

## ANTI-CULT ACCUSATIONS OF POLITICAL SUBVERSION AND SEXUAL ABUSE: TWO CASE STUDIES

Massimo Introvigne<sup>1</sup>

*This paper explores two facets of anti-cult criticism of groups labeled subversive or deviant in China and the West. The methodology is based on an examination of available scholarly literature, media reports, and court decisions analyzed through theories of social control. The first case study concerns labeling as xie jiao and banning Qigong-based movements in China. The second discusses accusations of sexual abuse targeting religious and esoteric groups in various Western countries.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), Turin, Italy, email: maxintrovigne@gmail.com

## 1. Who Is Afraid of Qigong? Repressing Qigong-Based Groups in China and Taiwan

In 1996, Tai Ji Men, the largest Qigong menpai (similar to a school) in Taiwan, faced politically motivated suppression. Although the Supreme Court declared it innocent in 2007, the group still encounters harassment through fabricated tax bills.

I have no direct evidence to suggest that the repression of Tai Ji Men in Taiwan was influenced by mainland China's campaign denouncing several Qigong-related new spiritual movements as *xie jiao*, a term historically used since the Middle Ages to describe "organizations spreading heterodox teachings." Notably, however, this campaign began in the People's Republic of China in 1996, the same year.

To enable a comparison with Taiwan, I will skip Chinese instances where political problems have played a significant role and focus on five cases: Zhonggong, Riyue Qigong, Xiang Gong, Bodhi Gong, and Human Universal Science.

### *Zhonggong*

In December 2020, police officers in ten Chinese provinces surrounded and arrested citizens who gathered in public parks for Qigong exercises aimed at preventing COVID-19. These individuals were members of Zhonggong, which was founded in 1987 and officially banned as a *xie jiao* since 2000. The problem was that, according to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Zhonggong was supposed to have ceased to exist. It was officially liquidated several years earlier and declared entirely eradicated by 2016. It was presented as one of the few "success stories" in the long-term fight against *xie jiao*. Nonetheless, this so-called "success" does not appear to be definitive.

Zhang Hongbao (1954–2006) was born in Harbin, Heilongjiang's capital, on January 5, 1954. A respected member of the CCP and a high school teacher in Harbin, he was sent by the Party to Beijing in 1985 to pursue a college degree. Although he did not finish his academic studies, he enrolled in the Chinese Qigong Further Education Academy and became a skilled Qigong instructor. While studying mechanical engineering, Zhang developed a Qigong system, which he called Zhonggong, that integrated engineering terminology and automation theories with traditional Chinese martial arts, dietary practices, and healing methods.

The CCP initially welcomed Zhonggong. From 1987 onward, Zhang conducted seminars at various prestigious locations, including Beijing University, the China Academy of Sciences, the Central Party School of the CCP, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Justice, and the China Academy of Social Sciences. These events received favorable coverage in the Party's newspaper, *People's Daily*. Ji Yi's biography of Zhang sold ten million copies, while Zhang asserted that Zhonggong boasted 38 million followers.

Zhonggong fell victim to its success, especially among high-ranking Communist Party officials. The Party began to view Zhonggong as a potential threat. Although Zhang had strong connections and promised to resist by hiring top Chinese lawyers, he realized his freedom in China was fading after hearing that around twenty women were prepared to testify they had been raped or sexually assaulted by him (a common accusation against *xie jiao* leaders in China). In December 1999, Zhonggong's significant assets were seized.

In 2000, Zhang fled to the United States through Guam, where he secured asylum. He grew progressively engaged in militant anti-Communist efforts and passed away on July 31, 2006, at the age of 52, due to a collision between his car and a large truck on an Arizona highway. His supporters suspected foul play.

Following Zhang's passing, Zhonggong encountered intense suppression in China. Zhang Hongbao's secretary, Zhang Xiao, reorganized the movement abroad, relocating its headquarters to Japan.

She revitalized a secretive network in China, adopting various names for the organization. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Zhang Xiao introduced anti-COVID Qigong exercises. The CCP uncovered that her network was vast, featuring local centers in multiple provinces.

A high-profile case in Shandong in 2021 involving Sun Xuhui, the head of another independent faction of the movement, brought to light the Ministry of Public Security's worries regarding Zhong-gong, leading to the formation of a dedicated task force to address this particular *xie jiao*.

### *Riyue Qigong*

On June 15, 2020, the Intermediate People's Court of Luohe City, Henan, sentenced Wen Jinlu, the 75-year-old founder of Riyue Qigong, to 19 years in prison for organizing and promoting a *xie jiao* and for rape. Six other leaders received sentences ranging from two years and ten months to three years and six months. Authorities estimated that the movement had approximately 130,000 followers.

Despite being arrested and sent to a reeducation camp in 2000, Wen reorganized Riyue Qigong, which he had founded in 1994, and continued to attract followers. In 2017, Henan's Public Security conducted a raid, destroying the movement's headquarters and arresting Wen along with 26 devotees. Eight female devotees testified that Wen had raped them, which resulted in his conviction for rape in addition to promoting a *xie jiao*.

### *Xiang Gong*

In May 2021, multiple followers of the Buddhist master Tian Ruisheng were detained in Luoyang, Henan, for disseminating the teachings of the prohibited movement Xiang Gong, formerly known as "Buddha Qigong." Xiang Gong is classified as one of the "harmful Qigong organizations," facing the same measures as the *xie jiao*.

Tian Ruisheng (1927–?), born in 1927, claimed that a wandering Buddhist monk healed him at age 12 and imparted secret healing techniques. In 1988, during China's "Qigong boom," Tian began teaching esoteric Buddhism and Qigong practices. Initially, the CCP reported positively on Tian and his teachings, and he had attracted over a million followers by the early 1990s. However, he mysteriously disappeared in 1995, with the CCP stating he died of liver cancer, a claim his followers contested, asserting he chose a life of seclusion.

Following this, Tian's son, Tian Tongxin, assumed leadership of Xiang Gong. He was arrested for fraud in 1999. Despite numerous police efforts to suppress it, Xiang Gong maintains popularity within esoteric Buddhism and Qigong milieus.

### *Bodhi Gong*

In June 2023, the China Anti-Xie-Jiao Association, an anti-cult organization under CCP control, initiated a nationwide campaign against Bodhi Gong, branding it as a *xie jiao*. Also referred to as Bodhi Meditation, Bodhi Gong was established by Di Yuming (Grandmaster JinBodhi) in 1991.

Born in 1965 in Hebei, Di claimed to have studied Buddhism in Tibetan monasteries and asserted that he had healed from childhood illnesses through self-cultivation. He established Bodhi Gong in Beijing, which quickly gained popularity. Di later moved the movement's headquarters to Dalian, then to Guangzhou, expanding to 26 provinces. In 1999, he moved to Canada to support international growth. Bodhi Gong launched centers in various countries, including the US, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea.

Despite a crackdown in 2015 in China that led to the arrest of over 100 leaders, the movement continued. Trials persisted in 2023 and 2024, resulting in jail sentences for several members. Chinese

authorities claim that the group's branches in Taiwan and Malaysia conduct covert activities in China. However, evidence suggests that the group may now have fewer members within China than abroad.

### *Human Universal Science*

Human Universal Science, founded by Zhang Weixiang (1942–2006), was a significant Qigong movement in China that faced severe repression as 2000 approached. Zhang claimed he received communications from the “Great Ancestors” and “alien astronauts,” establishing the movement in 1982. Although it gained considerable popularity, it was labeled a *xie jiao* and banned in 1999, which resulted in Zhang's arrest in 2000. Following his release, Zhang's health declined, and he passed away in 2006.

The movement continued across different factions, including the Datong Base Faction, led by Yang Fangping, who was arrested in 2023. Another faction, headed by Su Xiaoliang, underwent police raids in 2023, leading to Su's arrest and subsequent sentencing in 2024. Despite the government's suppression, Zhang's teachings persist and flourish among various groups and on social media platforms, managing to evade authorities consistently.

### *Conclusion*

Following 1999, not every Qigong group in Mainland China encountered repression. In Taiwan, Tai Ji Men faced a political crackdown in 1996 and continued tax harassment, while other Qigong groups largely remained unaffected.

Although some Marxist thinkers view Qigong negatively, it is not prohibited in China. However, versions of Qigong associated with religious movements that include unique teachings and a charismatic leader are forbidden. These movements could threaten the Communist Party's control over ideological and political power.

Similarly, Tai Ji Men has faced persecution in Taiwan due to its strongly independent stance. Ultimately, the Qigong groups that experience repression in totalitarian regimes—and occasionally in democratic countries—are those that teach their members how the liberating power of Qi can lead to forms of independent thinking that authorities perceive as potentially dangerous.

## **2. Sacred Eroticism and Sexual Abuse: Social and Legal Issues**

### *“Witnessing for Sociology”*

In 1996, two American sociologists, Pamela Jenkins and Steve Kroll-Smith, edited *Witnessing for Sociology: Sociologists in Court*. They collected essays about the legal and deontological implications sociologists face as expert witnesses in court cases. The book included a chapter by James T. Richardson, a leading American scholar of new religious movements, on sociologists serving as expert witnesses for groups accused of being “cults” and using “brainwashing.”

In the United States, professional associations have exact rules for sociologists who accept work as expert witnesses. Having played this role a few times in the U.S., I found the rules not constraining but helpful. At least you know what you can and cannot do. Unfortunately, deontological rules are less clear in Europe. When I found myself in similar situations, I voluntarily relied on the American regulations to be safer.

I also believe that scholars of religion, and indeed of many other subjects, face a broader problem. When they write on contemporary issues, it is always possible that their articles and books will

become part of the evidence in court cases. Even if they did not write with court cases in mind, they can influence their outcome.

Nowhere is the matter more delicate than in cases of religious groups and individuals accused of sexual abuse. Prosecutors or the media may easily charge sociologists writing about the cases or testifying as expert witnesses with disrespecting the victims, and by defense attorneys with supporting witch hunts against movements and leaders accused unfairly. We must clarify that our role is to provide a broader context rather than discussing individual incidents, of which we may not be fully informed. There is also the risk that the media will use our testimonies to sensationalize even further cases that are already sensational enough.

Sacred eroticism groups and others practicing what is generally called “sex magic,” a label not particularly appreciated by its practitioners, are almost by definition at risk of being accused of sexual abuse. Usually, members will end up engaging in erotic practices with persons who are not their partners or lovers. The boundary between sacred erotic ritual and abuse may sometimes appear dangerously thin.

I will mention four cases in which I was involved in different capacities. In the first, I was an expert witness for the prosecution. In the second, I was an expert witness for the defense. In the third and fourth, I had no formal role as an expert witness (although cases are still pending and I may become one in the future), but I published about the movements, and the defense counsels used what I wrote.

### *The “Monster of Florence”*

Fourteen and perhaps sixteen homicides committed around Florence between 1968 (or 1974) and 1985 resulted in the most famous criminal case in the history of republican Italy. It generated several dozen books, countless articles, and a few movies. From 1974 to 1985, unknown assassins killed seven couples who had driven to secluded spots in the woods to make love in their cars. All crimes were committed using the same gun. After they killed them, the assassins removed the women’s genitals and their left breasts with precise knife incisions. Possibly, the same assassins had already gunned down another couple in similar circumstances in 1968.

After a lengthy hunt, the police identified three serial killers they claimed were acting together: Mario Vanni (1927–2009), Giancarlo Lotti (1940–2002), and Piero Pacciani (1925–1998). Vanni and Lotti were sentenced to life imprisonment, while the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Cassation were still struggling about the guilt of Pacciani when he died suddenly in 1998. The court verdicts mentioned a possible magical or ritual element in their crimes. The three dabbled in folk magic. During their detention, they attended rituals in jail clandestinely officiated by an inmate called Salvatore Indovino (1922–1986). They believed his last name, “fortune teller” in Italian, lent credibility to his claims of magical powers.

Prosecutors and judges were much more interested in how the three killers, two of whom were semi-literate and one a mailman with primary education only, had learned to make incisions of surgical precision on the women, why Pacciani, a modest peasant, had more than 150 million lira in bank accounts when he died and had purchased two expensive homes, and why exactly the assassins took the female body parts. The police thus continued to investigate and focused their attention on “fringe Masonic” groups practicing sex magic rituals in Tuscany and Umbria. “Fringe Masonry” is a label scholars and Freemasons use to designate groups whose rituals place them outside Masonic orthodoxy. The investigators hypothesized that one of these groups purchased the body parts from the killers. The suspicious death of a possible member of the group before the prosecutor could interrogate him appeared to support the hypothesis.

Having studied both sex magic groups and “fringe Freemasonry,” I was asked to prepare two expert reports in 2002 and to become part of the investigative team, which included some legendary

figures in the Italian police and judiciary. My reports were kept secret until 2022, when they were obtained (legally or illegally) and published by journalists. I refused all requests for interviews. Nonetheless, since some of the accused had political connections, I was attacked in the Parliament by a cabinet minister who claimed I was supporting a witch hunt against inoffensive practitioners of gnostic rituals. Those who have read even a few lines from my writings know nothing can be farther away from my ideas. My reports were rich in question marks. I did not offer any firm conclusion. I believed my role was to describe a context where magical ceremonies with body parts and homicides with ritual elements might theoretically have been possible. I could not know whether they happened in the Monster of Florence case.

The lengthy investigation did not end up in any prosecution, and at the end of it, those suspected were all dead. However, the mystery is still intriguing Italian public opinion and politicians. On July 12, 2022, I was summoned to appear before a parliamentary commission investigating major crimes and tell once again the story of my involvement in the investigation. The matter was still so sensitive that a part of my testimony was declared a state secret and excluded from publication. This only increased the interest and speculations of the media.

The story of the Monster of Florence still maintains dark spots after forty years. It taught me that serious sexual crimes may include magical elements. However, they should not be exaggerated, and prosecutors and experts should exercise great care to avoid inadvertently fueling a media sensationalism that is already unavoidable in cases involving sex, death, and crime.

### *The Prosecution and Death of Father Giorgio Govoni*

Another sensational case I was involved in was that of Father Giorgio Govoni (1941–2000), a Catholic parish priest from the Italian province of Modena. He was accused by a social worker, based on what she believed she had understood from her conversations with a four-year-old boy, Davide Tonelli Galliera, of operating a ritual magic “cult” involving many of his parishioners, where children were sexually abused and killed. No bodies were found, and no children had disappeared in the area, but the social worker insisted that “breeders” connected with the “cult” had given birth to unregistered babies used for the rituals.

I worked as an expert witness for the Diocese of Modena, which was persuaded of the priest’s innocence. I insisted that what the social worker claimed she had learned from the young boy was taken from published and dubious American sources about ritual child abuse. The prosecutor believed the priest guilty. His closing argument was so vicious that Father Govoni had a heart attack and died. While in the first degree, some of his alleged accomplices were sentenced, both the appeal and the Supreme Court of Cassation’s decisions implied that the priest was innocent. The Diocese celebrated Father Giorgio as a martyr, and the municipality where he served as a parish priest named a street after him. In 2017, a leading Italian daily newspaper produced a podcast on the story, for which I served as a consultant, and where an actor played my role.

Ultimately, the superior judges established that I was right, and the prosecutor and the social worker were wrong, but by that time, the priest had died. In 2025, Davide Tonelli Galliera, now in his thirties, published a book in which he revealed that, at the age of four, he had been threatened and manipulated by the social worker. He confirmed that the ritual abuses never occurred.

The story is part of a larger international phenomenon of ritual abuse scares, which led to the prosecution of many innocents. In the case of Father Govoni, the fact that other Catholic priests had been found guilty of very real crimes of sexual abuse played against him. However, in his case, the crimes and the abusive sex magic group were imaginary, and the priest was innocent.

This was one of the cases where an expert familiar with both real ritual sex magic and scares about imaginary crimes was instrumental in clarifying the facts. Unfortunately, my findings failed to

save the life of Father Govoni, although they eventually contributed to giving him back his honor, posthumously.

### *White Wolf, Shaman*

On September 27, 2024, a 72-year-old man, Cyrille Adam, known to his followers as Loup Blanc (White Wolf), was sentenced by the Criminal Court of Gard, France, to fifteen years in jail for rape and “abus de faiblesse.” The latter is a peculiar French crime introduced specifically against “cults” accused of using psychological techniques to manipulate their victims. Based on lengthy interviews with members, I had published the only scholarly study of the Loup Blanc community, which played a minor role in the trial and the subsequent 2025 appeal, where the penalty was raised to sixteen years.

Born in Chantilly, near Paris, in 1951, Adam was a spiritual seeker who traveled extensively, exploring and experimenting with Native American shamanism and the ritual use of the hallucinogenic tea Ayahuasca, Chinese Qi Gong, Indian Tantrism, and various schools of Western esotericism. He gave his first public lecture in France in 1982 and started accepting students, who created multiple associations during the following forty years. In 2001, a student bought the historical Castle of Granès in the French department of Tarn-et-Garonne, where most group activities took place in subsequent years.

Among Loup Blanc’s many teachings, derived from various sources, is a criticism of Christian puritanism and what he calls its teachings on an “imbecile and unreasonable chastity.” He believes eroticism can be a path to initiation and liberation. However, he also teaches that due to the Catholic ethos prevailing in France, esoteric teachings about sexuality should be imparted cautiously. Although some general ideas appear in his published works, his teachings about a Tantric path to enlightenment are only discussed in a manual available to members (who shared it with me during my research), but not to outsiders.

What Loup Blanc calls the Tantric path starts with a shock therapy aimed at overcoming the sense of guilt Christianity associates with eroticism. Members are encouraged to share sexy photos of themselves and experiment with sexual positions they have not tried before. This is preliminary to a second phase in which they are taught continence, i.e., sexual intercourse where the male partner does not ejaculate. Tantric initiations for the women might involve intercourse with Loup Blanc and were always proposed to a minority of the group’s members only.

In March 2020, a senior male student, who had personal issues with Loup Blanc, left the group. He started campaigning against it on social media and inciting a handful of female ex-members who were hostile to the spiritual leader to contact the French governmental anti-cult agency MIVILUDES. He aimed to induce them to file a complaint accusing Loup Blanc of using techniques of psychological manipulation (the typical “cult” crime in France), including on women who agreed to participate in the Tantric work. The ex-members claimed that, while they were in the movement, they not only consented but felt very happy about the sexual initiations; they now realized they were “sous emprise” (under psychological control) and had been raped. The complaint was filed, eventually leading to Loup Blanc’s arrest on December 8, 2021.

The defense submitted a list of 140 witnesses who filed statements claiming their experience in the Loup Blanc group was positive, including most of the female participants in the Tantric group. In my research, I also interviewed eight women who went through the sexual initiations. They reported they had known what they were doing, had not felt raped or abused, and derived spiritual benefits from the experience.

At trial, the prosecutor argued that the fact that a large number of women found the sacred eroticism rituals uplifting might be authentic, but was irrelevant. Even one single case that may be classified as rape was enough to declare the defendant guilty.



I agree that the argument is valid in an average rape case. The literary character Don Juan is based on a real person, the Spanish gentleman Miguel Mañara (1627–1679), who claimed no woman ever said no to him. Finally, he found one who did. He was so impressed by the girl that he fell desperately in love with her. When she died, he reconsidered his life and devoted the rest of his years to helping the poor. It was a moving story, told in a poetic way in 1912 in a drama by Lithuanian diplomat and playwright Oscar Vladislas de Lubicz Milosz (1877–1939). Unlike his musical counterpart in the opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), the real-life Don Juan was not taken to hell by the devil but is now considered by the Catholic Church as a candidate for beatification.

Suppose that, rather than respecting her choice, Don Juan would have raped the young woman who said no. Besides adversely affecting his chances of being beatified, he would have likely been prosecuted and sentenced. The testimony of hundreds of women who might have described the experience with him as rewarding would not have made him innocent of that single rape. On this general principle, I agree with the prosecutor in the Loup Blanc case.

However, those involving sacred eroticism spiritual movements are not average cases of rape. The *thema decidendum* is whether the sacred eroticism practices were fraudulent pretexts to allow the leaders to enjoy the company of female devotees or were what they claimed to be, i.e., religious rituals rooted in an esoteric tradition and aimed at achieving spiritual benefits for the disciples. To answer this question, a large majority's opinion is not irrelevant. Suppose most women who experienced them did understand the sacred eroticism practices as religious rituals, and only a handful, in most cases *ex post facto*, reconstructed them as a pretext for abuse. In that case, chances are that they *were* rituals.

This is not to deny that the discomfort of some ex-members may be very real. Their experiences should be considered on a case-by-case basis, examining all the circumstances, to understand what went wrong and whether, in cases running counter to the experiences of the majority of devotees, the leaders might have misunderstood the attitude of the women or forced them to act in ways they did not want. The leaders can be, in this case, guilty of abuse.

It is an entirely different matter when it is dogmatically affirmed that only the women who report these were bogus rituals devised to abuse them “tell the truth,” while those who offer a different interpretation are either lying or under “brainwashing.”

### *MISA and Gregorian Bivolaru*

The case of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute and its leader, Gregorian Bivolaru, currently detained in France and accused of “abus de faiblesse” and rape, just like Loup Blanc, is particularly delicate since it is about a pending trial. I am not involved in it, although I would not be against contributing my knowledge of the movement and its teachings if asked, having written the only book-length scholarly treatment of MISA.

Anti-cult critics have already suggested in blogs and social media that the argument successfully used by the prosecutor against Loup Blanc also applies to Bivolaru. In his case, the French police raided the premises of MISA in various locations in November 2023 based on complaints by seven hostile ex-members who claimed they went through erotic initiations with Bivolaru, who was arrested, without realizing they had been “brainwashed” to do it. The police claimed to have liberated twenty-six women, none of whom was French, who were at risk of being raped by Bivolaru. However, none of the twenty-six agreed to file complaints against Bivolaru. They proclaimed loud and clear that they went to France freely, understood the movement's teachings about sacred eroticism, and did not regard themselves as abused and trafficked victims in any way. Several confirmed this version to Canadian scholar Susan Palmer when she interviewed them. There are also hundreds of women (and men) ready to testify that they found the sacred eroticism practices of MISA uplifting and spiritually



rewarding. Confronted with this contrast of narratives, the prosecutor will probably answer with the argument used against Loup Blanc, that rape cases are not decided in a “democratic” way by counting how many women were happy and how many felt raped.

Another argument used against MISA, which also teaches continence, and similar groups, is that their references to Tantrism are fake and pretexts to justify their erotic practices. I am not an Indologist, but I often interact with some of them, and I have read a good deal of literature about “Tantrism” (I am aware that the word itself is contested). According to Indologist Shaman Hatley, some of his colleagues, rightly disturbed by those who offer “Tantric weekends” to bored couples, have been “inadequate” in providing “detailed studies on sexuality in traditional tantric practice systems.” It is equally false to represent Tantrism as dominated by eroticism only as to exclude eroticism from its teachings.

Others object that MISA’s is not a “genuine” Tantric teaching and has been dismissed by other groups teaching more authentic forms of Tantrism. However, who decides which Tantrism is “genuine”? As suggested by Harvard Indologist Keith Cantú, the notion of “authenticity” is often used as a political tool to serve specific interests. Both Cantú and Julian Strube support the conclusion that narratives of authenticity usually ignore that, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Indian masters and schools have been influenced by Western yoga and Tantra teachers as much as vice versa.

The ultimate question, again, is whether women may submit to an erotic initiation through an intimate encounter with a master freely and of their own will. I believe it is possible that during a sacred erotic ritual, some women are forced to continue an encounter they asked to stop. The risk is not theoretical only. The authorities should adequately investigate these cases.

On the other hand, assuming that willing women are never really willing, notwithstanding how they tell their story, and can only be under the spell of mind control, implies that experimenting with sacred eroticism is forbidden in general. Women who claim to have freely chosen a path of sacred eroticism, including non-conventional erotic experiences and embraces with spiritual masters or men who are not their partners, are placed in a Kafkaesque situation: either they admit they were abused, or they are accused of being “in denial” and “sous emprise.”

The implication seems to be that no woman, except one “brainwashed,” would submit to the erotic embrace with a man she is not in love with or to performing naked or in other erotically charged situations. Modern Western societies do not believe this in all cases. According to one sociological investigation, France may be among the first countries in the world for the number of clients of “clubs échangistes” (swingers clubs), where precisely women (and men) have short-term sexual encounters with (mostly) unknown partners. In 1954, it was in France that the novel *Histoire d’O* was published, featuring a woman who decides to submit herself to any sexual request of a club of men, most of whom she does not know. The club where the woman ends up was not generally denounced by readers and reviewers as a “cult,” submitting O to “brainwashing.” The women and men who visit the “clubs échangistes” are perhaps not socially regarded as models of morality, but what they do is not considered illegal.

Why are certain practices tolerated when women claim they go through them for recreational purposes, but not when they report their purpose is achieving spiritual enlightenment through eroticism? Perhaps one red line that in most Western societies should not be crossed is that religion and eroticism should not be offered together. In a modern democratic society, you can propose forms of religion most would regard as “strange,” and still get away with it. Consenting adults may also engage in a variety of non-conventional sexual and erotic practices without being bothered by the police or being told that, by definition, they cannot be consenting. What they will not be allowed to do is go through non-conventional erotic experiences and proclaim that they are part of their *religion*. This is a taboo that still holds. As a Swedish academic scholar of esotericism, Henrik Bogdan, wrote, “While it is clear that sexuality in a secular context has been quite a liberal issue during the twentieth century, ritualized sex in a religious context is a different matter. To engage in actual sexual intercourse as part

of sacred action—or indeed as the highest form of sacred action—must be considered to go against the accepted norms of Western religious practice.”

In most democratic societies, there is a reasonable degree of religious freedom and a significant degree of erotic freedom, but the freedom of mixing eroticism with religion is not guaranteed. Nevertheless, while remaining alert to possible abuses, I believe those who want to explore these unconventional paths should be free. The test of freedom of religion or belief is our tolerance for religious teachings and practices that most of society finds unacceptable, but are freely chosen by adult men and women.

## References

- Bitter Winter (2021). *The Tai Ji Men Case in Taiwan: The Path to Religious Liberty & Human Rights*. A Bitter Winter Anthology. Turin: Bitter Winter, and Taipei: Grand Justice Publishing.
- Bogdan, H. (2006). Challenging the Morals of Western Society: The Use of Ritualized Sex in Contemporary Occultism. *The Pomegranate*, 8 (2), 211–46.
- Cantú, K. (2020). “Don’t Take Any Wooden Nickels”: Western Esotericism, Yoga, and the Discourse of Authenticity. In: Asprem, E. & Strube, J. (Eds.), *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism* (pp. 109–26). Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Chao, K.-H., Chang, M.-Y., Yu, Y.-S., & Chen, A. (2021). *Who Stole Their Youth? 24 Years of Persecution: A Battle for Human Rights & Tax Justice in Taiwan*. Taipei: Grand Justice Publishing.
- Chen, N. N. (2003). *Breathing Spaces: Qigong, Psychiatry, and Healing in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chen, T.-L., Huang, C.-C., & Wu, C.-C. (2021). The Tai Ji Men Case: A Legal Analysis. *The Journal of CESNUR*, 5 (4), 77–99.
- Commissione parlamentare d’inchiesta sul fenomeno delle mafie e sulle altre associazioni criminali, anche straniere. 2022. Audizione del Professor Massimo Introvigne. July 12. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/4imLaPd>. Accessed April 20, 2025
- Giuttari, M. (2022). *I mostri di Firenze e il patto segreto*. Perugia: Morlacchi.
- Hatley, S. (2018). *The Brahmayāmalatantra or Picumata*. Volume I. Chapters 1–2, 39–40 & 83. *Revelation, Ritual and Material Culture in an Early Śaiva Tantra*. Pondichéry: Institut Français d’Indologie, École française d’Extrême-Orient, & Asien-Afrika-Institut, Universität Hamburg.
- Introvigne, M. (2022). *Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA)*. Milan and Udine: Mimesis International.
- Introvigne, M. (2023). *Loup Blanc: A French Shaman and the Anti-Cult Police*. *The Journal of CESNUR*, 7 (2), 3–28.
- Jenkins, P., & Kroll-Smith, S. (Eds.) (1996). *Witnessing for Sociology: Sociologists in Court*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Menegotto, A. (2009). Italian Martyrs of “Satanism”: Sister Maria Laura Mainetti and Father Giorgio Govoni. In: Petersen, J. A. (Ed.), *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology* (pp. 199–209). Farnham (U.K.), and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Milosz, O. W. de Lubicz (1912). *Miguel Mañara. Mystère en six tableaux*. Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française.
- Palmer, D. A. (2007). *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China*. London: Hurst & Company.

- Palmer, S. J. (2011). *The New Heretics of France: Minority Religions, la République, and the Government-Sponsored "War on Sects."* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Palmer, S. J. (2024). The Police Raids Against MISA in France, November 28, 2023. *The Journal of CESNUR*, 8 (2), 89–110.
- Palmer, S. J. (2025). #SheToo: "Second-wave Feminism" and Women's Tantra Experiences in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA). *The Journal of CESNUR*, 9 (2), 3–25.
- Réage, P. (1954). *Histoire d'O*. Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert.
- Richardson, J. T. (1996). Sociology and the New Religions: "Brainwashing," the Courts, and Religious Freedom. In: Jenkins, P. & Kroll-Smith, S. (Eds.), *Witnessing for Sociology: Sociologists in Court* (pp. 115–37). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Strube, J. (2022). *Global Tantra: Religion, Science, and Nationalism in Colonial Modernity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tan, M.-Y., Ding, P.-F., & Huang, C.-B. (2016). *Revelation: 20 Years of Oppression and Injustice. A History of Human Rights Struggles*. Taipei: Grand Justice Publishing.
- Tonelli Galliera, D. (2025). *Io, bambino zero. Come la giustizia ha fallito: la mia verità sul caso dei Diavoli della Bassa modenese*. Milan: Vallardi.
- Trincia, P., & Rafanelli, A. (dir.) (2017). *Veleno, Stagione I*. Podcast. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/4IFN5Bc>. Accessed April 20, 2025.
- Tsai, C.-A. (2021). Uncompleted Transitional Justice in Taiwan: Repression of Religious and Spiritual Minorities and the Tai Ji Men Case. *The Journal of CESNUR*, 5 (5), 68–93.
- Welzer-Lang, D. (2005). *La planète échangiste. Les sexualités collectives en France*. Paris: Payot & Rivages.

