigation ended due to lack of evidence on March 28, 2023); on August 12, 2022, in Buenos Aires (targeting BAYS). The authorities have brought serious charges in each of these situations, including charges of human trafficking, against which there is rightly an extensive international cooperation. Since “the victims did not admit that they were victims” (in some cases a few interested persons made accusations without evidence), the law enforcement institutions, in connivance with public opinion, resorted to an argument that defies the legal tradition: the people involved, adults capable of discernment, were manipulable, they could not oppose the leaders.

”Mental manipulation” and “abuse of weakness” are two interpretations that have no place, *in the sense promoted by French law*, in the legislations of most democratic states and even more so, in international law. For this reason, in the aforementioned cases in Romania, the Czech Republic and Italy, the courts have failed, after years of investigations, to return guilty verdicts against people treated as if they were heinous criminals. France

could be an exception¹, because the legislative arrangements (the About-Pickard Act, the 2024 amendments) provide the Police, Public Prosecutor's Offices and Courts the necessary tools to protect their abuses, and the institutional arrangements are pushing the French justice system towards an increasingly radical anti-cult practice. The appeal of the well-known scholars to the Georgian authorities reflects a concern for the specific situation in France, and the possibility that innocent people will be convicted because the "victims", adults integrated into society, in full control of their mental powers, are treated as lacking discernment.

The brutal and discriminatory treatment of groups that practice sacred eroticism (the category established by Massimo Introvigne) are behaviors reminiscent of the shameful stains on the history of European democracies: sending people to psychiatric institutions because they "adhere to ideas differing from those which are usually shared by social consensus", or sending women who had given birth to children out of wedlock to educational centers. The states responsible for these acts (Italy, Ireland) have many years ago repudiated these cruel measures. It would be appropriate for the French authorities, together with the public opinion in the country of Voltaire, to rethink the repressive policy against adults who make a free and voluntary choice of their conscience and therefore follow precepts of their own will.

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1 A similar type of legislation is found in Argentina, where accusations of "mental manipulation" and "abuse of weakness" are insistently used by the institutions called upon to apply it. On June 5, 2024, the Argentinian National Chamber of Cassation in Criminal and Correctional Matters confirmed the annulment of the decision for arraignment of the defendants in the case known as "Buenos Aires Yoga School" (BAYS), accused of psychological manipulations to control a person's or group's will.