



# The Fear of the Occult and Politics

Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR)  
American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting  
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# An Occult Campaign



- Cartoons about Trump as the Devil were not the main occult reference in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Much more relevant was the accusation that Clinton's campaign manager, John Podesta, participated in "Satanic rituals" organized by contemporary artist Marina Abramović

# An Artist's Story



- ▶ In fact, Podesta never attended Abramovič's "spirit cooking" dinners (his brother did). Neither is the artist a Satanist. She elaborated what she called the Abramovič Method, which heals through something that is artistic performance and ritual at the same time. The method uses quartz, crystal, and other sacred stones, magnets, a search for the Earth's energy lines, and old Eastern techniques such as counting the grains of rice. Some of Abramovič's rituals (including the "spirit cooking") are derived from Santeria, and she also cooperated with the Brazilian Spiritualist healer John of God and actually served as a Spiritualist medium during some of John's services.



# The Fear of the Elites

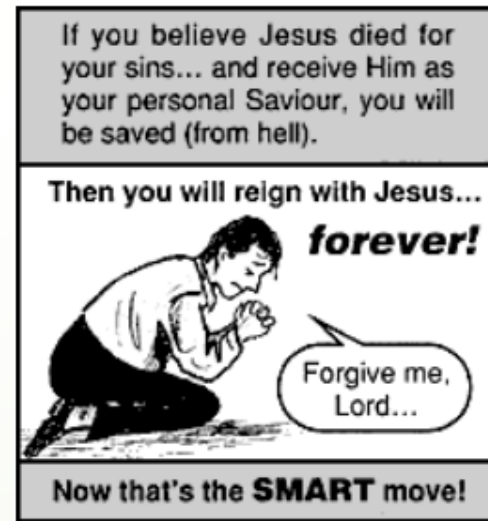
- Even more interesting than Abramovič's actual teachings is that accusations that she and the Clinton campaign were somewhat involved in Satanism was widely believed and reported without ridicule even by mainline media. Populist politicians like to depict their enemies as part of secret groups involved in the occult. It started with accusations against Queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) in revolutionary France, and went on with the campaigns against Freemasonry in the 19th century, where Freemasons were accused – falsely – of worshiping the Devil. Basically, it never stopped. It is part of a certain populist rhetoric. The fear of the occult becomes the fear of the elites





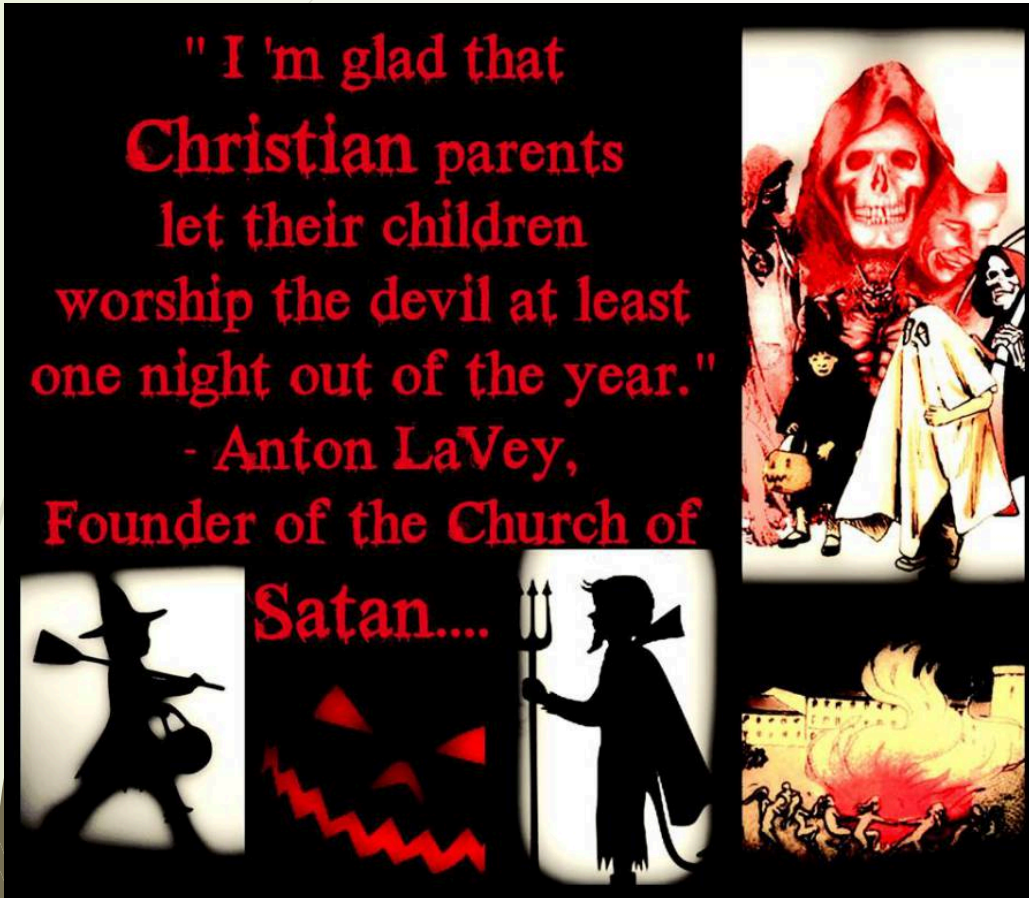
# Happy Halloween

- My second example is about Italy. Before Halloween 2016, I posted on my Facebook page an explanation about the Catholic origins of Halloween. I insisted that the campaign connecting Halloween with Satanism originated with the counter-cult, and rabidly anti-Catholic, American activist Jack T. Chick (1924-2016, right). Italian Catholics repeated his theories ignoring their source



# Chick and Halloween

**" I 'm glad that  
Christian parents  
let their children  
worship the devil at least  
one night out of the year."  
- Anton LaVey,  
Founder of the Church of  
Satan....**



- Three arguments of the anti-Halloween campaign, all demonstrably false, did not exist before Chick: (i) in the night of Halloween, occult and Satanist cults perform their main initiation ceremonies; (ii) more crimes occur in the night of Halloween than in any other night of the year; (iii) Church of Satan's Anton LaVey (1930-1997) encouraged Satanists to persuade Christian parents to let their children participate in Halloween, thus worshipping Satan in that night



# The Halloween Wars



- The main purpose of my posting was to collect and analyze the reactions. I knew I was stepping into the “Halloween Wars,” opposing every year in Italy those celebrating Halloween and critics arguing that it is a satanic feast



# A Facebook Survey



The screenshot shows a Facebook post by Sara Mura with a link to a website. Below the post are two comments from Hermann Sta and Tullio Rotondo. At the bottom, there is a link to a dossier on Halloween.

**Sara Mura** · Jacopo Coghe e altri 72 sono amici comuni  
<http://www.bolognatoday.it/.../halloween-curia-preghiera...>

**Curia vs Halloween: 'Un cristiano non può accettare tale festa'**  
BOLOGNATODAY.IT

Mi piace · Rispondi · Rimuovi anteprima · 25 ottobre alle ore 12:11

**Hermann Sta** questo vescovo è un bigottone, ed è pure ignorante, non conosce le origini cattoliche della festa 😊  
Rispondi · 5 · 25 ottobre alle ore 12:13

**Tullio Rotondo** · 96 amici in comune  
Ignoranti pure gli esorcisti come p. Amorth e i Vescovi della Romagna ... ignoranti sono esperti come don Bonaiuto etc ... che sanno bene come stanno le cose .... a differenza di M. Introvigne ? Mi meraviglio che M. Introvigne dica certe cose e ch... Altro...

**Dossier su Halloween, festa satanica da evitare assolutamente**  
APOLOGETICA-CATTOLICA.NET | DI DON TULLIO

- As I have 5,000 friends on Facebook of very different persuasions, the study of the reactions (more than 1,000) was statistically significant. 74,8% of the reactions were positive. However, those reacting positively liked and shared, while the opponents (25,2%) were the majority (86%) of those posting increasingly excited comments

# The Anti-Halloween Camp

- ▶ The survey showed that proponents of the satanic origins of Halloween included pseudo-former Satanists turned Eyangelicals, Catholic exorcists (which in Italy are still quite active), journalists, anti-cultists, and even some Catholic bishops



**Fausto Grassi** · Jacopo Coghe e altri 41 sono amici comuni  
lo sto con Padre Amorth.



Mi piace · Rispondi · 🇺🇸 2 · 25 ottobre alle ore 14:06



**Mat Teo Alessandro Ferrati**

Mi piace · Rispondi · 25 ottobre alle ore 14:14



**Rossella Campagnini** direi che quanto dicono gli esorcisti su halloween ( nel linguaggio dei satanisti significa gloria a satana ", poi c'è il significato comune in inglese... mi basta e avanza...

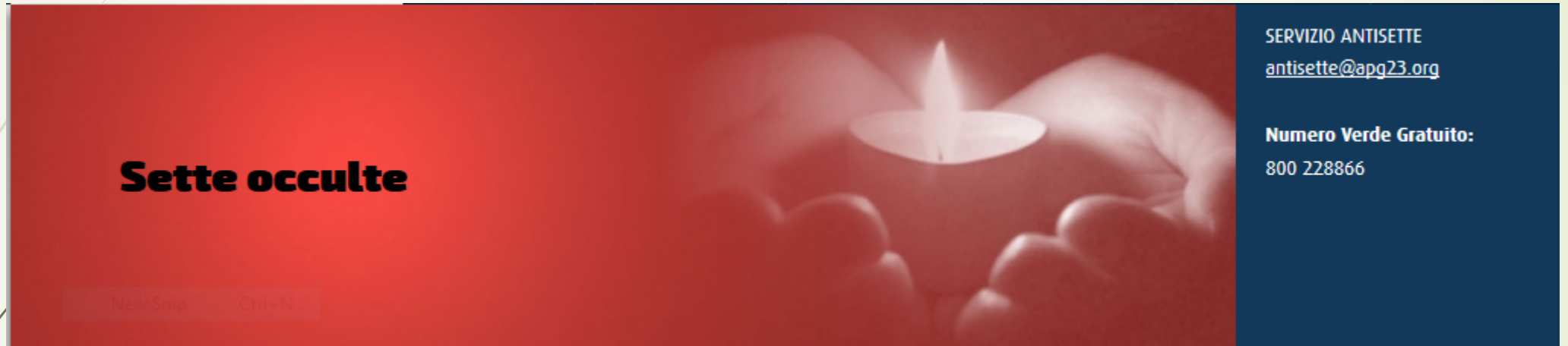
# Enter Father Buonaiuto



- Most of the arguments for the Italian anti-Halloween campaign came from Jack T. Chick, but the journey from Chick to Italy was long. My survey evidenced the crucial role of a specific Italian Catholic exorcist, Father Aldo Buonaiuto (left), who wrote a book on the subject and managed to appear in several talk shows claiming that on Halloween “occult cults” recruit new “victims” and commit serious crimes. Buonaiuto had been investigated for the alleged sexual abuse of a 5-year old boy, but in 2004 he was exonerated of all charges and not committed to trial



# Buonaiuto and the “Occult Cults”



- In 2002, Father Buonaiuto founded something called “Anti-Cult Service” within a respected Catholic movement, the Community Pope John XXIII. The Anti-Cult Service offers a toll-free number that people concerned with “cults” may call. According to its Web site, since 2002 it got 2,613 calls and some 696 cases were in fact “treated.” The Service is not the only anti-cult organization in Italy, but it is the only one that claims to specialize in “occultism, esotericism, and Satanism.”

# 2004: The Beasts of Satan Tragedy

LUNEDÌ 7 GIUGNO 2004 MILANO CRONACA LA REPUBBLICA III

Il lavoro dei criminologi a Somma Lombardo. L'antropologa Cattaneo: ecco come abbiamo trovato i corpi dei due ragazzi

## Si allarga l'inchiesta sulla setta

*Morti sospette, si cercano collegamenti nei luoghi dei satanisti*

rolle etniche e le borse con le impronte, c'è posto per l'abbigliamento e i gadget metal, dischiare borse e cassette con la faccia stampata di Marilyn Manson. Ed è forse in un'ora di tanti sabodi passati tra le bancarelle...

volante mezzo ettaro di bosco, a volte ci sembrava di aver trovato qualcosa, ma poi erano resti di animali», spiega l'antropologa Cattaneo. L'antropologa del gruppo, si è rivolta pezzo per pezzo la zona che Andrea Volpe aveva indicato, cercando di...

il lavoro è stato lungo e delicato, perché il posto è pieno di esperti, con l'aiuto dei cani, del geografo e del metal detector, ha dovuto rivoltare pezzo per pezzo la zona che Andrea Volpe aveva indicato, cercando di...



Le indagini continuano

I sospetti del fratello

“Andrea voleva andarsene”

- In 2004, a small Satanist group connected with the extreme Black Metal musical subculture, the Beasts of Satan, was raided by the police in Northern Italy. Eight persons were eventually found guilty of various crimes, including three homicides. They appeared to be one of the exceedingly rare instances of genuine human sacrifices performed in the name of Satan, although the members of the groups who were sacrificed had also expressed some dissent from the leaders

# An Invented Cult: The Angels of Sodom

## PANORAMA

### Il sacerdote dell'orrore

Minorenni adescati, festini con droga e alcol, teschi bolliti. I segreti inconfessabili del reverendo «cenere», l'uomo che si crede un amico di Satana

### Pedofili e satanisti, quattro arresti

PESCARA - Lo hanno sorpreso all' alba. Sotto casa. Mentre, con la sua ultima adepta, rientrava dal classico giro di notte a Roma. Stanchi, stressati da un appostamento che sembrava essere andato a vuoto, gli uomini della Squadra mobile di Pescara non sono stati certo teneri. "Hei, Jan", gli hanno

### Riti satanici, nove anni

CHIETI. E' stato condannato a 9 anni e due mesi di reclusione per spaccio di droga (7 anni) e per profanazione di tombe (2 anni e 2 mesi). Giovanni

- Buonaiuto became famous for his work as an expert in the court case against the Angels of Sodom, which he described as a dangerous Satanic cult in the Italian region of the Abruzzi, led by a local musician. The latter was eventually recognized as guilty of drug-related offenses, but the court decisions did not confirm that a Satanist cult really existed, a circumstance the media failed to appreciate



# The Strange Case of the Anti-Cult Squad

MODULARIO  
INTERNO 314

MOD. 4 P.S.C.



*Ministero dell'Interno*

DIPARTIMENTO DELLA PUBBLICA SICUREZZA

N.225/UAG/2006 - ~~64767~~ - U

Roma, 2 NOV 2006

OGGETTO: Attività di contrasto agli illeciti connessi alle attività delle “sette sataniche”. Istituzione della S.A.S. (Squadra Anti Sette).

AL SIGNOR VICE DIRETTORE GENERALE  
DELLA PUBBLICA SICUREZZA

- On November 2, 2006, in the wake of the emotion created by the Beasts of Satan and Angels of Sodom cases, the then Chief of the Italian Police, Gianni De Gennaro, issued a circular letter on “combating the illegal acts of satanic cults.” He announced the creation of a special and secretive “Anti-Cult Squad” (Squadra Anti-Sette, SAS) within the Italian Police. It was an extraordinary document, and this for three different reasons

# An Italian Anomaly



- First, Italy does not have a strong anti-cult movement. It is not France or Russia. Anti-cult movements do exist, but they are rarely taken seriously by quality media. Groups labeled as “cults” elsewhere are socially accepted in Italy. Soka Gakkai signed a concordat with the Italian government in 2015. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hare Krishna (ISKCON) was officially celebrated in the House of Parliament on October 4, 2016 (above: I was one of the speakers)

# The Rise and Fall of Plagio



- In Italy, it is also particularly difficult to introduce statutes incriminating brainwashing, as something similar under the name of *plagio* (undue influence) existed since 1930. After it was used against leaders of religious movements, including the Catholic Father Emilio Grasso (right, with Pope Francis), the Constitutional Court eliminated it from the Italian Criminal Code in 1981. The Court argued that it might easily lead to incriminate unpopular ideas



# Satanism: The Only Target?

dalla magia alla stregoneria, dallo spiritismo al cannibalismo e vampirismo, manifestazioni apparentemente folkloristiche che però, non di rado, sono sfociate nella commissione di gravissimi crimini, quali omicidi, stragi, violenze sessuali.

- ▶ The second anomaly of Di Gennaro's 2005 letter is that it indicated as its subject matter fighting "satanic cults," yet the lengthy discussion mentioned features anti-cultist commonly attribute to "cults" in general, including mysterious "techniques of psychological conditioning." The usual suspects of the anti-cult literature – including the Hare Krishna, the Moonies, or Scientology – were not mentioned, and it was stated that the Anti-Cult Squad should focus on "magic, witchcraft, Spiritualism, cannibalism, and vampirism" because there it would find "homicides, massacres, and sexual violence"

# Father Buonaiuto, Again

In tale ottica sarà certamente utile ogni forma di raccordo con le iniziative avviate, sotto forma di volontariato, nell'ambito della società civile ed in particolare con l'Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, che già ha avviato una specifica attività intesa ad analizzare gli aspetti dei comportamenti di gruppi pseudoreligiosi e con i responsabili del Numero Verde Nazionale Servizio Anti-Sette Occulte, (800228866 attivo 24 ore su 24) che è entrato in funzione a partire dall'anno 2002.

- Anomaly number three: although a secular anti-cult organization was also mentioned, the letter made no secret of the fact that the Anti-Cult Squad was expected to cooperate with Buonaiuto's Anti-Cult Service of the Community Pope John XXIII. Buonaiuto was officially designated as an auxiliary of the Anti-Cult Squad, and an expert capable of indicating which groups were "pseudo-religious." One should consider the magnitude of the anomaly: the police of a secular State hired a *Catholic exorcist* to designate which esoteric groups were "pseudo-religious" and dangerous

# “Esoterico-Religious Crimes”

Ciò ha determinato la necessità di rivedere le competenze nella prevenzione e nel contrasto dei *“reati commessi nell’ambito esoterico-religioso”*, che rimangono pur sempre un obiettivo importante.

- In fact, Buonaiuto’s approach influenced the whole letter. It was premised on the idea that a new category of crimes were being committed in Italy, “esoterico-religious crimes,” somewhat connected to Satanism – or perhaps to Satan himself, as described in the subculture of the exorcists – but going well beyond the scope of the explicitly Satanist groups



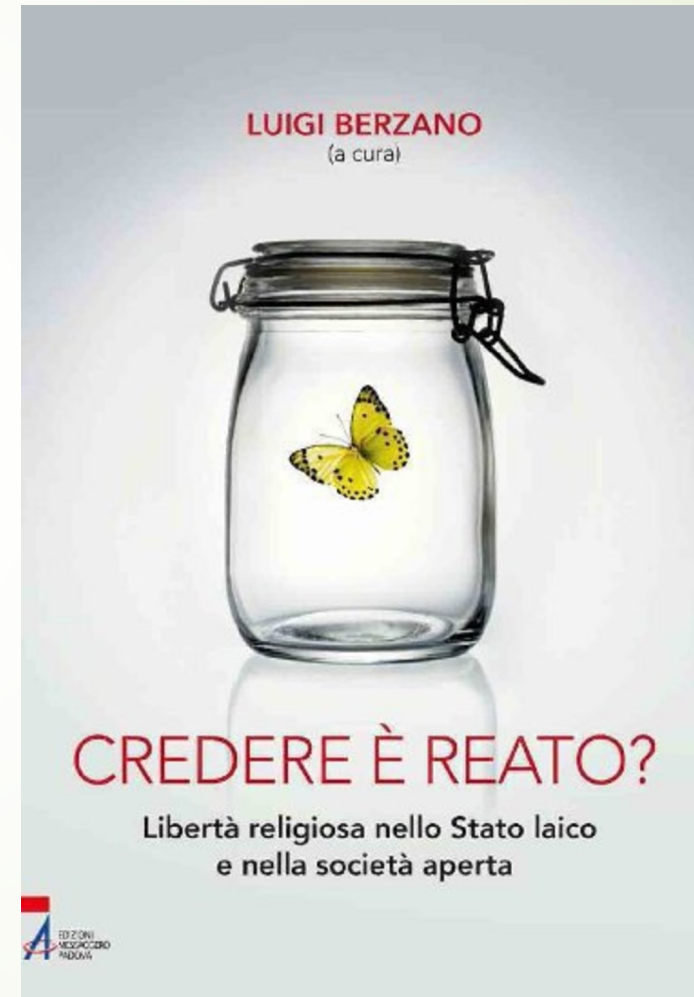
# “Occult in Italy” (2011)



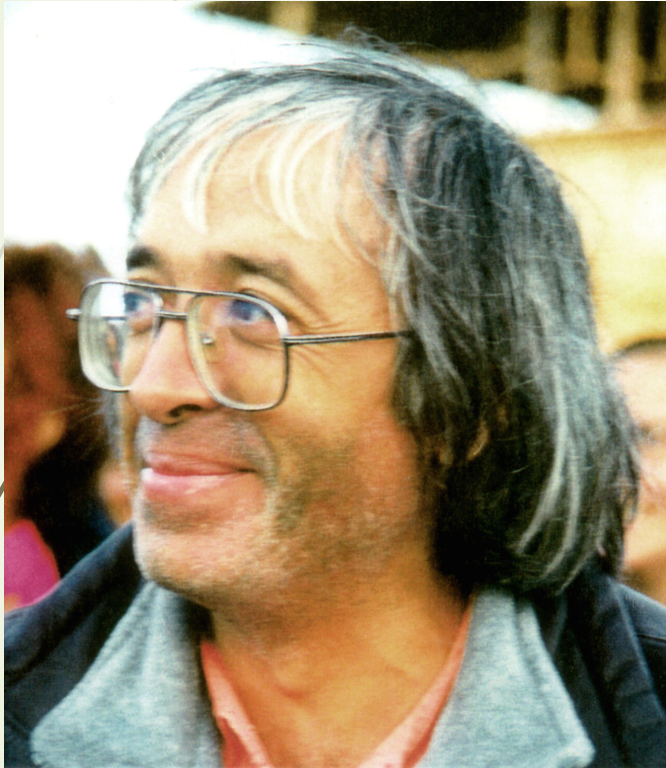
- While the Anti-Cult Squad did not achieve very significant results, in 2011 the fear of the occult in Italy was promoted by a book, *Occulto Italia*, authored by two left-wing journalists, Gianni Del Vecchio and Stefano Pitrelli. They included into “the occult” Scientology and Soka Gakkai in order to “prove” that “occult cults’ in Italy had infiltrated the Parliament, large corporations, and perhaps the government itself

# “Is Believing a Crime?” (2012)

- ▶ A number of Italian academics and legal scholars reacted to “Occult in Italy” with a book, *Credere è reato?*, published in 2012. I was one of the authors. The general editor was Luigi Berzano, a sociologist and a Catholic priest, and the publisher was a leading Catholic press, showing that not all within the Catholic Church shared Father Buonaiuto’s anti-occult campaigns



# The Anti-Cult Squad and MISA



- In this context, the Anti-Cult Squad managed to be involved in actions against at least two “esoteric cults,” neither having anything to do with Satanism
- The first case involved MISA (Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute), a Romanian group controversial for its teachings about Tantric sexual techniques. Its founder, Gregorian Bivolaru (left), is currently in jail in Romania for an alleged sexual relationship with a minor, although the biased style of his prosecution has been criticized both by the European Court of Human Rights and by Sweden, who granted to him political asylum in 2006



# Raiding MISA

- At the dawn of 6 December 2012, the police broke into the private houses of 25 students and sympathizers of MISA. Hundreds of documents were seized, and the prosecutor mentioned possible crimes of “criminal conspiracy, prostitution, pornography, enslavement, and sexual violence.” To the best of my knowledge, no evidence of these crimes has emerged to this date and nobody has been committed to trial

## Yoga e violenze sessuali, nei guai "guru" e suoi presunti seguaci

Firenze, diciotto indagati in un'inchiesta della procura del capoluogo  CHI  
E' BIVOLARU/FOTO  Commenti

Tutto ruota intorno alla figura di Gregorian Bivolaru - COMMENTA LA NOTIZIA



Gregorian Bivolaru

Firenze, 8 dicembre 2012 - Nella scuola di yoga si sarebbero praticate attività ben al di là dei dettami della disciplina orientale. Riduzione in schiavitù e presunti abusi sessuali: con queste accuse la procura fiorentina ha indagato diciotto persone a Firenze e in tutta Italia. Persone tutte riconducibili **alla scuola di yoga Misa**, fondata nel 1990 da un romeno, **Gregorian Bivolaru, 60 anni**. Sono stati gli stessi frequentatori del centro a denunciare quanto sarebbe accaduto alla polizia. Da qui le indagini e le perquisizioni.

# “Violent Sex, Esotericism, and Yoga”



- In connection with the raid, on December 7, 2012, the main Italian wire agency ANSA, perhaps inspired by the erotic shows promoted by some MISA members (left), reported that a dangerous Romanian group was being investigated by the police for “violent sex, esotericism, and yoga.” Several Italian daily newspapers reprinted the news without comments – and without asking themselves whether “violent sex” (whatever it might be), “esotericism” and “yoga” were indeed crimes worthy of a police investigation



# The Arkeon Saga

- Earlier on, in 2008, the Anti-Cult Squad was involved in a raid in a Rome hotel against an event organized by the Reiki group Arkeon. Here again, the media hype (right: note the mention of 1,000 “cults” active in Italy) did not result in significant legal results. Some of the Arkeon leaders were eventually found guilty of minor crimes only, and courts did not accept the narrative of Arkeon as a sinister “occult cult”

2 **PRIMO PIANO** **QN** IL RESTO DEL CARLINO - LA NAZIONE - IL GIORNO LUNEDÌ 15 MARZO 2010

**LA TRAPPOLA DELL'OCCULTO 1.000** IL NUMERO DELLE SETTE IN ITALIA DELLE QUALI IL 40% SONO PSICOSETTE

**IL COMMENTO**  
**LA MENTE PROSCIUGATA**  
di **GABRIELE MORONI**

**«Violenze, truffe e umiliazioni»  
Alla sbarra i guru della psicosecca**  
*Bari, giovedì si apre il processo contro Arkeon: 11 imputati*

**IL 'MAESTRO'**  
A sinistra, Vito Carlo Moccia, 58 anni, di Noicattaro, ritenuto il fondatore della psicosecca Arkeon; sotto, un momento del cosiddetto rito della fortificazione

**S**IPARLA di sette e subito si annusa odore di zolfo. Satana, il diavolo, il 666 minacciosamente simbolico, gli omicidi compiuti e sotterrati sotto palate di terra nella brughiera del Varesetto. Sbagliato. Anacronistico. Nel continuo e sempre più ondivago spostamento delle frontiere del settarismo italico, oggi il diavolo si trova relegato in una posizione sempre più periferica, come un vecchio zio mal sopportato in casa. Il satanismo non è che un piccolo frammento in una galassia sfaccettata e confusa dove entrano nuovi culti, tendenze e comunità spirituali, movimenti mistico-religiosi, new age, associazioni culturali e per-



# The Crusade against Dr. Di Marzio



- ▶ The Arkeon case had a very special feature. During the 2008 raid, Dr Raffaella Di Marzio, an Italian scholar, was also present, as she was conducting a study of the group. Correspondence between Italian anti-cultists and the Anti-Cult Squad posted on the Web by Italian hackers (possibly connected with a “cult” targeted by the authors of the mail) proved that destroying the reputation of Dr Di Marzio and possibly sending her to jail was an aim of the campaign at least as important as putting Arkeon out of business

# Raffaella Di Marzio, Apostate

- ▶ There was a special reason for the fury against Dr Di Marzio. She had been a leading Italian anti-cultist in the 1990s, before changing her mind and exposing the questionable tactics of the Italian anti-cult movement. With a form of poetic justice, anti-cult movements, who rely so often on apostate ex-members of the cults, now had an apostate of their own. Eventually, court cases against Dr Di Marzio collapsed completely



# The Crisis of the Anti-Cult Squad



**POLIZIOTTA**  
Maria Carla Bocchino a capo della squadra anti sette (Sas)

- In recent years, the Italian Anti-Cult Squad has been at the receiving end of increasing criticism by members of the Italian Parliament and NGOs. As a result of these critics, references to the Squad disappeared from the Italian Police's Web site, although it still exists. As late as October 25, 2016 its current chief, Maria Carla Bocchino, was giving interviews to daily newspapers in this capacity



## Italy's Answer: "It's About Satanism"



- ▶ In 2015, answering criticism by an NGO (with which several "cults" were associated) during an OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) meeting in Warsaw, the Italian representative stated that the Anti-Cult Squad was about "Satanist cults" and asked those in the audience to "decide yourself whether Satanist cults should enjoy freedom of religion"

# A Strange Answer



- ▶ The answer was, indeed, strange. First, the Anti-Cult Squad was involved in cases not related to Satanism. And second, yes, Satanist movements are entitled to religious liberty, unless of course they commit common crimes. This conclusion has been reached by *Italian* courts themselves in the case of the Children of Satan, the largest Italian Satanist organization, whose leaders, after well-publicized arrests (left) were found not guilty in 2000 of all the charges brought against them – with the sole exception of tax evasion, not an especially “ritual” crime

# A Left-Wing Affair



- It is interesting to note that not only, and in fact not mostly, reactionary or right-wing organizations have supported the Anti-Cult Squad. The image shows the authors of *Occult in Italy* featured on the Web site of comedian Beppe Grillo, the leader of the Five Stars Movement, a populist party on the left side of the political spectrum



# The Left-Wing Fear of the Occult

- It is not surprising that the Left believed more than the Right that “occult cults” were infiltrating Italian politics. Wouter Hanegraaff demonstrated that, after World War II (although not before), anti-esotericism came mostly from the Left, which suspected esoteric movements of a reactionary irrationalism making them fellow travelers of Nazism and of contacts with radical right-wing groups

Éditions de La Hutte

Stéphane François

## **Des mondes à la dérive :**

réflexions sur les liens entre

**l'ésotérisme  
et l'extrême droite**



Collection Essais

# Italian Factors: P2



- ▶ Two specific Italian factors played a role in this bizarre saga. The first was the fear of Freemasonry based on reminiscences of the P2 Lodge affair. Although originally a regular lodge of the mainline Grand Orient of Italy, P2 (Propaganda 2) under the leadership of Licio Gelli (left, 1919-2015) evolved into a secretive group, accused of planning a right-wing coup in Italy and including leading Italian politicians – as well as future politicians, such as Silvio Berlusconi. The P2 affair powerfully contributed to prepare a “fear of the occult” in Italy



# The Monster of Florence



- The second specifically Italian element that prepared a political “fear of the occult” came from the 16 homicides perpetrated by the “Monster of Florence” (actually a group of three serial killers) between 1968 and 1985. Prosecutors tried for many years, inconclusively, to prove that the three killers could not have acted alone but were somewhat related to a secret cult (I was myself an expert for the prosecution in one of the cases: my report remains sealed, but I didn’t find any clear evidence that a “cult” was involved)



# Explaining an Anomaly

- There were some uniquely Italian factors – the Monster of Florence, P2, the Beasts of Satan – explaining why such a bizarre creation as the Anti-Cult Squad, with a counter-cult exorcist (right) as an official expert, was instituted in Italy in 2006. Eventually, the Squad became a source of embarrassment for Italy in international fora



# An Unsuccessful Affair



- Members of certain “cults,” however, often exaggerated its dangerousness for religious liberty in Italy. As admitted in national anti-cult conferences by its current chief, the Anti-Cult Squad has been largely unsuccessful and managed to interest the judiciary in a very limited number of cases



# The Fear of the Occult

**SCENA DEL CRIMINE** ▶ Monito della polizia: aumentano i gruppi che plagiano le persone



## LE SETTE? GURU E ARMI PSICOLOGICHE

Lorita Tinelli, presidente del Centro Studi Abusi Psicologici: «Questi santoni mirano a condizionare la mente di chi soffre o si trova in difficoltà»

Servizio di **Imma Giuliani\***  
Milano - Febbraio

**L**a polizia ha registrato un allarmante incremento di gruppi organizzati dietro i quali, a quanto pare, si celano sette e psicosette dirette a schiacciare psicologicamente ed economicamente uomini, donne e adolescenti. A spiegarci il fenomeno dei gruppi settari è Lorita Tinelli, presidente del CeSap, il Centro Studi Abusi Psicologici.

**«Vengono definite pure "autoreligioni"»**

Cosa si intende con il termine "setta"?



**LE BESTIE** Uno dei casi più famosi di "sette" della recente cronaca, quello delle Bestie di Satana. Qui c'è Elisabetta Ballarín portata via dai poliziotti. La giovane fu condannata nel 2004 a 23 anni di reclusione per concorso in omicidio di una giovane.

- ▶ The existence of the Anti-Cult Squad does not change an Italian situation where groups labeled as “cults” are less subject to public harassment than in nearby France or other countries. But the Anti-Cult Squad was never typically “anti-cult,” it was “anti-occult.” The fear of the occult had entered Italian politics and media, and will probably remain there for a certain period of time





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