

# Yoga, Tantrism, and Persecution: MISA, a New Religious Movement in Social Conflict

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<https://doi.org/10.14712/25704893.2018.7>

**Abstract:** Known since the 1990s as Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), Gregorian Bivolaru's movement has a history of four decades of conflict with Romanian society, represented by the police and courts as well as the media, which have given a lot of attention to apostates and anti-cult activists. In the perspective of new religions studies, the conflict seems to be a typical case, albeit an exceptionally severe one. The article offers basic information about the MISA movement and its conflicts. It suggests an explanation of these conflicts in five possible misunderstandings, due to which the relationship between the new religious movement and the surrounding society becomes extremely complicated.

**Keywords:** new religious movements; Gregorian Bivolaru; MISA (Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute); social conflict; Yoga; Tantrism

**Abstrakt:** Hnutí Gregoriana Bivolarua, od 90. let 20. století známé jako MISA prochází už čtvrté desetiletí konfliktem s rumunskou společností, reprezentovanou policejními i soudními úřady a médií, která poskytují prostor apostatům a antikultovním aktivistům. V rámci studia nových náboženských hnutí se tento konflikt jeví jako typický, ačkoli výjimečně ostrý. Následující článek poskytuje základní informace o hnutí MISA a jeho konfliktech. Nabízí vysvětlení příčin těchto konfliktů v pěti možných nedorozuměních, která vztah mezi novým náboženským hnutím a okolní společností mimořádně komplikují.

**Klíčová slova:** nová náboženská hnutí; Gregorian Bivolaru; MISA (Hnutí pro duchovní integraci do Absolutna); společenský konflikt; jóga; tantra

*Received:* 29 July 2018, *Accepted:* 18 September 2018

*Published online:* 30 November 2018

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## Introduction

The conflict between the MISA religious movement and representatives of Romanian society is surprisingly severe. Part of this conflict was formed by a judicial process followed by the imprisonment of its founder and spiritual leader Gregorian Bivolaru. In 2004, Romanian police organized a violent raid on the movement's Bucharest centers, which would deserve a whole chapter in the recently published book of *Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities*.<sup>1</sup> Media and apostates refer to the movement and its leader in a hostile way, using typical stereotypes. This happens regardless to the political regime, in which those references take place, since the movement was persecuted both in Communist Romania and contemporary Romania, which is an EU member state. At some moments, the conflict even had an international dimension. Nevertheless, Sociologists of religion and Religious Studies scholars have paid little attention to the movement.

The goal of this article is to introduce the MISA movement as a new religious movement, showing that its surrounding conflicts may be understood neither as the effect of moral failures of the group's members nor as the outcome of intolerance and prejudices of Romanian society, but as a result of misunderstanding. Needless to say, both parties had their share in it. Therefore, the article summarizes the history of the MISA, describes its doctrine, allows better comprehension of its community, offers a testimony of a secret tantric initiation and, in conclusion, tries to understand the causes of the extraordinary tension experienced by the movement specifically, although not exclusively, in the Romanian society.

I use the terms “the MISA movement” or “Bivolaru's movement” for an entire cluster of both national and international organizations. The national ones consist for example of the Danish and Finnish Yoga centers “Natha”, “German Academy for Traditional Yoga”, the Slovak school of Yoga “Mystérium”, the Czech spiritual school “Rezonance”, the Indian “Satya Yoga Center”, Yoga centers “Tara” in Great Britain and many others. On the international level, there are two organizations, “Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute – MISA” and “The International Federation of Yoga and Meditation – ATMAN”; the former one (the older of the two) forming a part of the latter. Members of the MISA movement share spiritual practices based on Gregorian Bivolaru's teachings, as well as their respect to him. To illustrate their devotion, one of Bivolaru's followers described his spiritual leader as an “utterly exceptional being, a genuine living tantric master, who has deeply and radically transformed their life in a positive way”.<sup>2</sup>

Among academic sources, initially the only two relevant sources were a short article by Indian Studies specialist Moti Lal Pandit, who described the Scandinavian

<sup>1</sup> STUART A. WRIGHT and SUSAN J. PALMER, *Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities*, New York: Oxford University Press 2016.

<sup>2</sup> MIHAI STOIAN, “Gregorian Bivolaru – an exceptional spiritual destiny, an example of life”, in GREGORIAN BIVOLARU, *The Secret Tantric Path of Love to happiness and fulfillment in a couple relationship*, Denmark: Natha Publishing House 2010, p. 308.

branch of the movement,<sup>3</sup> and a better and more detailed study of the same topic by Religious Studies scholar Sara Møldrup Thejls.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, a more serious academic discussion was finally opened by the CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions) conference in South Korea, since one of its panels was dedicated to Bivolaru's movement. The papers presented by lawyer and New Religious Movements scholar Massimo Introvigne, Sociologist PierLuigi Zoccatelli, Psychologist Rafaella Di Marzio, and Religious Studies scholar Gordon J. Melton were published the following year in *Journal of CESNUR*.<sup>5</sup> Later the same year, Massimo Introvigne offered the sum of facts relevant to MISA to The World Religions & Spirituality Project.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from academic sources, this article also makes use of publicly available promotional and apologetic texts published by the MISA movement.<sup>7</sup> Another document, a Czech M.A. thesis of a long-time member of the movement, is also of an apologetic nature.<sup>8</sup> During the preparation of this article I conducted a personal interview with Mihai Stoian,<sup>9</sup> a spiritual teacher considered to be the second most important authority after Bivolaru. A great deal of information was gathered from internal texts: I used the educational material of the courses of the third grade (the grade consists of about forty courses): they contain instructions related to Yoga, the chakras, mudras, alimentation, self-healing, positive thinking, etc. Some parts of these texts are considered to be "secret", "a secret revealed", etc. I studied these courses in Czech. As for their authorship, they are supposed to have been written by Bivolaru himself and we can therefore reasonably suppose that similar texts are distributed in other branches of the MISA too. Among these internal materials I also count programs of the "Holiday Spiritual Yoga Camps" complete not only with many educational texts and commentaries, but also with readings about different mysteries and their uncovering, prophecies about an imminent destructive earthquake and other topics related to pop-culture and religion.<sup>10</sup> Other similar materials can be found in documentaries and movies contained on special edition of DVDs, which are not for sale and can be only acquired in the community. I had a total of fourteen of these discs at my dis-

<sup>3</sup> MOTI LAL PANDIT, "An Evaluation of Natha" [online], *TheoNet*, accessed 27. 1. 2002, used to be available online at <http://www.theonet.net>.

<sup>4</sup> SARA MØLDRUP THEJLS, "MISA and Natha: A Peculiar Story of a Romanian Tantric Yoga School", in JAMES R. LEWIS and INGA BÅRDSSEN TØLLEFSEN, *Handbook of Nordic New Religions*, Leiden – Boston: Brill 2015, p. 62–76.

<sup>5</sup> *Journal of CESNUR* 1 (September–October 2017), p. 3–60.

<sup>6</sup> MASSIMO INTROVIGNE, "Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute" [online], *World Religions & Spirituality*, 1. 6. 2017, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <https://wrldrels.org/2017/05/31/movement-for-spiritual-integration-into-the-absolute>.

<sup>7</sup> These texts, accessed 9. 8. 2016, are available online at <http://www.yogaesoteric.net> and at <http://gregorianbivolaru.net>.

<sup>8</sup> MARTIN HELMAN, *Rumunská škola jógy MISA a stavy osvícení [Romanian Yoga School MISA and States of Enlightenment]*, M.A. thesis, Hussite Theological Faculty, Charles University, Prague 2010, available online at <https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/download/120111753>.

<sup>9</sup> He also uses the name Advaita or Advaitananda Stoian. The interview took place on 7 November 2016, in Prague.

<sup>10</sup> *Program of the Holiday Spiritual Yoga Camp*, Shambala Publishing 2012; *Program of the Holiday Spiritual Yoga Camp Costinesti 2013*, Shambala Publishing 2013.

position. In addition, they contained an audio recording of fifty “Tantra Lessons”. Another source of better understanding of Bivolaru’s concept of Tantra is his book *The Secret Tantric Path of Love*,<sup>11</sup> which addresses the public.

Other type of documents I studied were the public announcements of support to Bivolaru, which were made by some trustworthy public figures and institutions.<sup>12</sup> I took considered testimonies of the apostates in the international Internet presentation Exmisa<sup>13</sup> and I conducted an interview with a woman who was initiated into Tantra by Bivolaru himself.<sup>14</sup>

As was already mentioned, during the research for this article I studied the internal and apologetic texts mostly in Czech; my presentation of the community and tantric ritual is therefore influenced by a Czech perspective. Nevertheless, due to the international character of the movement, it is highly probable that the description is also valid in case of other national organizations. On the other hand, this perspective naturally leaves out the Romanian sources and the literature reacting to the local controversies, as well as the texts produced by the Romanian civil services and declarations by the local Orthodox Church. This Romanian perspective would merit a separate academic treatment.

## MISA as a New Religious Movement

The Sociological and Religious Studies category “New Religious Movement” was coined in the beginning of the 1970s. The term “New Religious Movement” describes an ideal type and serves to explain the position of some religious institutions in society, the internal dynamics of these institutions, and their interaction with their surroundings. This position is characterized by the attribute of “new” in the sense of “socially unaccepted”, “not integrated”, or “not established”. The dynamics of a “new religious movement” are defined by its innovative and protesting attitude, with which it distances itself from the socially accepted convictions, values, and norms represented by established institutions. The socially unstable character of a New Religious Movement requires charismatic leadership, as well as enthusiastic engagement of its members. The reaction of the majority society to religious innovation, the outcomes

<sup>11</sup> GREGORIAN BIVOLARU, *The Secret Tantric Path of Love to Happiness and Fulfillment in a Couple Relationship*, Denmark: Natha Publishing House 2010.

<sup>12</sup> The most important of these figures is Gabriel Andreescu, who was a dissident during the Romanian Communist period; he also spoke at the CESNUR conference. The Romanian branch of the Helsinki Committee of Human Rights also publicly supported Bivolaru. A detailed history of Bivolaru’s persecution was offered by GABRIEL ANDRESCU, *Radiografia unei represiiuni [Radiography of a Repression]*, București: Polirom 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Until August 2016, the material was available on <http://exmisa.org>, later at <http://exmisa.comuf.com> and [www.exmisa.int.eu.org](http://www.exmisa.int.eu.org). At this moment, the material is unavailable.

<sup>14</sup> The woman was initiated twice in Paris. The information I gathered appears mainly in the chapter on Tantric initiation. I conducted the interview on 9 September 2016.

of protesting attitudes, the execution of charismatic authority, and the high level of commitment of its followers may create tension or even unleash a conflict.<sup>15</sup>

As we will see below, the MISA movement can be listed in the “New Religious Movement” category. A conflict was indeed sparked in Romanian society and its echoes have affected other countries as well. On the other hand, no trace of the conflict can be found in the Czech Republic, to which the movement only expanded in the beginning of the 21st century. Possible reasons for this may be that the Czech branch is not too big and its public presentation, which mostly relies on posters and invitations, is not too excessive. Another – and more important – reason may be that Yogic movements are well known to Czech society and were tolerated even by the Communist authorities since the 1960s. The Czech MISA branch therefore operates in the shadow of other international Yogic societies, which, by the virtue of being older and bigger, enjoy a good social standing; this applies specifically to the Czech Union Yoga in Daily Life and to Sahaja Yoga. Moreover, there is competition of dozens of local Yogic communities.

### **MISA in Romania: the history of success and resistance**

The biographies of Gregorian Bivolaru (born 12 March 1952) tend to start with mentions of his childhood spiritual experiences;<sup>16</sup> his childhood dreams, in which he was a high-level Tibetan Yogi; his young adulthood interest in Eastern Philosophy (specifically Ramakrishna, Shivanananda, and Yogananda);<sup>17</sup> and with his interest in scientific literature belonging to different disciplines.<sup>18</sup> According to his own autobiography,<sup>19</sup> as early as at nineteen years, he became an unofficial Yoga teacher and taught unofficially in the Socialist Romania. Bivolaru’s correspondence with Mircea Eliade, a Romanian Religious Studies and Yoga scholar considered an enemy of Romania and living in American exile, attracted the interest of the Romanian intelligence service. The agency isolated Bivolaru from those potentially interested in spiritual teachings<sup>20</sup> and he was therefore only able to gather his first circle of followers as late as in 1981–1982, after becoming a Transcendent meditation enthusiast.<sup>21</sup> In 1982, along with other members of the Romanian Transcendental meditation community,

<sup>15</sup> A great merit in the establishment of the term of “New Religious Movement” belongs to British Sociologist Eileen Barker. Basic description of new religious movements is contained e.g. in her textbook EILEEN BARKER, *New Religious Movements. A Practical Introduction*. London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office 1992, first published 1989.

<sup>16</sup> STOIAN, “Gregorian Bivolaru ...”, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. J. GORDON MELTON, *Melton’s Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 8th ed., Farmington Hill: Gale 2009, p. 1019.

<sup>18</sup> “Who is Gregorian Bivolaru: Biography of Gregorian Bivolaru” [online], *Gregorian Bivolaru*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://gregorianbivolaru.net/whoisgb-1.php>.

<sup>19</sup> “Who is Gregorian Bivolaru. Biography of Gregorian Bivolaru”, <http://gregorianbivolaru.net/whoisgb-1.php>.

<sup>20</sup> STOIAN, “Gregorian Bivolaru ...”, p. 310.

<sup>21</sup> HELMAN, *Rumunská škola jógy ...*, p. 15–16.

Bivolaru was registered by the intelligence service and persecuted.<sup>22</sup> He continued teaching Yoga illegally to 170 students and he raised the first generation of instructors, who were able to keep organizing secret Yogic groups even after Bivolaru's arrest in 1984.<sup>23</sup> Bivolaru was charged with an alleged intent to kill the Romanian Communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu by paranormal means – he was supposed to carry out this task with his Yoga students.<sup>24</sup> Both Bivolaru and his biographers insist that he escaped from custody by means of his psychic abilities acquired by Yogic practice and after getting enough attention for his cause this way, he voluntarily returned to the prison.<sup>25</sup> In the subsequent political process, Bivolaru was condemned to 1.5 year of prison, specifically because of his escape from custody. In July 1989, a new wave of repressions ensued, affecting Bivolaru, as well as his closest students. Against his will, Bivolaru was interned in a mental asylum. The severe persecution of the members of his Yogic school only ended in December 1989, when the Communist regime in Romania crumbled.<sup>26</sup>

In January 1990, shortly after the fall of the regime, Bivolaru founded a non-profit organization, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA).<sup>27</sup> He gained international recognition in Yoga, which allowed him to use the title “Yoga Professor”. Meanwhile, his movement grew as a “compact and organized group of young people”<sup>28</sup> and apart from founding new centers all over Romania, it had many other activities as well. 1990 saw a summer camp, which was to be the first of a long series of camps, which have remained the “peak of MISA's festival life” until present day.<sup>29</sup> The movement organized lectures and other public presentations, in 1991 it founded a magazine dedicated to Yoga, etc. While MISA grew in Romania, its mission also enjoyed success abroad: at this moment, Bivolaru's movement is active in 28 countries. In Denmark, MISA's most important foreign organization was founded in 1990 under the name of Natha; in 1999, the German Academy for Traditional Yoga was created; and in 2001, Eduard Selea, one of Bivolaru's first pupils, founded the Rezonance society in the Czech Republic. To supervise the international activities of Bivolaru's movement, ATMAN – the International Federation of Yoga and Medita-

<sup>22</sup> Between 1977 and 1981, the Transcendental meditation movement operated in Romania peacefully, despite the fact that the state was aware of it. Unfortunately, this only lasted till 1981 – since the following year the members and supporters of the movement were harshly persecuted. See also ADAM BURAKOWSKI, “‘Transcendental Meditation’ Affair in Romania 1976–1982” [online], *Studia Polityczne* 17 (2005), p. 119–152, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.b8ba523a-2edd-34bd-a622-cf3234bca494>.

<sup>23</sup> “Who is Gregorian Bivolaru: Biography of Gregorian Bivolaru”, <http://gregorianbivolaru.net/whoisgb-1.php>.

<sup>24</sup> STOIAN, “Gregorian Bivolaru ...”, p. 311.

<sup>25</sup> “Who is Gregorian Bivolaru. Biography of Gregorian Bivolaru”, <http://gregorianbivolaru.net/whoisgb-1.php>; STOIAN, “Gregorian Bivolaru ...”, p. 311–312.

<sup>26</sup> BIVOLARU, *The Secret Tantric Path ...*, p. 312.

<sup>27</sup> Mișcarea pentru Integrare Spirituală în Absolut.

<sup>28</sup> HELMAN, *Rumunská škola jógy ...*, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> HELMAN, *Rumunská škola jógy ...*, p. 27.

tion was established in 2004.<sup>30</sup> The number of members of Bivolaru's movement is unknown: Bivolaru speaks about 35 thousand,<sup>31</sup> his latest biography about 40 thousand.<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, despite of this successful development, the movement didn't manage to avoid problems and controversies in its country of origin. Just like New Religious Movements in other post-Communist countries, Bivolaru's movement became a target of one-sided criticism of the media,<sup>33</sup> specifically in the 1990s: the tabloid character of the criticism was incited by the spiritual use of sexuality. Apart from media attacks, the movement – and Bivolaru personally – had to face violence: in 1994, unknown persons attacked Bivolaru in his hotel room, beat him, and destroyed his belongings.<sup>34</sup> Next year, someone installed explosives in his apartment in Bucharest, which devastated the place and started a fire.<sup>35</sup> In the same year, in 1995, the police was monitoring the telephones of the movement's leading members of and in the following years, new cases of police investigation kept appearing: the movement has interpreted them as bullying.<sup>36</sup>

The pressure on the movement culminated after 2000. On 18 March 2004, the police organized a massive raid on the Bucharest Yogis, searched 16 facilities in which they lived, detained some of them and confiscated their belongings. The media presented the raid as a major operation against drug and human trafficking. The testimonies made by the Yogis, e.g. in a documentary series *M.I.S.A. – Looking for the Truth*<sup>37</sup>, are extremely disquieting. Bivolaru as a teacher was charged with having had sexual intercourse with a minor. Yet the very next day, the seventeen-year-old girl insisted her statement was given under pressure and retracted it. After five days of custody, Bivolaru was released under investigation and, out of fear of unjust trial, he escaped to Sweden. In 2006 he was indeed granted asylum there. The conduct of the officials in the "Bivolaru case" raised questions, which were discussed during the European Union accession negotiations. Since there was doubt about whether the charges were justified, the Romanian ordinary courts acquitted Bivolaru; nevertheless, in 2013 the Supreme Court sentenced him to six years in prison. As Bivolaru was in France at that time, the French police arrested him on 26 February 2013 by request of the Romanian authorities and a French court decided on 13 July 2016, to extradite

<sup>30</sup> In its online presentation, the federation announces its presence in more than thirty countries of the world. "Members" [online], *Atman*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.atman.yogafederation.org/members>.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., "Who is Gregorian Bivolaru. Biography of Gregorian Bivolaru", <http://gregorianbivolaru.net/whoisgb-1.php>.

<sup>32</sup> STOIAN, "Gregorian Bivolaru ...", p. 313.

<sup>33</sup> DANIELA POPESCU, "The Effect of the Persistent Media Campaign on the Public Perception – MISA & Gregorian Bivolaru Case Study", *World Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2 (2, 2016), p. 29–36.

<sup>34</sup> "Who Is Afraid of Gregorian Bivolaru" [online], *YouTube*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr4sCZUxS\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hr4sCZUxS_s), 5:50.

<sup>35</sup> STOIAN, "Gregorian Bivolaru ...", p. 313.

<sup>36</sup> HELMAN, *Rumunská škola jógy ...*, p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> GEORGE ADAMESCU and MIHAELA CREȚU, *M. I. S. A. – In Cautarea Adevarului* [M. I. S. A. – Looking for the Truth] [online], *Sophrozin* 2009, Part 1–10 with English subtitles, 1st part accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwYdY4gkb-8>.

Bivolaru to Romania. The media coverage of the case sparked a new wave of hostility against the movement: in May of 2016, a Yogi was stabbed in the entrance to a MISA building, while writing on a wall close by stated “death to Bivolaru”. In June, another Yogi was beaten and the attackers accused him of being in contact with Bivolaru.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Gregorian Bivolaru served a sentence in Romania: he was released conditionally on 13 September 2017. According to the Romanian media, Bivolaru insists he is innocent.

During these events interpreted as persecution by the MISA, the movement also received some support. One of the organizations, which have been openly supportive of MISA for a long time, is the Helsinki Committee of Human Rights, followed by other non-governmental organizations that monitor the respect for human rights. Gabriel Andreescu, a dissident who fought against the Communist regime and authored two books about the repressions against Yogis during Communism<sup>39</sup>, has repeatedly, personally, and publicly supported the movement. Short after Bivolaru’s extradition, he wrote an open letter to the President of Romania, summing up all the arguments inciting doubt of the authorities’ conduct and appealed to him to pardon Bivolaru.<sup>40</sup> The European Court of Human Rights repeatedly stood up for different individual members of the MISA. In 2014, the Court stated that the Romanian state violated the rights of a MISA member, who was interned in a mental asylum against her will.<sup>41</sup> In 2016, it awarded financial compensation to 26 Yogis for the losses they suffered during the police raid of 2004.<sup>42</sup> And for the illegal arrest of Bivolaru, the European Court of Human Rights ordered the Romanian state to compensate him financially in 2017.<sup>43</sup>

## The basics of the doctrine

Members of Bivolaru’s movement consider their doctrine to be Yoga and regard it not as religion, but as a doctrine of the essence of all religions. In their point of view,

<sup>38</sup> GABRIEL ANDREESCU, “Apel la grațierea lui Gregorian Bivolaru adresat Excelenței Sale, Domnul Klaus Iohannis, Președintele României” [“Call to pardon Gregorian Bivolaru addressed to His Excellency, Mr. Klaus Iohannis, President of Romania”] [online], accessed 26. 7. 2016, available online at <http://www.comanescu.ro/p-apel-la-gratierea-lui-gregorian-bivolaru.html>.

<sup>39</sup> GABRIEL ANDREESCU, *Reprimarea mișcării yoga în anii ‘80* [*Repression of the Yoga Movement in the 1980s*], Iași: Polirom 2008; GABRIEL ANDREESCU, *Radiografia unei represii* [*Radiography of a Repression*], București: Polirom 2013. Andreescu also authored the Romanian Helsinki Committee reports of the Bivolaru case.

<sup>40</sup> ANDREESCU, <http://www.comanescu.ro/p-apel-la-gratierea-lui-gregorian-bivolaru.html>.

<sup>41</sup> “*Atudorei v. Romania*” [online], Strasbourg 16. 9. 2014, *Juridice*, accessed 26. 7. 2016, available online at <https://www.juridice.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CASE-OF-ATUDOREI-v.-RO-MANIA.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> “*Amarandei and Others v. Romania*” [online], 26. 4. 2016, *European Court of Human Rights*, accessed 26. 7. 2016, available online at <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press#%22itemid%22:%22003-5358361-6688251%22>}.

<sup>43</sup> “*Affaire Bivolaru c. Roumanie*” [online], 28. 5. 2017, *European Court of Human Rights*, accessed 26. 7. 2016, available online at <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%22itemid%22:%22001-171550%22>}.



Yoga “does not stand against any religion” and may even become a tool to enhance each and every spiritual path.”<sup>44</sup> The followers postulate an existence of objective and universally valid spiritual principles, two sets of which are of a supreme importance. First, the laws that relate to the unity of all reality and the identity of this reality with God; all the cosmic and local realities correspond with each other (Correspondences between Microcosm and Macrocosm); they contain each other (every part of cosmos carries the image of the whole); and all the cosmic and local events reflect each other (as above, so below, and vice versa). And second, there are laws of polarity. These laws cause the dynamic character of reality, which is being held by a balance of two opposing principles called “masculine” and “feminine”, traditionally represented by Shiva and Shakti as two aspects of God. The contrasting nature of these principles creates an energy which in itself is neutral and brings about the cosmic “interplay” of phenomena and forms. By means of their consciousness, human beings can influence it both positively and negatively: modulate it, control, transform, and even merge with it.<sup>45</sup>

In this concept, God is “the infinite whole that embraces everything”. The concept “can only be understood in His indivisible unity and this beyond the various modalities that can serve to represent Him, according to the temporal needs of the manifestation.”<sup>46</sup> Being in all, “God is present in each of us and waits for us to discover Him in the mysterious center of our being, where He exists ...”<sup>47</sup> All “elements of the Universe (things, beings, processes, created phenomena)”<sup>48</sup> communicate with each other on the basis that in God’s Creation, “everything, without exception, begins and is maintained by processes of resonance”.<sup>49</sup> According to this doctrine, the Yogic and Tantric techniques serve precisely to tune the consciousness in and to create a resonance with respective cosmic energies. Yoga’s goal is thus to create and sustain a process, which helps human beings to perceive, modify, and transform cosmic energy’s impulses.<sup>50</sup> Bivolaru’s concept of Yoga as a technique that allows resonance with cosmic energy is integral. In other words, it comprises of a combination of traditional Yogic methods: Hatha Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Mantra Yoga, Tantra Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, and Yantra Yoga. A specific place is reserved for Tantra Yoga.

In this context, the term “resonance” equals to “spanda” and its meaning is close to “movement”, “vibration”, “movement potential”, or “movement energy”. *Spanda*

<sup>44</sup> “Víceletý kurz integrální jógy” [online], *Rezonance*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.jogin.cz/kurzy-jogy>.

<sup>45</sup> “The Law of Resonance” [online], *Natha*, accessed 30. 4. 2002, used to be available online at <http://www.natha.dk/Resonance.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> “Glossary: ‘God’”, in: GREGORIAN BIVOLARU, *The Secret Tantric Path of Love to happiness and fulfillment in a couple relationship*, Denmark: Natha Publishing House 2010, p. 363.

<sup>47</sup> “Glossary: ‘God’”, in: BIVOLARU, *The Secret Tantric Path ...*, p. 365.

<sup>48</sup> “Yoga and resonance” [online], *Yogaesoteric*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.yogaesoteric.net/content.aspx?lang=EN&item=3663>.

<sup>49</sup> “Glossary: ‘God’”, in: BIVOLARU, *The Secret Tantric Path ...*, p. 364.

<sup>50</sup> “The Law of Resonance”, <http://www.natha.dk/Resonance.htm>.

is one of the core terms of Kashmir Shaivism, a North Indian religious philosophical tradition that, in contrast to South Indian Shivaism, absorbed more influence from the Advaita philosophy and developed into a relatively independent system. Even before Abhinavagupta (975–1025), who shaped Kashmir Shivaism into its specific form, this term had been used by Vasugupta and his disciple Kalatta in *Shiva Sutras* and *Spandakarika*. With the ever increasing influence of Islam during the first centuries of the second millennium AD, Kashmir Shivaism started to lose importance. Finally in the 20th century it was restored in India and, mostly thanks to Lakshman Joo (1908–1991), expanded to the West.

Gregorian Bivolaru created his own system, which relied on the philosophical basis of Kashmir Shivaism combined with Yogic and Tantric practice and integrated many other elements into it. These other motifs stem from the Indian spiritual tradition (Ayurveda, Indian astrology, some gods and goddesses, the doctrine of Prana and Chakras, and other techniques, sometimes also called “Yoga”, etc.), Christianity (apocalyptic expectations, the Lord’s Prayer, the revelations of Fátima), Daoism (Ying/Yang polarity), Western Esotericism (astrology), and the New Age movement. This last tradition is represented e.g. by the belief in angels and extraterrestrials (the evil of them known as “reptiloids” or “reptilians”) or the expectations of the coming of the Age of Aquarius, positive thinking, Feng-Shui practices, Parapsychology, and others. The doctrine also contains traces of conspiracy theories (the interpretation of the Freemasons as the biggest enemies of the humankind)<sup>51</sup> and question of the so-called “mysteriology”. This vast synthesis is possible by means of replacement of some religious terms (such as Gods and Goddesses) by non-religious expressions (energies, power spheres, cosmic powers, etc.). Just as in the New Age movement, the belief in these secondary doctrines and their elements is not compulsory for Bivolaru’s followers.<sup>52</sup> Another quest MISA shares with the New Age is its search for scientific explanations of spiritual techniques; the intention to prove the objective character of their effects; and the tendency to distance itself from the term “religion”.

While the acceptance of different popular religious phenomena creates a permissive environment open to new worldviews, the basic Yogic and Tantric teachings are presented as unique and secret. The vision of Romania and the MISA schools’ central role in “the spiritual revival of the entire planet” reinforces their unique character.<sup>53</sup> Since we are presently in the transition to the Age of Aquarius, this role becomes crucial. The conviction that “Yoga will help to bring about a major change on a national level”<sup>54</sup> appeared among Bivolaru’s persecuted disciples as early as 1984. After his

<sup>51</sup> THEJLS, “MISA and Natha ...”, p. 69–71.

<sup>52</sup> The collection of all the necessary elements of MISA movement’s orthodoxy may be found e.g. in this article: GREGORIAN BIVOLARU, “The 17 unsuspected dangers of the demoniac doubts” [online], *Yogaesoteric*, accessed 27. 7. 2018, available online at <http://www.yogaesoteric.net/content.aspx?item=5650&lang=EN>.

<sup>53</sup> Eduard Selea, the founder of the Czech branch of Bivolaru’s movement, puts it this way. ELINOR SELEA, “Lidé a duchovno – dotazy na Eduarda” [online], *Rezonance*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.jogin.cz/lide-a-duchovno-dotazy-na-eduarda/strana-2>.

<sup>54</sup> HELMAN, *Rumunská škola jógy ...*, p. 19.

return from prison the following year, Gregorian Bivolaru confirmed this opinion of some of his Yogis; he put the idea in context of different prophecies stemming from various historical epochs and religions;<sup>55</sup> and he spread it among the rest of his followers. The belief that Bivolaru's movement is not only a set of Yogic techniques, but a unique path to truth and salvation, is still present among the movement's leaders<sup>56</sup> alongside the idea that Bivolaru's texts are divine inspired.<sup>57</sup>

In free society, the main means of spreading their doctrine have been printed two-page or four-page leaflets, which are given to each student after every class and which are kept during the following grades. They contain the main theme, which may be supplemented by secondary themes, proverbs, aphorisms etc. The movement insists that their author is Bivolaru himself, who is supposed to write them every week.<sup>58</sup> This way Bivolaru's "school opens, step by step and to all those interested, the secret spiritual tradition of India and Tibet's schools and their masters, a tradition, which was originally only transmitted orally."<sup>59</sup>

## The community

The basic form of the movement consists in a school, that is, a system of courses, which are studied and practiced in a set of grades in two mutually interconnected lines – Yoga and Tantra – and physically located in one of the movement's centers. The meetings take place once a week; they comprise of a theoretical and practical part and last from two to four hours.<sup>60</sup> The movement insists on the importance of being in contact with the community at least once per week – not only due to the interconnected character of the lessons, but also because the doctrine deems it specifically important for the transition to the Age of Aquarius.<sup>61</sup> Apart from the regular meetings, the movement also organizes weekend workshops, occasional cycles of theoretical or practical classes, and voluntary meetings such as those that deepen the relationship between the aspirant and his or her spiritual guide.<sup>62</sup> There are also joint Karma Yoga workshops in the center or in the Ashram. Moreover, the Czech

<sup>55</sup> The most influential among them is perhaps the prophecy of an Indian Christian by the name of Sundara Singh. "The Sundar Singh prophecies about THE SPIRITUAL FUTURE OF ROMANIA" [online], *Yogaesoteric*, accessed 27. 7. 2018, available online at <http://www.yogaesoteric.net/content.aspx?item=2257&lang=EN>.

<sup>56</sup> THEJLS, "MISA and Natha ...", p. 71.

<sup>57</sup> "Divine Inspired Texts" [online], *Yogaesoteric*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.yogaesoteric.net/content.aspx?lang=EN&item=1660>.

<sup>58</sup> HELMAN, JOSSE, "Škola jógy MISA a život v ášramu" [online], *Rezonance*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.jogin.cz/skola-jogy-misa-a-zivot-v-asramu>.

<sup>59</sup> "Víceletý kurz integrální jógy", <http://www.jogin.cz/kurzy-jogy>.

<sup>60</sup> HELMAN, "Škola jógy MISA ...", <http://www.jogin.cz/skola-jogy-misa-a-zivot-v-asramu>.

<sup>61</sup> SELEA, "Lidé a duchovno ...", <http://www.jogin.cz/lide-a-duchovno-dotazy-na-eduarda/strana-2>.

<sup>62</sup> "Gurujóga (setkání skupiny)" [online], *Rezonance*, 12. 6. 2016, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.jogin.cz/gurujoga-setkani-skupiny>.

Rezonance center, for example, organizes a public weekend-long Tantra festival every year. During these events, most people that come in contact with the movement remain on the lowest levels of Yoga.<sup>63</sup>

The apex of the movement's activities are the spiritual camps that take place every year in Romania and which comprise of different programmes aimed at the graduates of the different levels. There is the ten-day camp in the mountain center Baile Herculane and, most importantly, the up to five weeks long camp in the seaside resort of Costinești, which is attended by thousands of Yogis from the entire world. The summer camp tradition goes back to 1990.<sup>64</sup> One of the conditions of admission to one of these camps is to send one's photograph in swimsuit and confirmation that the applicant is free from syphilis and HIV. While ex-members and opponents argue that the camp, as the whole life of the community, is "infused with sexuality",<sup>65</sup> the movement's leaders insist that the doctrine of the spiritual importance of sexuality is only present in a small fragment of the educational materials.<sup>66</sup> The idea that sexuality is put on spotlight is, among other reasons,<sup>67</sup> probably caused by the Miss Shakti female beauty contest.<sup>68</sup> While for the movement members the core of this pageant is to boost female energy, the movies shot during the contest appeared on erotic Internet servers. Among the less controversial activities is another special summer camp event – the Yang spiral group meditation, whose photographs tend to figure as symbols of the camp in contact with the public.<sup>69</sup>

Apart from the spiritual camps, there are also other opportunities for the student to reinforce his or her contact with the community – for example shared accommodation of a group of Yogis or Ashram life. The Ashram also organizes spiritual events and houses visitors. According to the movement, there are at least 40 of these Ashrams in Bucharest only: about 2000 people live in the biggest and best known one, which lies in the Pipera suburb.<sup>70</sup> Another option of deeper personal engagement with the movement is to become an instructor: this requires an intense two-year course, a series of exams, and an authorization by Bivolaru himself.<sup>71</sup> The instructors are also supposed to have passed a tantric initiation, which is available only after the Yogi has

<sup>63</sup> Theijls insists that in the Danish organization of Natha (a part of MISA), only 15% of the school's students attend the retreats or summer camps. THEIJLS, "MISA and Natha ...", p. 66.

<sup>64</sup> HELMAN, *Rumunská škola jógy ...*, p. 27.

<sup>65</sup> One of the Czech participants in the interview with the Author, 16. 9. 2016.

<sup>66</sup> In an interview with the Author (7. 11. 2016), Advaita Stoian estimated that the topic figures in no more than 8% of the movement's education.

<sup>67</sup> Such as the printed programs of the camps, which contain many explicitly erotic photographs and drawings.

<sup>68</sup> Even the interview about Miss Shakti contains photographs of naked bodies. "Rozhovor: Miss Šakti – soutěž vnější a vnitřní krásy" [online], *Rezonance*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.jogin.cz/miss-shakti-soutez-vnejsi-a-vnitрни-krasy/strana-2>.

<sup>69</sup> For more information, see e. g. "Mezinárodní tábory jógy (Baile Herculane a Costinești, Rumunsko)" [online], *Rezonance*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.jogin.cz/tabory>.

<sup>70</sup> HELMAN, "Škola jógy MISA ...", <http://www.jogin.cz/skola-jogy-misa-a-zivot-v-asramu>.

<sup>71</sup> HELMAN, "Škola jógy MISA ...", <http://www.jogin.cz/skola-jogy-misa-a-zivot-v-asramu>.

passed the first grade (for details, see below). Conversely, even the non-initiated may reside in the Ashram.

The organization of the Yoga and Tantra school requires a hierarchy of instructors according to their initiation, experience, and years of service. The top of this informal pyramid is reserved for Bivolaru, known among his disciples as Grieg. His guru authority is fully comparable to other Yoga teachers and spiritual celebrities,<sup>72</sup> which are believed by their disciples to have reached the highest spiritual goals. In much the same way, Grieg's disciples tell stories about the impact of his siddhi (psychic abilities)<sup>73</sup> and attribute extraordinary abilities to him. Bivolaru's unique position is also caused by the fact that until now, he is the only person authorized to bestow the tantric initiations. The Yogis who gradually adopt the doctrines of Bivolaru's school and who wish so may allow for the ever increasing influence of the community and its values in their daily activities and other (possibly all) spheres of their lives. Thanks to regular yogic exercise and the custom to dedicate food or other activity to God through a short meditation, even the Yogis' daily life is filled with awareness of their belonging to the doctrine and the community. Through the community, their spiritual teacher Bivolaru urgently recommends specific dietary practices to them (the so-called Yoga dietetics, purifying methods, and, most importantly, fasting) and preventive and healing procedures that come mostly (but not exclusively) from Ayurveda.<sup>74</sup> Among these techniques, the dominant position is reserved for the drinking of one's own urine, but the Yogis are also strongly motivated to abstain from tobacco and alcohol. The Yogi's intense life also requires the separation from people that lead him or her astray from "the spiritual life and gradually lessen his or her internal vibrations to their own limited level."<sup>75</sup>

The relationship between spiritual progress and interest in one's own body is clearly visible from the great attention the movement pays to techniques of sexual continence; these are supposed to help Yogi couples to explore spiritually all the potential sexuality offers.<sup>76</sup> The male Yogi gradually learns to prevent ejaculation and separate it from the orgasm, while the advanced female Yogi is supposed to lengthen her menstrual cycle by means of meditations, asanas, and purifying methods, until, in the ideal case, she completely stops menstruating.<sup>77</sup>

The MISA movement also offers its own models of relationships. Exclusively dyadic marital relationships complete with procreation and maintaining of a stable home are considered egoistic and not valued,<sup>78</sup> although they are tolerated, specifically when they were established before the decision to devote oneself to Yoga. On the other hand, friendships between Yogis both of the same and the opposing sex are

<sup>72</sup> See e.g. the leaflet ("kurz") 37 in the first grade of Integral Yoga course.

<sup>73</sup> HELMAN, "Škola jógy MISA ...", <http://www.jogin.cz/skola-jogy-misa-a-zivot-v-asramu>.

<sup>74</sup> See e.g. the leaflets ("kurzy") 24, 25, 27, and 28 in the first grade of Integral Yoga course.

<sup>75</sup> See e.g. the leaflet ("kurz") 28 in the second grade of Integral Yoga course, p. 3–4.

<sup>76</sup> See e.g. "Co je sexuální kontinence" [online], *Rezonance*, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <http://www.jogin.cz/co-je-sexualni-kontinence>.

<sup>77</sup> Leaflet ("kurz") 10 in the second grade of Integral Yoga course, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> SELEA, "Lidé a duchovno ...", <http://www.jogin.cz/lide-a-duchovno-dotazy-na-eduarda/strana-2>.

valued, specifically when, thanks to tantra, the relationships develop in a great intimacy, due to which the friends “know almost everything” about each other.<sup>79</sup> In case of Yogis of different sexes, these relationships can develop into sharing of sexuality. Its eventual non-binding character and possible experimenting both with sexuality and the relationship itself are justified by the shared belief that thanks to tantric initiation, Shiva manifests in every man and Shakti in every woman. On the other hand, the movement clearly signals that the goal of tantric initiation is not mere pleasure or irresponsibility. Sexual sharing between same-sex couples is forbidden: as Eduard Selea, the Czech MISA Yogi’s chief authority said, “there is no place for homosexuals in the tantric practices.” Even though homosexuals have their place in human society, Tantra explains homosexuality as an “unnatural, dangerous thing.”<sup>80</sup>

The long-standing tension, which the movement has been experiencing in Romania (and, to a lesser extent, even in other countries) has naturally had its impact on the teachings and life of the community, including in such countries as the Czech Republic, where there is no pressure from the authorities or the public. It is probably precisely this tension that creates a harsh rejection of opposing views. There is a widespread supposition in the movement that every doubt is a result of an attack of demons, which try to stop the adepts’ spiritual development.<sup>81</sup> Ex-members are also demonized. For example, they are to be punished for their leaving by the fact that in the following incarnations, they will have no possibility for spiritual growth. If the movement members still decide to leave, these tense attitudes may liken them to the role of apostates,<sup>82</sup> whose negative testimonies may cause further escalation of the tension.

## Tantric initiation

Tantric initiation<sup>83</sup> by the spiritual teacher Grieg himself is only available for women and there is no available information on whether any other MISA instructor was ever authorized to initiate women. The ceremony is preceded by several steps. First of all, there is the invitation from master Grieg communicated to the adept by a female initiate, who points out how extraordinary the adept’s personality is and that the master’s offer is truly exceptional. All communication regarding the initiation is

<sup>79</sup> SELEA, “Lidé a duchovno ...”, <http://www.jogin.cz/lide-a-duchovno-dotazy-na-eduarda/strana-2>.

<sup>80</sup> SELEA, “Lidé a duchovno ...”, <http://www.jogin.cz/lide-a-duchovno-dotazy-na-eduarda/strana-2>.

<sup>81</sup> BIVOLARU, “The 17 unsuspected dangers ...”, <http://www.yogaesoteric.net/content.aspx?item=5650&lang=EN>.

<sup>82</sup> This role, typically, consists of an explicitly hostile stance towards the apostate’s former community and alliance with those who oppose it. See DAVID G. BROMLEY (ed.): *The Politics of Religious Apostasy. The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, Westport, London: Praeger 1998, passim. Cecilia Tiz, a Romanian woman who is mentioned below, is a typical example of apostasy.

<sup>83</sup> The secret ritual is described on the basis of personal interviews with two female Yogis: one described the rite to the Author and the other corrected the description and added other information based on her own experience. The resulting description may of course be not fully valid for rites conducted in different years.

held secret and the adept is explicitly forbidden to speak about it. The woman is also asked to make a payment, but this is more akin to a financial deposit, which is usually returned after the event, because all the expenses related to the initiation are understood as a gift from the master. During the time of Bivolaru's hiding, all the transfers were kept completely secret,<sup>84</sup> which means that neither the address of the Paris ashram inhabited only by women nor the place of the initiation was known by the women. The adepts (in varying numbers) resided in the closed ashram with blinded windows without their personal belongings and with no possibility to communicate with the outside world; they had to wait there for a varying number of days under supervision of the ashram's permanent residents, until new instructions came. The period of waiting was to be filled with Yogic preparation and reading of recommended texts. It was precisely in this environment where the close friendships described above flourished, along with the feelings of togetherness and belonging. Apart from the spiritual preparation, the adept was supposed to make a written acceptance of her own responsibility, an oath of silence, and nude photos and videos. Little gifts and presents sent by the master increased the positive expectations of the imminent initiation, the awareness of the adept's own femininity, and self-confidence.

Blindfolded and in an atmosphere of secrecy and conspiracy, the adepts were finally transported to an apartment, where they waited for the individual initiation by Gregorian Bivolaru. The waiting was mostly spent in purifications, consuming of aphrodisiacs, Yogic exercise, watching erotic movies, and talking with those who had been initiated earlier. The initiation itself had a varying length (it may have been as short as an hour but could also exceed eight hours) and it comprised of an interview and a ritual intercourse. Tantric sex made use of different positions corresponding to different energetic centers (chakras) and its goal was to incite different types of female orgasm (vaginal, clitoral, and urinal), while the biggest stress was put on the last one, since drinking the master's urine is considered to be the highest level of tantric ritual. During the interview and when confronted with questions, the master showed a great empathy and knowledge of the women's lives. Empathy and kind insight was also apparent in the subsequent electronic correspondence between Grieg and the initiate.

The woman's first urine after the ritual was to be shared with the other women, while any following urine for up to 24 hours after the initiation she drank on her own. Upon request, Gregorian Bivolaru entirely returned the financial deposit to the women, sometimes even adding to it. In this latter case, the contribution helped to motivate the woman to attend the ceremony again, since it was considered to be crucial for her spiritual growth. The second apex of the initiation came after 11 days. The woman prepared for it by keeping the schedule of Yogic exercise, which was established by her master according to her spiritual condition and current needs. Exactly after 11 days the women had an ecstatic experience described as a strong orgasm and reaching *Samadhi*, the highest spiritual state. Even this event is determined by

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<sup>84</sup> In order to keep it a complete secret, the adepts were transported with sunglasses on their eyes and a hat put over the glasses.

Bivolaru's assumptions about the importance of the urine, water circulation in human body and the way it carries information. The complexity of the tantric experience then fades away in the mentioned correspondence with the master. Men are initiated in an analogical way by means of a ritual sexual intercourse with a woman initiated by Bivolaru. For this reason, married men encourage their wives to get initiated by their master. It is equally possible that in the local communities, in which a second generation was already produced (mainly in Romania, but possibly also elsewhere), the Yogi parents are interested in the initiation of their adolescent daughters.

### **Conclusion: a misunderstanding?**

The Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA) is a community that can be listed under the sociological category of New Religious Movements and it shows many (if not all) characteristics of this phenomenon: new religious idea, protesting attitude against the majority concept of spiritual life, charismatic leadership, millenarian expectation (of the end of this world or age), attraction to certain segments of society, dynamic community with a high level of commitment, harsh distance from their critics, demonization of apostates and other "enemies", etc. In this sense and in comparison with other new religious movements, the criticisms with which the media and apostates target the movement are hardly exceptional, although their intensity and long-standing presence is indeed remarkable. The truly extraordinary aspect is only the intensity and length of the repressions which the movement has been facing in Romania, its place of origin, where it is still very popular. This repression have been affecting both Bivolaru and his disciples for three decades already (with some intermissions) and they peaked a few years ago with his long term imprisonment.

To assess whether this repression is justified would greatly exceed both the goals and the possibilities of this Religious Studies article. On the other hand we may suggest that the core target both of the criticism and repression of Romanian authorities is Bivolaru's and his disciples' concept of sexuality and its consequences for human relationships. It is symptomatic that the best known among the apostates that attack the MISA movement is a woman that left the community in the aftermath of a marital crisis, which according to her stemmed precisely from those parts of doctrine and practice that have to do with sexuality. This Romanian woman by the name of Cecilia Tiz was, according to her own statement one of the movement's members since the beginning of the 1990s and by the end of the century she even became one of the founders of the MISA centers in Germany. Only after the crisis did she start her struggle against the movement.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup> "Cecilia Tiz Interview" [online], *ProTv*, 8. 2. 2010, accessed 9. 8. 2016, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5LSG76phc0>.



Nevertheless, the attitude towards sexuality, as it seems, follows in a consistent way from Bivolaru's interpretation of ancient Tantra and this interpretation is not very far from similar ways, in which other Western spiritual teachers work with the obscure and multifaceted Tantric tradition (or with what they think is Tantric tradition). Perhaps we may therefore suggest that the roots of the conflict, which the movement suffers, stem more from misunderstanding and less from malice or flawed character. Even though the movement does not hide its interest in the spiritual use of sexuality,<sup>86</sup> it is still understood mostly as a Yogic school, and this category is rarely associated with sexual activity. The image of a standard Yogic school is further reinforced by its autodenomination as a school of "integral Yoga" which resides in "Yogic centers".

A similar misunderstanding may arise from the fact that external observers and beginners may see MISA as an "open", syncretic Yogic community similar to other New Age Yoga centers, which are able to integrate different elements of popular culture and religion and whose doctrine and practices are individual and optional. Only after closer examination it starts to be apparent that the MISA movement regards itself as a unique community with exclusive access to truths about humanity and this world.

More confusion may arise from the usage of the term "religion". The movement tends to avoid it and to describe its doctrine by non-religious language: this creates an impression in the newcomers and onlookers that they are witnessing ordinary leisure activities and not religion. This language notwithstanding, the commitment to the community, lifestyle changes and other time and emotional investments of their members greatly exceed a leisure activity and are more proportionate to a radically lived religion. Moreover, this religious engagement – and here we come to the fourth source of misunderstanding – is tied to an esoteric community that at the same time makes active public appearances. However, it is typical for esoteric fellowships to bestow their doctrine gradually and to lead their members to secret ceremonial initiations. Those groups generally avoid the interest of the public. In case of Bivolaru's movement, the combination of its public mission and esoteric character may naturally lead to suspicions that the gradual way of secret doctrine's transmission and keeping of secrets is caused by the desire to hide the "true" *raison d'être* of the community. And thus follows that "in fact", this true reason must be morally dubious.

And finally, the fifth misunderstanding may originate from the role of the spiritual master (guru Bivolaru) equipped with supernatural authority. This type of spiritual leadership, which is typical for Indian traditions, is not widely known and understood in the West. Subsequently, the phenomenon provokes suspicions of abuse of power. These types of misunderstandings between the new religious movement and society at large are hardly exceptional and they usually do not lead to serious conflicts. The most important remedy that mitigates and ultimately eliminates them is time.<sup>87</sup> Even though

<sup>86</sup> For example, the student is introduced into the role of sexuality in the "quickening of spiritual development" as early as in the 8th lesson of the basic course of Integral Yoga. Leaflet ("kurz") 8 in the first grade, p. 2–4.

<sup>87</sup> EILEEN BARKER, Plus ça change ..., in: *Social Compass* 42 (2, 1995), p. 165–180.

this perspective may seem to be distant at this time, it is very probable that even the MISA movement will in time join the spectrum of established and respected religious societies. Bivolaru's release from prison and his generally forgiving reactions give hope that the tension may diminish and the intensity of the conflict will gradually subside.

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