

Massimo Introvigne

## Sacred Eroticism and Contemporary Esoteric Groups<sup>1</sup>

MfSA is not the first, nor the only, contemporary esoteric movement that proposes to its followers teachings on sacred eroticism. In this chapter, I will first discuss the history of sacred eroticism in Western esotericism, and its non-Western roots. In the second part of the chapter, I will present the Guru Jára Path, a Czech movement that offers the closest parallel with MISA, although relevant differences will also emerge.

An integral and fundamental part of esotericism is the theory of correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm: “as above, so below.” In his 1976 book *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions*, Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) insisted that a recurring esoteric correspondence, found in almost all cultures, is that between spirit, light, and the male semen (Eliade 1976).

As semen generates children in the microcosm of the woman, so, by means of appropriate techniques, many of them kept secret, the semen, being transformed into energy, triggers spiritual enlightenment and even makes it possible to achieve the state of immortality in the macrocosm.

At least from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, Chinese Taoist alchemists suggested that the sperm contains vital energy (*jing*). The most appropriate way of preserving rather than wasting it, they argued, is sexual intercourse without ejaculation (“male erotic continence,” which also benefits the female partner).

A handful of Western travelers and scholars learned about the existence of Taoist sexual alchemy in past centuries, but it was popularized in the West by some Asian and Western teachers only since the 1970s (Despeux 1990; Melton 2017).

Some believe that “Tantrism” as a system is a late construction by Western scholars, based on a variety of very different and non-stematic books known as Tantra, conceived and written in India by Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain authors, mostly between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Tantra regard almost all material realities as potential resources or means, rather than obstacle arising on the enlightenment path. Eroticism and the use of sperm are one (but certainly not the only) resource (White 2000; Urban 2003).

The Tantra developed, alongside erotic male continence, the so-called technique of the “assimilation” of the sperm by re-absorbing, ingesting (or being anointed with) it after different form of lovemaking, in order to transform it into energy (Hatley 2018, 195-211). In both cases, the energy resulting from sperm transformation had to ascend from the lower to the upper chakras, through technique we will further explore in the fifth chapter.

Several Tantric techniques initially came to the West through the books of Arthur Avalon (pseud. of Sir John George Woodroffe, 1865-1936). Avalon, as Julian Strube

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from the book: Massimo Introvigne, *Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual In-tegration Into the Absolute (MISA)*, Milan and Udine: Mimesis International, 2022.

has observed, “is credited with almost single-handedly founding the academic study of Tantra, for which he served as a main reference well into the 1970s. Up to that point, it is practically impossible to divide his influence between esoteric and academic audiences” (Strube 2021, 132; see also Strube 2022). Avalon was later accused of having “invented” a somewhat orientalist construction called “Tantrism,” and certainly influenced countless occult movements. On the other hand, he had done his homework, and his books had a great impact on the academic world as well (including on Eliade: Strube 2021, 154-55) for decades.

Drawing on gnostic, Middle Eastern, and other sources, and later discovering Taoism and Tantra, Western esotericism knew sacred eroticism techniques since the late Middle Ages, but kept them hidden due to the prevailing negative Western attitudes toward sexuality. Cagliostro (1743-1795: Introvigne 1992) and early Rosicrucians *might* have alluded to them in very cryptic terms.

John Humphrey Noyes (1811-1886) founded at Oneida, New York, in 1848, the first Western community centered on erotic male continence (which did not always work, as evidenced by the fact that children were born there) and the exchange of partners. It lasted for about 33 years (DeMaria 1978; Kern 1981; Foster 1984).

The ideas of erotic continence were by no means a purely male project. As J. Gordon Melton has noted, they entered early feminism through Alice Stockham (1833-1912) and Ida Craddock (1857-1902) (Melton 2017). Stockham developed a system called *Karezza*, teaching women how to successfully practice their version of continence, guiding their male partner (Stockham 1885, 1896). She is mentioned as a precursor of its own continence techniques by MISA (Yogaesoteric.net 2003). Craddock, who founded her own Church of Yoga, was repeatedly arrested for her sexual teachings, and in 1902 committed suicide to avoid going to jail again (Chappell 2010; Schmidt 2010).

19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Rosicrucian groups went from applying erotic continence to other technique, including the ingestion of the sperm. A leading figure in the field of Rosicrucian sacred eroticism was American mulatto Pascal Beverley Randolph (1825-1875), whose career, connections with the mysterious Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, and (at least indirect) influence on a larger esoteric milieu have been studied in depth by American scholar Pat Deveney (Deveney 1996).

Georges Le Clement de Saint-Marcq (1865-1956), an important Spiritualist and Masonic leader in Belgium, shocked the European esoteric milieu in 1906 with his pamphlet *L' Eucharistie*, where he claimed that spermatophagy was practiced by Jesus Christ and was still secretly present within the Catholic Church (Le Clément de Saint-Marcq 1906). He devoted to the defense of this thesis a substantial part of his life, although there is no evidence that Saint-Marcq ever practiced what he attributed to Jesus (Pasi 200 ).

### **Three Main 20<sup>th</sup> Century Traditions**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, three main tradition of sacred eroticism emerged within the milieu of esoteric movements. The first is the OTO (Ordo Templi Orientis, “Order of Oriental Templars”). Its founders included Carl Kellner (1851-1905), a German industrialist who had studied Tantra

(Kaczynski 2012; Ebner 2021), and Theodor Reuss (1855-1923: Moller and Howe 1986). The OTO later came under the control of British magus Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), although not without various schisms, which continued after Crowley's death.

Based on Tantrism, of which they had some real knowledge, but whose real meaning they might at times have misunderstood (Urban 2008), the early OTO pioneers developed various sacred eroticism techniques. Crowley personally created an elaborated theology, detailing the divine role of the sperm, and considered its assimilation (i.e. ingestion), after both heterosexual and homosexual lovemaking, and in some cases together with female secretions, an extremely effective magical technique. Unlike Kellner and Reuss, whose names remain comparatively obscure, Crowley, also because of his connections with literary and artistic milieus, has generated in recent times a substantial academic literature on his life and ideas (Bogdan and Starr 2012).

If Oneida was the first Western communal experiment centered on erotic continence, Crowley founded in Cefalù, Sicily in 1920 the Abbey of Thelema, the first Western community centered on sacred eroticism through sperm assimilation. The Abbey was closed by Benito Mussolini's (1883-1945) police in 1923 but the building still exists, although in a state of disrepair (Zoccatelli 1998; Pasi 2014).

The main branch of the OTO has now some 4,000 members throughout the world. Considering the numerous other branches and schisms, the whole "Thelemite" group of organizations may have today from 5,000 to 10,000 devotees (Hedenborg White 2020, 195).

Crowley was not a Satanist, and in fact criticized Satanists as "inferior Christians" who had accepted the Judeo-Christian tales about sin and the Devil. However, his technique of sacred eroticism have inspired many, if not most, contemporary Satanic groups, some with a worldview very far away from Crowley's (Introvigne 2016b).

The second important tradition of sacred eroticism that developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century includes some of the followers of Italian esoteric master Giuliano Kremmerz (pseud. of Ciro Formisano, 1861-1930). He founded a Brotherhood of Myriam, whose inner circle may have been an Egyptian Order of Osiris, although the whole history of Kremmerz's organizations is highly controversial (Introvigne 1999). Today, a dozen separate branches of the Kremmerz movement exist. Some (but by no means all) believe that Kremmerz elaborated one of the most complete contemporary systems of sacred eroticism, while others maintain that sexual techniques were a post-Kremmerzian deviation (Guzzo 2020, 282-83).

In one of these systems practiced in a post-Kremmerzian school (Introvigne 1990, 303-5), sexual rituals are performed in astrologically determined days, for several years, observing absolute chastity (abstinence) outside the special days of the "operations." The first degree focuses on ingestion, of sperm obtained through masturbation (for men) and of menstrual blood "charged" through masturbation (for women). The second degree calls for the ingestion of a mixture of sperm and female secretions obtained through lovemaking. The third degree includes the ingestion of the second-degree mixture before and after three intercourses, black (anal), white (without ejaculation), and red (during the woman's red days). The success of these "operations" largely depends on adding to the mentioned sexual mixtures a "ferment," which is considered to be the system's true

philosopher's stone. Different factions have experimented with alternative "ferments," including fresh eggs of different birds.

German esoteric teacher Arnaldo Krumm-Heller (1876-1949) was a one-time associate of Crowley, who took to Latin America European ideas about sacred eroticism (Villalba 2019). His Columbian disciple Samael Aun Weor (Victor Manuel Gómez Rodríguez, 1917-1977) founded in 1950 a Universal Gnostic Church, the third main tradition of sexual eroticism that emerged in the West before the foundation of MISA. Divided by subsequent schisms in more than twenty rival branches, Weor's Gnostic movement maintains several thousand members throughout the world (de Cmpos 2017; Tamayo Jaramillo and Hasler 2017; Introvigne 2018).

Like MISA's, Weor's system is about erotic continence only. Forms of sacred eroticism based on the assimilation of sperm are attributed to the perverse teachings of a "Black Lodge" (Zoccatelli 2000). Through intercourse, always without ejaculation, both semen and female secretions, which are thus "transmuted," pas to a "higher octave" (the language shows the influence of Armenian esotericist George Gurdjieff, 1866?-1949: Zoccatelli 2005). They gradually build a marvelous and strong "astral body," the vehicle for enlightenment and (spiritual) immortality.

—

## **Book review by *Camelia Marin*, Soteria International**

Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration Into the Absolute (MISA) by *Massimo Introvigne*. Milan and Udine: Mimesis International, 2022, ISBN: 97888869773747, 142 pages

We will briefly discuss some of the ideas presented in Professor Massimo Introvigne's book, such as:

- *Occultism, legal controversies, the merging of esotericism and eroticism,*
- *The culture, history, and practices of The Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, MISA,*
- *An intriguing cocktail – full of taboos, potential projections, rumors, and slander,*
- *The tensions deriving from the merging of eroticism and spirituality.*

### **The Author**

The author of this book is Professor Massimo Introvigne, an Italian sociologist of religions, the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR). Introvigne is the author of 70 books (the most recent of them published by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press) and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and of the executive board of University of Pennsylvania Press' *Nova Religio*. From January 5 to December

31, 2011, he has served as the “Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions” of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015, he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, created by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to monitor issues regarding religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

Introvigne has been following MISA closely for many years, conducting interviews with several teachers and practitioners from the movement, and has even participated in some of the yearly camps conducted online during the COVID period. He identifies as main issues of the Movement, relevant to the more general phenomenon of New Religious Movements, sacred eroticism, the political agendas of its attackers, the anti-MISA actions of anti-cult organizations and the media, legal controversies, objective art, COVID skepticism, „conspirituality” (a meeting of conspiracy theories and spirituality) and others. The book succeeds in offering a multidimensional presentation of MISA and its history, practices, and controversies, whose nuances are often overlooked in the general discussions around MISA in the media.

### **Background of MISA**

The Movement for Integration into the Absolute, MISA, is one among several contemporary new religious movements that are frequently generating headlines in the press. The core of the Movement formed in the 1970s around the yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru. In 1982, yoga was banned in Romania. Gregorian Bivolaru was arrested the same year, other followers also went to prison, and all members suffered retaliation. What followed was a long intricate history of legal disputes and serious allegations against Bivolaru.

In 1990, MISA was created and the new post-communist regime in Romania continued to persecute Bivolaru and the MISA yoga school. The accusations against Bivolaru and the school in Romania were never proved in court. On the contrary, some were proved to be false and to be a fabrication of the Romanian authorities. Bivolaru was declared guilty in one single case, a tragic story in which the alleged victim states to this day that she was forced to give false testimony and that the case was fabricated. All these aspects are presented in detail in Introvigne’s overview of MISA’s legal history.

From its origin in Romania, the movement spread internationally. Yoga schools based on Bivolaru’s teachings were founded in countries across several continents. The schools are independent in organization and administration, but they are members of The International Federation of Yoga and Meditation, ATMAN, which provides the courses and teacher training programs.

According to Introvigne, MISA has its sources in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Western Esotericism, and esoteric Christianity (pg. 27). The teachings follow an approach of “unity in diversity.”

## Sacred Eroticism

The concept and practice of sacred eroticism is a central aspect of MISA's esoteric teachings. It is probably the aspect attracting the most attention and misunderstandings, although it is just one out of multiple fields covered by MISA's teachings. Introvigne discusses the history of sacred eroticism as it has emerged through time in various esoteric movements. It is important to note that there are great differences in the specific teachings of these movements. However, looking at the reactions against MISA in the context of how other esoteric groups and teachers proposing sacred eroticism practices have been persecuted offers a profound perspective on the roots of social ostracism.

The book follows three main 20th century traditions of sacred eroticism that emerged in the western esoteric sphere (the Order of Oriental Templars, the Brotherhood of Myriam, and the Universal Gnostic Church) and a fourth tradition to which Introvigne dedicates an entire chapter: the Guru Jára Path in the Czech Republic. The latter is similar to MISA and Bivolaru in its teachings and the legal repercussions suffered by its leading figures.

Modern society suffers from a serious confusion regarding the terms sexuality and eroticism and their meaning. According to MISA, the two are distinct energies with different vibration frequencies (one inferior, the other superior). "Raw sexuality" is a downward-moving energy leading towards manifestation, separation, procreation, objectification, materialism, and so on. While "pure eroticism" is an ascending and uplifting energy, leading towards universality, unity, sublime inspirations. The energy of Pure Eros is in fact, according to Bivolaru's and MISA's teachings, 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 subtle inner field (p. 61).

Sacred Eroticism is a melding of three distinct Godly energies: pure eros, love and holiness. Bivolaru thinks that the distinction between Pure Eros and sexuality is not something new but is found in the ancient knowledge of India

where the Sanskrit term *kama* in fact precisely defines the erotic longing of human beings, which is something altogether different from sexual desire (p. 79).

Together with an in-depth discussion of the Godly Attributes in general and the Godly Attribute of Pure Eros in particular, the book also contains a short summary of a synthesis Bivolaru made of 37 differences between these two energies, sexual and erotic. At the end of the book, Introvigne includes a short glossary of some terms relevant to sacred eroticism, describing the meaning of the words as defined and frequently used by MISA. This is useful for the reader and for understanding the sacred eroticism practiced by MISA. For MISA, the accusations that call it a "sex cult" are, if not absurd, then at least paradoxical in light of their teachings and aims, which reject sexuality. The MISA initiate is in fact advised to "give up on the obviously inferior sexuality, just like one gives up old, shabby clothes, and to embrace only eroticism" (p. 65).



The book introduces several additional aspects related to sacred eroticism, which belie the simplistic media portrayal of this movement. Introvigne explains the esoteric techniques and practices – some of which are taboo – in a pragmatic, informed, and open manner. One of these is amorous erotic continence – a necessary key in sacred eroticism, often wrongfully understood as simply the avoidance of ejaculation or retention of semen. The practice of amorous erotic continence for both the man and the woman, and the act of consecrating beforehand all the fruits of the lovemaking to God and of only proceeding after receiving a clear affirmative answer, are necessary requirements for MISA's practitioners of sacred eroticism. More topics are discussed such as the esoteric approach to erogenous zones, orgasm, sexual demonology, the important role of nudity, the use of other bodily fluids such as urine, menstrual blood, sweat, as well as the damaging effects of pornography and masturbation.

Gregorian Bivolaru believes that his teachings herald nothing less than a true “erotic revolution,” which will be “the first and the last one” in the history of Planet Earth (p. 95). It will guarantee “great spiritual leaps,” which will lead humans to their “deification” (p. 98):

This revolution will replace sexuality with eroticism for an elite of initiates, whose numbers will grow exponentially over future centuries. It will be an event of incomparable cosmic significance. Of course, “the Satanic clique of the so-called Illuminati will be extremely disturbed” by the erotic revolution. But ultimately these dark forces will be defeated (p. 95-96).

### **Turning Poison into Elixir**

As part of bringing about this erotic revolution, some MISA students tried to contribute in ways that were often incriminated by society and highlighted the lack of understanding of their purpose. Some of the initiatives and adventures of MISA's students inspired by the teachings on sacred eroticism and the erotic revolution included erotic adult movies, performances at erotic festivals, dancers at gentlemen's clubs, and erotic video and audio chats. These initiatives were not organized by MISA and were entirely the students' private initiatives. Introvigne opens the chapter with a fascinating discussion on the academic discipline and disputes regarding “porn studies”. He notes the striking similarities between those who accuse academics who study pornography of being “porn apologists” and anti-cult militants who label scholars of new religious movements as “cult apologists.” These labels are in themselves examples of a bias against independent research on controversial matters.

These experiments by some students backfired on MISA and Bivolaru and fueled the picture created by the media of a “sex cult.” While the initiatives were not of a pornographic, sexual, or abusive character according to the students involved, some hostile ex-members (called by scholars of religion “apostates”) made several serious accusations, including that MISA “organizes prostitution rings”, an accusation that has never been proven but frequently resurfaces in the media. Introvigne asks:

Why did they do this? After all, they were aware that certain films and performances had become a main weapon for the anti-cult opponents of the movement and those who wanted it banned as a “porno cult” (p. 113).

Examining different answers from opponents and students, Introvigne proposes his conclusion that the main reasons motivating the students to engage in these endeavors are esoteric: when it enters the otherwise dark world of “adult” entertainment and gatherings, MISA believes that “the positive energy generated by sacred eroticism transforms the world and may usher in a transmutation of the whole Planet” (p. 114). In the words of the MISA students involved with the erotic movies, they believe such actions may “turn poison into elixir” (p. 114).

### **Freemasonry, the Illuminati and Conspiritoriality**

MISA’s teachings extend over a vast number of topics, of which sacred eroticism is just a small yet vital part. Among the topics addressed within MISA those related to sacred eroticism are not the only ones that proved controversial. Another is the anti-Masonic discourse, which is typical of MISA and Bivolaru (who has written several lectures, books, and articles on the topic), and stems from the traditional religious Roman Catholic and Orthodox criticism of Freemasonry as well as contemporary testimonies from hostile former Freemasons (p. 28). No less controversial are its theories about extra-terrestrials, its position on the anti-COVID vaccine, or MISA’s advocacy for natural and holistic health remedies. The topic of esoteric healing is the subject of a lengthy discussion in the book.

In line with this, Introvigne discusses the term “conspiritoriality” – derived from “conspiracy” and “spirituality” and coined by Charlotte Ward and David Voas in 2011. Introvigne argues that a sizable minority of the Western population

approaches health questions in a way that implies a criticism of modern science and looks to spirituality, perhaps even ‘conspiritoriality,’ for alternatives. This is a symptom of the deep contradictions in our culture, which are not solved by simply ridiculing the “conspiracy theories” (p. 57).

### **Radical Aesthetics**

One of the very valuable and unique contributions of Introvigne’s study on MISA (undertaken with his colleagues PierLuigi Zoccatelli and Raffaella Di Marzio) is the analysis of a worldview described as “radical aesthetics.” Introvigne explicitly rejects the classification of MISA and its sacred eroticism practices as a “deviant cult”:

“Deviance,” however, is a category that tells us how others perceive the members of a spiritual movement. It is not a particularly useful concept for understanding the practitioners of sacred eroticism (p. 8).

Introvigne proposes radical aesthetics as a framework for understanding MISA and its sacred eroticism practices which can prove more helpful in building a bridge between those



who are part of the spiritual movement and understand its practices, i.e. those “inside” the community, and those who look from the “outside,” trying to grasp what this movement is all about. In his concluding remarks, Introvigne claims that radical aesthetics might also offer the best explanation for all the critique and skepticism MISA and its followers have confronted throughout the history of the movement.

In the book, Introvigne invites the reader to place the category of radical aesthetics in its theoretical premises, by outlining the process of, and perspectives on, “aestheticization” as viewed by renowned sociologists such as Simmel, Collins, Durkheim, and Goffman. In the 1960s a revolution of “radical aesthetics” emerged, drawing mainly from three sources: Eastern spiritualities, Western esotericism, and modernist art. This revolution was characterized by the “collapse” of the boundaries between art, religion, everyday life, and eroticism. And most importantly, this collapse triggered tensions in society and reactionary counter-movements with a vested interest in maintaining these boundaries.

Introvigne has conducted multiple interviews with practitioners of MISA about their experiences from the large camps and public rituals, as well as the movement’s influence in their daily life and practices at home. In his study, Introvigne concludes that the issues often derive from the “undefined boundaries” so typical of radical aesthetics. Quoting Introvigne:

We can look at certain images on MISA’s Web sites and ask whether they are artistic performances, spiritual rituals, or celebrations of the human body. From MISA’s point of view, they are all these things together, as there is no separation between daily life, art, and spirituality (p. 10).

This merging of spheres appears to be both powerful and subversive. It led to the reactions from the media, society and politics:

Ultimately, it is what I have called MISA’s radical aesthetics that outraged in different ways the different components of the coalition that mobilized against it. Even in allegedly liberal societies, theories and practices that deny that religion and society are separate realms, and proclaim that amorous encounters may be lived as sacred eroticism and as a form of religion, seem to go well beyond the boundaries of the officially proclaimed tolerance (p. 121).

### **Comments on the Conclusion: “Who Is Afraid of Sacred Eroticism?”**

Historically, many groups labeled as “cults” have been the target of criticism, legal battles, scandalous stories, and rumors spread by tabloids. The combination of eroticism and spirituality has especially proven to be a “potent cocktail” in this regard. As Introvigne states, “the spiritual teachers who proclaimed the virtues of sacred eroticism rarely became popular with the media, police, and prosecutors” (p. 115).

However, Introvigne claims that the violence of the campaigns against MISA and Gregorian Bivolaru, and the strength of the legal reaction in different countries, are somewhat unprecedented and truly at an international scale. Why? Part of the answer was already given above, i.e. that:

in most democratic societies, there is a reasonable degree of religious freedom, and a large degree of sexual freedom, but there is no real freedom of mixing eroticism with religion (p. 117).

On top of that, we have the specific environment in which MISA was born, which included members of the old Ceaușescu regime who survived the fall of Communism and maintained positions of power after 1989, some of which became owners of the largest media groups in Romania. The Orthodox Church had its own reasons for joining the campaigns against MISA. Eventually these campaigns reached international levels when Romanian anti-cult militants started cooperating with the European anti-cult federation FECRIS, the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects, (without formally affiliating with it) and its international anti-cult network (p. 120). This consolidated, according to Introvigne, “a global alliance” against MISA.

For religious anti-cult militants, presenting eroticism as part of religion is an intolerable scandal. For secular anti-cult militants, collapsing the boundaries between religion, culture, daily life, and eroticism is a sin against secularism. These aspects make up the phenomenon of “radical aesthetics”, which in Introvigne’s analysis is the most powerful source of outrage stemming from MISA’s teachings and practices.

Massimo Introvigne’s book is a profound and rich addition to the growing body of studies on the social conflicts that afflict new religious movements which promote sacred eroticism in their teachings and practices. In relatively few pages (124 in total), Introvigne conveys a stunningly complex understanding of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, of its history and its practices. The book is mandatory reading for any researcher interested in the MISA and Gregorian Bivolaru “phenomenon”; it deepens and broadens our understanding of sacred eroticism at a time when it has become a test of the functioning of modern democracies.