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# Sacred Eroticism, Anti-Cultism, and the Revival of "Brainwashing" Narratives: An Emic View

Camelia Marin
*Soteria International*
marincamelia@yahoo.com

**ABSTRACT**: This article examines the resurgence of anti-cult rhetoric in Europe and its impact on minority spiritualities, particularly those practicing sacred eroticism. Despite the rejection of "brainwashing" theories by mainstream psychology and sociology, anti-cult networks have successfully re-engineered these narratives into potent legal and political tools. Through case studies such as the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), the paper demonstrates how apostates, media sensationalism, and theatrical police raids construct moral panics that criminalize consensual esoteric practices. The analysis situates these dynamics within a broader historical continuum, recalling the persecution of the Cathars and other minority faiths, and highlights the paradox whereby secular societies celebrate sexual experimentation yet repress identical behaviors when embedded in spiritual frameworks. Drawing on comparative religious traditions—Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—the article shows that consecration and bodily ritual have long been central to spiritual life. Scholarly perspectives from Mircea Eliade, John Woodroffe, and William James further validate the transformative, non-pathological nature of mystical erotic states. Ultimately, the paper argues that sacred eroticism represents a legitimate, historically grounded, and legally protected path of human flourishing. It calls for a mature, inclusive discourse that dismantles weaponized anti-cult taboos and affirms freedom of conscience as a fundamental human right.

**KEYWORDS**: Sacred Eroticism, Anti-Cult Movement, Brainwashing, MISA, Tantra.

## *Introduction*

In the contemporary study of minority spiritualities, the greatest threat to freedom of conscience is the aggressive resurgence of an unscientific myth: the narrative of "brainwashing" and "psychological manipulation." This paper examines how contemporary anti-cult networks—composed of specialized advocacy groups, state-sponsored committees, and sensationalist media outlets—have successfully revived these outdated psychological models specifically to target, criminalize, and repress movements practicing sacred eroticism.

This paper's central focus is an acute contemporary paradox. While modern secular societies aggressively defend and celebrate boundary-pushing sexual experimentation, non-normative relationships, and bodily expression in art,

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media, and secular therapy, immediate institutional repression is triggered the exact moment those identical behaviors are embedded within a minority spiritual framework.

By analyzing contemporary case studies—such as the international actions against the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), a school of which I am myself a student—this paper highlights the structural mechanics of anti-cult modus operandi. I argue that anti-cult actors construct a highly effective circular logic: they persuade prosecutors and courts that no "normal" adult would ever freely choose to engage in esoteric erotic rituals. Therefore, they claim, the practitioners must be "brainwashed." This epistemological refusal to acknowledge the internal value systems and historical lineages of alternative paths leads directly to systematic violations of fundamental human rights under the guise of "protecting" victims.

## *"Brainwashing"*

The concept of "brainwashing" or "coercive control" as an explanation for religious conversion has been repeatedly rejected by mainstream sociology of religion and the American Psychological Association (APA) since the late twentieth century (Introvigne 2014, 2022a). Despite this scientific consensus, anti-cult activism has successfully re-engineered this rhetoric to create a potent legal tool. In everyday media and court cases, the "brainwashing" story is used as a tool to:

- take away personal choice: it treats adult practitioners as if they lack the intelligence or right to control their own bodies and spiritual beliefs. By calling someone "manipulated," the state completely ignores and cancels their voluntary, adult consent.
- Label minority beliefs as mental illness: Instead of seeing alternative spiritual choices as acts of free will, it treats them as signs of psychological trauma, unhealthy dependency, or a damaged mind.
- Force people to fit in: It acts as a way to enforce social conformity. It establishes a rule that if an adult's choice looks too different from mainstream society, it must be a result of psychological pressure.

When anti-cult groups successfully push this unscientific language into prosecutors' offices, they turn normal, consensual spiritual practices into fabricated crimes of mind control.

### *"Apostates"*

A critical operational mechanism in the anti-cult apparatus is the systemic recruitment and deployment of apostates (Bromley 1998)—former members who are weaponized as strategic tools to disrupt and destabilize alternative spiritual groups. These individuals often target millennia-old practices that are completely forgotten or profoundly misunderstood by modern secular society.

Within the dynamics of anti-cult moral panics, apostates perform several key functions:

- creating hostile legal testimony: Anti-cult networks actively recruit former members to give highly biased, negative testimony in court. This is a common tactic in messy child custody battles when one parent is part of a stigmatized spiritual group, or when government agencies need an excuse to claim a group is violating minor regulations.
- The fake "whistleblower" label: The media and anti-cult groups take these personal stories and automatically label the former members as objective "experts" or brave "whistleblowers." This satisfies a public appetite for dramatic, behind-the-scenes scandals about mysterious groups.
- One-sided media coverage: There is a huge imbalance in the news. The dramatic personal grievances of a few former members easily get front-page headlines and TV coverage. Meanwhile, objective sociological reports showing the actual, peaceful day-to-day life of the spiritual group are completely ignored.

Constantly pushing these negative stories triggers massive social and financial damage. It pushes peaceful citizens to the margins of society—ruining their careers, cutting off their livelihoods, and trapping them in expensive, unfair legal battles just because of their personal beliefs and choices of conscience.

When we look at the wave of anti-cult movements moving across European nations—such as France, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Italy—a troubling

pattern stands out. Under the noble goal of fighting human trafficking or preventing sexual abuse, states have passed highly expansive surveillance laws and security policies that explicitly target minority spiritualities. These specialized laws allow for highly disproportionate, aggressive state interventions in peaceful, law-abiding communities. The real-world execution of this policy relies on the spectacularization of police raids (Wright and Palmer 2016).

Instead of standard, non-violent judicial inquiries or normal court summons, state authorities launch massive, military-style operations. Heavily armed, masked tactical units smash into private ashrams, yoga studios, and the homes of peaceful practitioners at dawn.

Crucially, these armed units are almost always accompanied by pre-invited news crews and tabloid journalists. This is a calculated strategy of theatrical enforcement, designed not to gather evidence, but to instantly generate intense public shock and moral panic.

Follows a trial by media. By broadcasting images of automatic weapons and tactical teams surrounding yoga centers, the state cements a public narrative of absolute guilt before a court of law can even review the facts. The media spectacle reinforces public suspicion, visually validating the "cult" label through raw physical shock, public degradation, and manufactured terror.

## *Learning from History*

Learning from history, we can see that these modern dynamics—the alignment of anti-cult actors, weaponized psychological labels, and state force—are nothing new. Both ancient history and modern records contain clear examples where state institutions have aggressively persecuted peaceful spiritual communities based on manufactured stories of deviance and public panic.

In medieval southern France, the Albigensian Crusade and the subsequent early Inquisitions were launched to eliminate the Cathars, a spiritual movement that preached an austere form of Christianity opposed to dogmatic Catholic orthodoxy. State and church authorities painted the Cathars as dangerous heretics who threatened social cohesion (Pegg 2008).

More recently, in stable Western democracies, state apparatuses have explicitly integrated anti-cult mandates into administrative laws to profile minority

spiritualities systematically. A primary example is the persistent use of the "Sect Filter" (Sektenfilter) in Germany, an administrative mechanism designed to exclude members of specific minority religions from public employment, commercial bids, and civic participation (Introvigne 2021).

Similarly, official state reports—such as those delivered to the French government by anti-cult advisory committees like MIVILUDES—have formally targeted yoga teachers who mix kundalini or Tantra with regular postural exercises, moving them to the top of state surveillance lists under the unscientific label of "mind control" to justify aggressive, state-sanctioned discrimination (Palmer 2011).

In a historic post-war precedent, the Tokyo District Court and Tokyo High Court ordered the complete institutional dissolution of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly the Unification Church). Spurred by political panic following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954–2022), the judiciary stripped the religious corporation of its legal and tax-exempt status, triggering the immediate liquidation of its properties and assets. Crucially, the court explicitly relied on an anti-cult framing of "mental manipulation." By ruling that the group employed techniques that "suppressed" free will, the judiciary imposed the ultimate institutional death penalty on a religious community without a single criminal conviction against the organization itself, a move heavily condemned by international law experts as a catastrophic blow to freedom of religion and association (Duval 2026).

## *Why Sacred Eroticism?*

When you look closely at why sacred eroticism is so easily targeted by anti-cult groups and turned into media scandals, the root cause becomes clear. Mainstream legal systems and media channels suffer from a total lack of historical and theological literacy. They do not understand how ancient wisdom traditions successfully integrated Eros into a holy life. Anti-cult rhetoric relies heavily on the public's modern puritanical taboos, intentionally framing physical or erotic offerings as weird, isolated, and deviant behaviors invented by dangerous modern "cults." But if we open the history books, a completely different reality emerges. The conscious act of offering up the fruits of one's body and

actions to a higher, godly power is a universal constant shared by the world's major religions.

Take Hinduism, for example. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the entire path of Karma Yoga centers on *phala-tyāga*—the absolute detachment from the fruits or rewards of our actions. It teaches that acting without egotistical desire transforms ordinary, everyday physical tasks into a *yajña*, a sacred spiritual sacrifice. The text explicitly demands that every single physical act, down to the food you eat, must be offered up as a total consecration to the Divine (Zaehner 1969, 2:47).

Christianity mirrors this same internal structure through the concept of the living sacrifice, or *sacrificium vivum*. The Apostle Paul famously commanded believers to present their very bodies as a living sacrifice to God as a spiritual act of worship. In both Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mysticism, this became a daily practice where ordinary life is elevated into a holy offering. Brother Lawrence (Nicholas Herman, 1614–1691) illustrated this perfectly through his own life, demonstrating that one could experience the divine presence just as profoundly amidst the daily clutter, noise, and grease of a monastery kitchen as during the most solemn moments of silent prayer before the altar (Brother Lawrence 1895).

We see this same discipline in Judaism through the frameworks of *kavanah*—the intense inner focus of the heart—and *dveikut*, which means complete attachment to the Divine. Early Kabbalists noted that spiritual completion requires transforming our natural, selfish desire to receive into a pure intention to bring pleasure to the Creator. They explicitly applied this sacred focus to ordinary, worldly spaces, including daily meals and the intimate dynamics of marital life, to distinguish the holy from the profane (Segol 2021).

Even Islamic theology achieves a parallel structural model through *tawakkul*, which means absolute surrender to the divine will, and *zuhd*, the detachment from lower, transient worldly desires. Through the Sufi practice of *dhikr*—the continuous internal remembrance of the divine presence—practitioners turn every breath, heartbeat, and action into a state of uninterrupted communion with God. Across all these faiths, history shows that human beings have always used ritual to align their physical reality with a higher spiritual purpose (Bashir 2011).

To navigate modern biases, we must ground ourselves in rigorous scholarship. The leading historian of world religions, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), spent his career studying how ancient traditions experienced the divine through

everyday life. In his foundational text *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Eliade analyzed the sacred erotic practices of Tantra and Eastern wisdom traditions, explaining how they transform physical desire into a transcendent state. He observed that the integration of the sexual life into the spiritual life is a major conquest of Indian thought, where

> Sexuality was no longer a psychophysiological situation, that it was valorized as ritual... If the sexual plane is sanctified and homologized to the planes of ritual and myth, the same symbolism also operates in the opposite direction—the ritual is explained in sexual terms (Eliade 1958, 256).

Through Eliade's work, we see that the split between the body and the spirit is a modern misunderstanding; ancient wisdom traditions recognized the erotic as a bridge to the sacred.

However, Western audiences have historically misunderstood this bridge—a problem directly tackled by Sir John Woodroffe (who wrote under the pseudonym Arthur Avalon, 1865–1936). Woodroffe was a pioneer who translated and defended Eastern Tantric texts, striving to rescue them from being labeled as "vulgar" or "immoral" by colonial commentators (Borkataky-Varma and Foxen 2025). In his landmark book *Shakti and Shākta*, he clarified that true sacred eroticism requires supreme mastery over oneself, not reckless indulgence. He translated traditional principles, noting that the true hero is not he who is of great physical strength and prowess, or a man of powerful sexual energy, but he who has controlled his senses, and is a truth-seeker who has overcome lust without abandoning eroticism (Avalon 1918).

## *MISA*

A clear example of these principles in practice can be found in contemporary esoteric groups such as MISA (the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute), which brings these ancient traditions into modern focus. Through their integration of Tantric and Hatha Yoga, they emphasize erotic amorous continence—the conscious sublimation and redirection of sexual energy into a higher life force. Central to this path is the practice of consecration, in which intimate energy is intentionally offered to the Divine or to the highest spiritual ideals rather than wasted.

This deep practice relies on two clear mechanisms that demand intense self-mastery, making the anti-cult claim that practitioners are "passive,

brainwashed victims" highly ironic. First, they practice erotic amorous continence, which is the conscious retention and redirection of sexual energy during intimate relations, completely avoiding physical depletion. The intimate act begins with a formal consecration, in which the entire experience and its energetic fruits are deliberately offered to the Divine or a higher moral ideal, rather than spent on purely egoic satisfaction. Second, they use transmutation, which acts as a highly sensitive biological and spiritual filter. Instead of letting vital force dissipate through ordinary physical release, transmutation absorbs that raw, potent drive and elevates it into higher frequencies of consciousness. It converts somatic energy directly into profound emotional love, heightened intellectual clarity, creative artistic inspiration, and expanded states of mystical awareness. In practical application, this internal alchemy is supported by a structured, daily discipline aimed at direct communion with objective godly principles.

Rather than asking practitioners to follow a rigid, dogmatic belief system, these schools, including the MISA yoga school, focus on the systematic study of what they call "Godly Attributes"—to actively ground practitioners and help them discover God through inner experience. By systematically meditating upon distinct universal facets—ranging from Godly Aspiration, Freedom, and Justice to Elevated Godly Pleasure, Pure Eros, and Transfiguration—the practitioner transitions from abstract theory to direct, living revelation. This method provides a clear, replicable phenomenological discipline: daily exemplifications performed in unison trigger measurable psychological synchronicities, subtle emotional refinement, and states of unconditional love, effectively establishing an interior, health-promoting compass (Introvigne 2022b).

From a psychological and sociological perspective, these subjective transcendent experiences are entirely non-pathological. As the father of modern psychology, William James (1842–1910), famously pointed out, these kinds of mystical states are entirely non-pathological. They do not cause delusions or disconnect people from reality. On the contrary, they produce highly constructive, practical outcomes: increased moral responsibility, a radical reduction in existential anxiety, and enhanced empathy. They are validated precisely by their healthy, life-affirming fruits, completely contradicting the anti-cult narrative of psychological subjugation.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James established four precise criteria for validating authentic mystical states: ineffability, a noetic quality,

ephemerality, and passivity (in which the personal ego feels suspended and governed by a superior, upward power) (James 1902).

The anti-cult assertion that practitioners are victims of a pathological brainwashing mechanism is thoroughly debunked when analyzing the specific, highly structured experiential responses reported by practitioners. When a consecration and subsequent transmutation are successful, the individual experiences a predictable sequence of psychological phenomena: a profound flow of subtle energy, an unexpected state of euphoric peace, and an intense, pure inner awakening.

## *Conclusion*

Ultimately, the study of sacred eroticism and the repression of minority spiritualities brings us to a critical human rights intersection. The international legal framework for religious freedom explicitly protects the right of all individuals to manifest their deepest convictions through worship, observance, practice, and teaching. The ability to consecrate—to step back, invest our choices with deeper meaning, and align our bodies and actions with a higher spiritual ideal—is a natural human capacity that belongs to everyone, whether they are religious or secular.

As for Tantrism, Daniel Odier concludes that

> The Tantric way is open to all the richness of human nature, which it accepts without a single restriction. It is probably the only spiritual path that excludes nothing and no one, and, in this way, it corresponds to the deep aspirations of women and men today. Those who accept the marvelous recognition of female power and the feminine part within themselves, a source of richness and continual development, no longer have a position to defend in the war between the sexes. They have integrated this recognition and gone beyond the persistent duality that impedes all deep progress (Odier 1997, 22).

As relationship expert Esther Perel correctly notes,

> Eros is an antidote to death... It is about how people connect to this quality of aliveness, of vibrancy, of vitality, of renewal. And that is way beyond the description of sexuality. And it is mystical. It is actually a spiritual, mystical experience of life. It is a transcendent experience of life... (Tippett 2019).

The field of religious studies must actively work to deconstruct these weaponized anti-cult taboos. It is our scholarly and ethical duty to demand a mature, legally rigorous, and inclusive public discourse—one that recognizes the erotic-spiritual path not as a product of psychological manipulation, but as a

profoundly responsible, historically validated, and legally protected avenue for human healing, personal vitality, and genuine connection.

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