



Communicating the Incommunicable: How Aumism Survived

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“Republican Taliban”



- On September 6, 2001, French police and military forces raided the Mandarom, the Holy See of the Aumist Religion, and destroyed the statue of its founder, Gilbert Bourdin (1923-1998), aka the Cosmoplanetary Messiah, Lord Hamsah Manarah. Swiss historian Jean-François Mayer wrote on a Fribourg daily newspaper about “les Talibans de la République”

How to Liquidate a “Cult”

- The destruction was ordered on the basis of presumed zoning violations, but it was clear that, during the virulent French “cult wars”, the government and the anti-cult movement wanted to “liquidate” the Mandarom (a Stalinist term, which is now becoming fashionable again in Russia). The movement, with its huge statues, was just too visible and had become the very symbol of “destructive cults”



A Series of Unfortunate Events



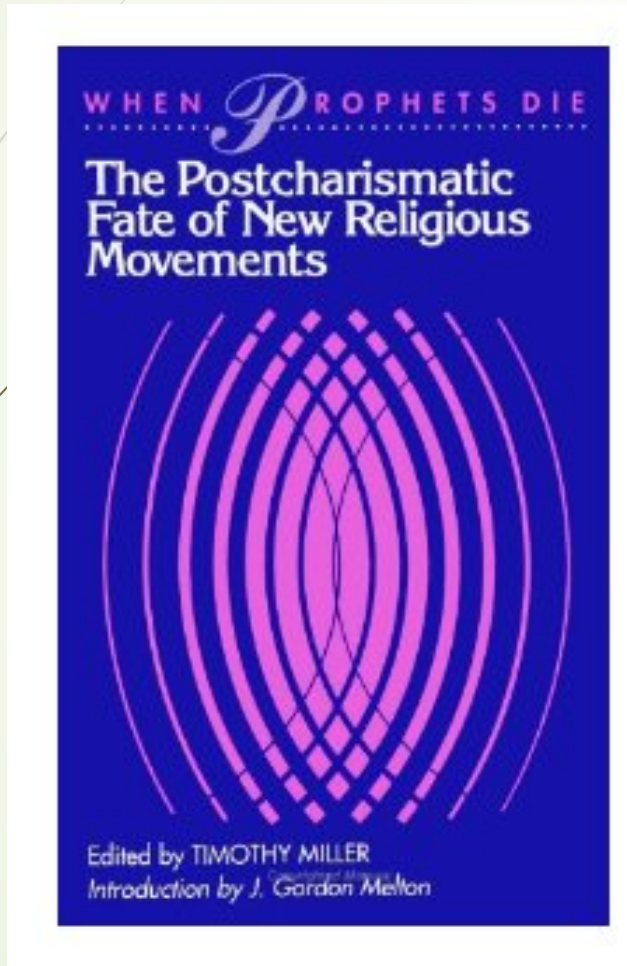
- Those hostile to the Mandarom believed that the “liquidation” would easily succeed. The destruction of the statue came after strong media attacks against Bourdin after his coronation as the Cosmoplanetary Messiah (1990), his arrest for alleged sexual abuse (1995), and his death (1998)

How Liquidation Failed



- ▶ Yet, the liquidation did not succeed. The Aumist Religion lost members but, to the great surprise of the anti-cultists, did not disappear and in fact in the 21st century started growing again
- ▶ How was this possible? How were the Aumists able to communicate what had become an incommunicable message?

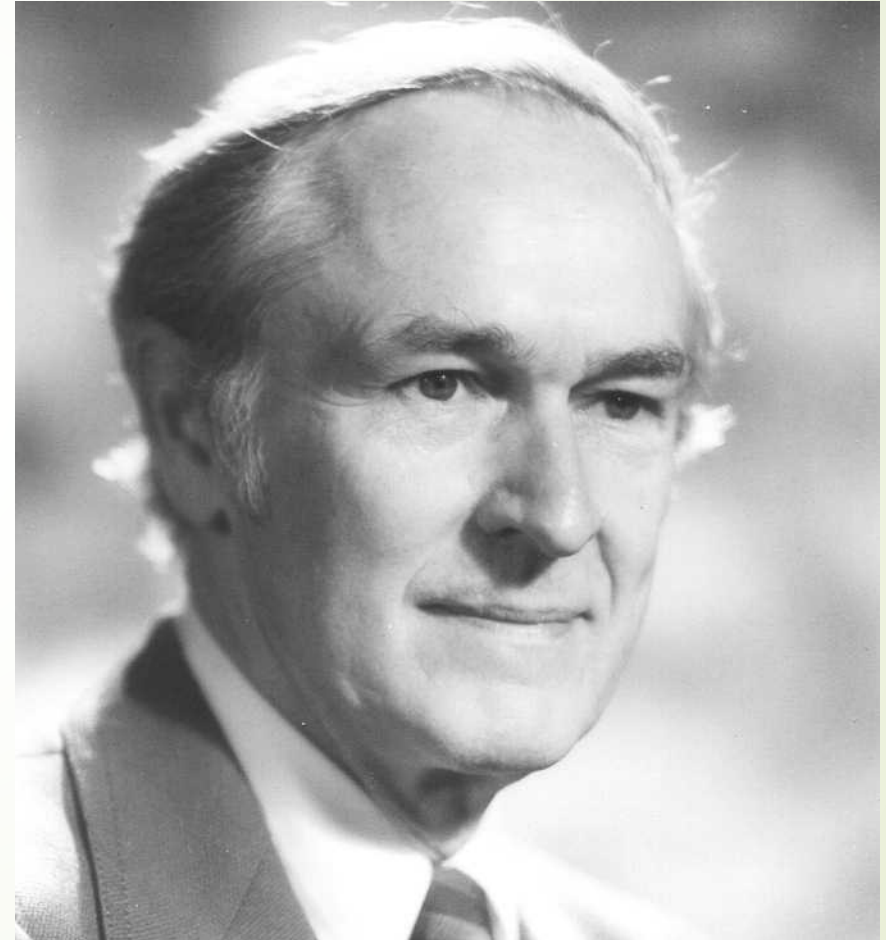
Two Methodological Tools



- I would apply to the Aumist Religion two well-developed theoretical tools in the sociology of religions:
 - a. Theories of the postcharismatic fate of religious movements, “when prophets die”
 - b. Theories of the effect of persecution on the survival and growth of a religious movement

1. When “Cult Founders” Die

- In the 1960s, received sociological wisdom largely followed the categories presented in the influential 1957 textbook of John Milton Yinger (1916-2011, right) *Religion, Society and the Individual*. Yinger claimed that “cults,” as opposed to “religions,” were “small, short-lived, often local, ... built around a dominant leader.” When the leader died, the “cult” normally died with him



THE SPIRITUALIST MOVEMENT AND THE NEED FOR A REDEFINITION OF CULT*

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The need for a refined concept of cult emerged as the result of an attempt to analyse the Spiritualist movement in terms of the church-sect typology. Previous definitions of cult also appear inadequate when applied to the analysis of Spiritualism. This paper argues the need for a refined concept of cult, and proposes a definition of cult in terms of one basic criterion—that cults are religious movements which make a fundamental break with the religious tradition of the culture—and two subordinate criteria—that cults are composed of individuals who have had or seek mystical, psychic, or ecstatic experiences, and that they are concerned with the problems of individuals. It also proposes a typology of cults, and an explanation of the origin and development of cults in terms of a continuum from cult to new religion.

THE NATURE OF SPIRITUALISM

SPIRITUALISM ORIGINATED in the United States in 1848, and was introduced into Britain in 1852. The movement as a whole lacks homogeneity, and has no central organization. One may, however, distinguish two criteria by which a group or individual may be classified as Spiritualist. First, a Spiritualist believes in the survival of the human personality after the death of the physical body, and that that survival can be proven. Second, a Spiritualist believes that it is possible, by various means, to communicate with the spirits of the dead, and joins others to effect or

participate in such communication. The movement thus consists of all those who may be described or describe themselves in this way as Spiritualists.

Spiritualism in Britain

Spiritualism in Britain at the present time is by no means homogeneous. In its widest sense it is not an organisation but a movement. In Britain, this movement consists of two national organisations (the Spiritualists' National Union and the Greater World Christian Spiritualist League), a large number of local churches, groups not associated with either of these national organisations, and individuals not attached to any formal organisation.

The Spiritualists' National Union (SNU) is a federation of local churches and of individual members who are enrolled on a regional level through District Councils. Its organisation is specifically democratic,

* This paper is based on the author's Ph. D. thesis (University of London, 1967), a version of which is to be published as *Spiritualism and Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969, in press).

Nelson vs Yinger

- In 1969, British sociologist Geoffrey Kenneth Nelson, in an important article on the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, challenged Yinger's categories. Based on his study of Spiritualism, Nelson maintained that "cults" cannot be defined on the basis of their small or ephemeral constituency, but are identified by their doctrines and practices "alternative" to the mainline

A New Notion of “Cult”



- In the 1970s, both scholars of religion such as Rodney Stark (left) and William Sims Bainbridge, and anti-cultists, agreed that “cults” are not defined by their size or permanence in time, but by other features. The use of the word “cult” by anti-cultists as synonymous of a “bad” or criminal group led social scientists to gradually replace it with “new religious movement” or “new religion”

A Curious Remnant of the Past

- In 1991, American historian of religions J. Gordon Melton (right) noted that curiously, “in spite of the changing understanding of new religions,” the idea that they may face serious problems and even disappear “following the death of the founder (...) has been separated from the ongoing discussion and has survived as an independent remnant of the earlier definition of ‘cult.’ While only rarely mentioned in print, that assumption is frequently dropped in conversations on new religions as an assumed truth”



A False Cliché



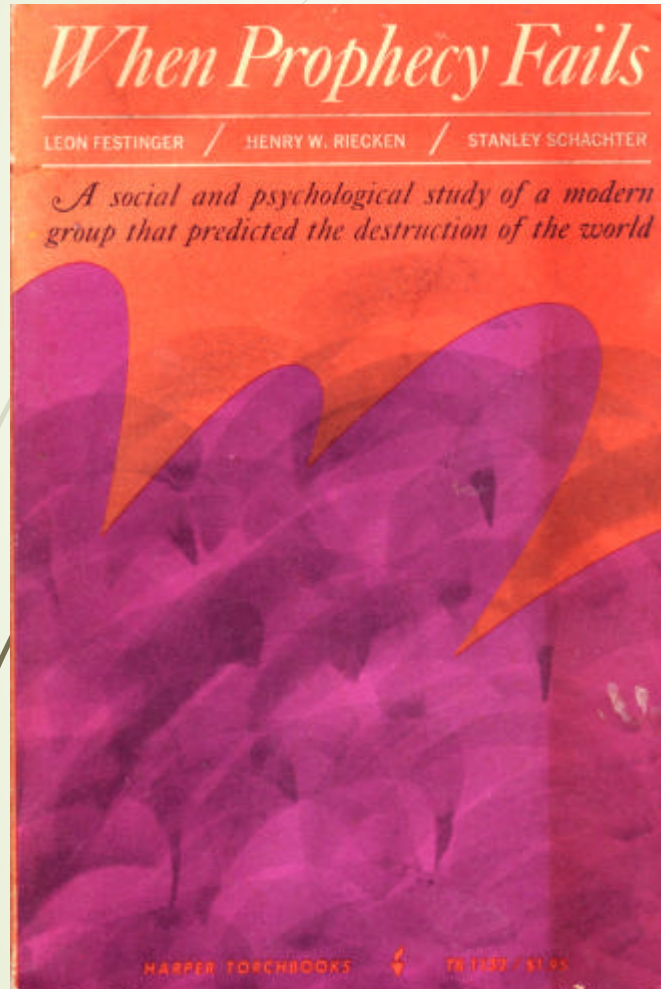
- ▶ As is true for many clichés, the idea that new religions die with their founders is, Melton argued, false. “The death of the founder rarely proves fatal or leads to a drastic alteration in the group’s life.”
- ▶ Melton was aware of a few groups, including Psychiana, that really died with their founders, but noted that these are rare and “hard to discover.” “When a new religion die, it usually has nothing to do with the demise of the founder; it is from lack of response of the public to the founder’s ideas”

How New Religions Survive

- Melton also studied how new religions survive, singling out three key factors, typically at work in the case of Scientology: a corpus of authoritative writings; provisions for the succession made by the founder (which do not prevent, but limit, the unavoidable schisms); and a corporate legal structure that controls the movement's property (rather than leaving it in the hands of the founder as an individual owner, thus preparing potential legal conflicts between the founder's family and the movement)



Two Additional Clichés



- Finally, in his 1991 introduction to *When Prophets Die*, Melton compared the cliché implying that new religions die with their founder with two others commonplace, but false, assumptions: that new religions die when a prophecy, normally about the end of the world, fails, or when sexual scandals involving their founders are revealed
- New religions normally survive failed prophecies, not so much for the psychological reasons (cognitive dissonance) Leon Festinger (1919-1989) and his colleagues described in their classic *When Prophecy Fails* (1956) but because for the believers *the prophecy did not fail* and “something” happened at the due date, perhaps in Heaven

Sexual Accusations



- As for sexual accusations, devotees may stubbornly deny that they are true, as in the case of Swami Muktananda (1908-1982), or, as it is currently happening with Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012), maintain that what at first sight appeared as sexual transgression in fact enacted divine commands mysteriously connected with the founder's mission



2. Persecution

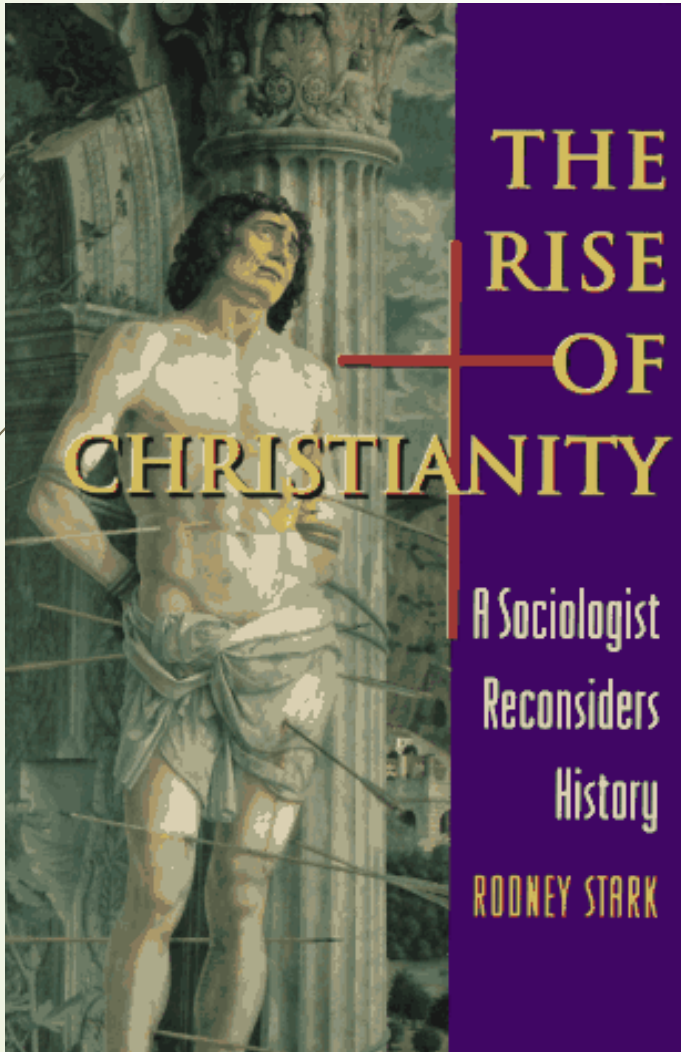
- Melton's 1991 text did not consider another potential killer of new religions: persecution. Here, the historical cliché goes in the opposite sense. It is taken for granted that persecution and the example of martyrs actually *reinforce* a religion. As Tertullian (190-225, left) famously said, *semen est sanguis Christianorum*, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians

Christians in the French Revolution

- Historians started doubting long ago that the cliché was uniformly valid. French historian Jean de Viguerie noted in 1987 that the anti-Catholic persecution of the French Revolution caused a drastic reduction in the number of active Catholics in France, something that the French Catholic Church was never able to reverse thereafter. Others later noted the same with respect to Communist regimes, in Czechoslovakia, Albania, and elsewhere



Sociologists Confirm



- Rodney Stark and Roger Finke confirmed in several articles that legal restrictions, even without bloody persecution, severely affect the targeted groups. In 1996, Stark also argued that perhaps even Tertullian was only partially right. Early Christianity grew more rapidly when it was *not* persecuted. The example of the martyrs was certainly persuasive, but was counterbalanced by other negative factors

Contemporary Evidence Regarding the Impact of State Regulation of Religion on Religious Participation and Belief*

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We examine the impact of religious competition on religiosity by looking at state support for religion as a structural factor affecting religious pluralism. Our independent variable consists of a series of six measures that deal with state support for religion from the Religion and State database (RAS) for the 1990 to 2002 period. Our dependent variables include measures of attendance at religious services, religious beliefs, and self-categorization as a religious person. These indicators for 81 countries are based on the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Program. Regression analyses controlled for demographic, social, political, and economic indicators, and the nature of the dominant religious denomination. The results indicate that state regulation of religion is significantly and negatively correlated with religiosity in 14 of 72 regressions which include these variables. Twelve of these fourteen regressions are those in which attendance at religious services or individuals classifying themselves as religious are the dependent variables. This is consistent with predictions that religious monopolies will reduce participation but not belief.

While "at first glance the regulation of the religious market seems far removed from the individual" (Finke 1990:614), the impact of the degree of religious pluralism on religious participation has been the subject of considerable debate. Peter Berger (1967) claimed that competition leads to an erosion of belief and subsequent religious participation. An "economic" perspective claims that pluralism leads to more participation as it offers a wider choice for a religiously diverse public to meet their religious needs (Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1987; and see Sherkat and Ellison 1999 for a summary of this research). Many of the studies that exam-

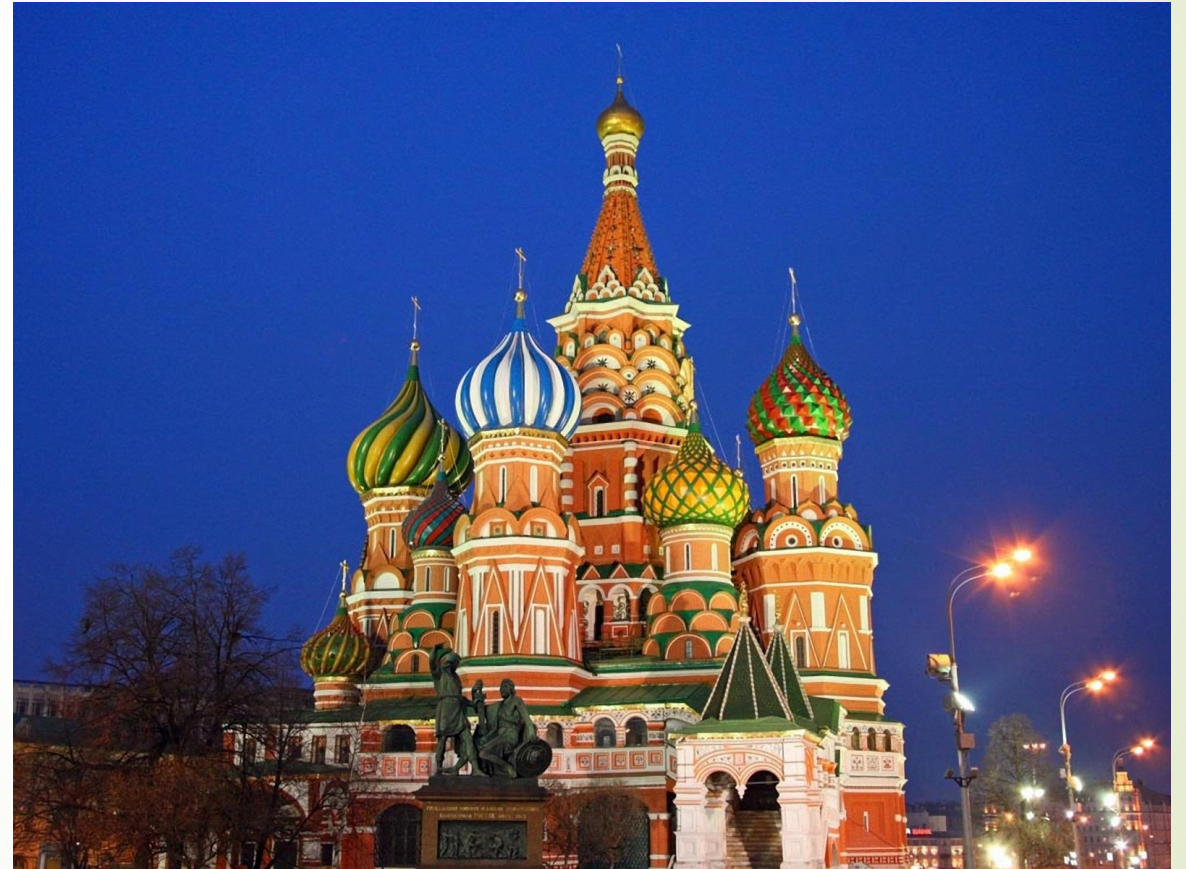
*Direct correspondence to Jonathan Fox, Department of Political Studies, Bar Ilan University, 52900 Ramat Gan, Israel (foxjon@mail.biu.ac.il). The Religion and State Dataset, including the specialized version used in this study, is available at www.biu.ac.il/soc/po/ras/. This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant 896/00) and the Sara and Simha Lainer Chair in Democracy and Civility. The authors gratefully thank Robert Barro for providing us with the religiosity data used in this study, and acknowledge the input of Bernard Lazerwitz and the anonymous reviewers of this journal.

Confirmations from Israel

- In 2008, Israeli scholars Fox and Tabory won an award for best article of the year in sociology of religions by confirming, with massive quantitative data, that state hostility to a religion negatively affects membership and participation

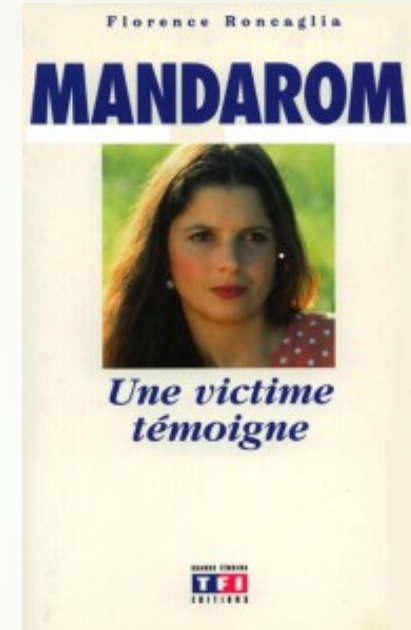
Surprising Consequences

- The Israeli scholars also confirmed an early intuition by Stark and Finke: discriminations against minority religions have negative effects on religion in general. In the long run, worship attendance decreases also in mainline churches. When the latter applaud, in Russia and elsewhere, state repression of “cults,” they are probably unaware of these data



3. What about the Mandarom?

- I will now apply the above categories to the Aumist religion of the Mandarom. It survived, to start with, accusations of sexual abuses against its founder. Most members regarded them as false (and ultimately French courts concluded they were not supported by any evidence) – although others, when Bourdin went to jail, left. Those who remain in, or join, the religion today explain the accusation as just another tool used by unscrupulous anti-cultists during the “cult wars”



Le gourou du Mandarom mis en examen pour viols Gilbert Bourdin a été placé en détention hier à Digne.

Prophecies?



- The fact that the Temple Pyramide, whose construction was predicted by the founder and whose importance is capital for the Aumist Religion, is still not built at the Mandarom, due to the persistent opposition of the French authorities, is also not disturbing the faith of the believers. If anything, it motivates them in their struggle to obtain the building license

Post-Charismatic Fate



- The Mandarom also survived the death of the founder. The three elements mentioned by Melton worked in favor of the Aumists. First, the Lord Hamsah Manarah left an impressive and normative corpus of teachings. In a way, the books symbolically substitute the absent Messiah

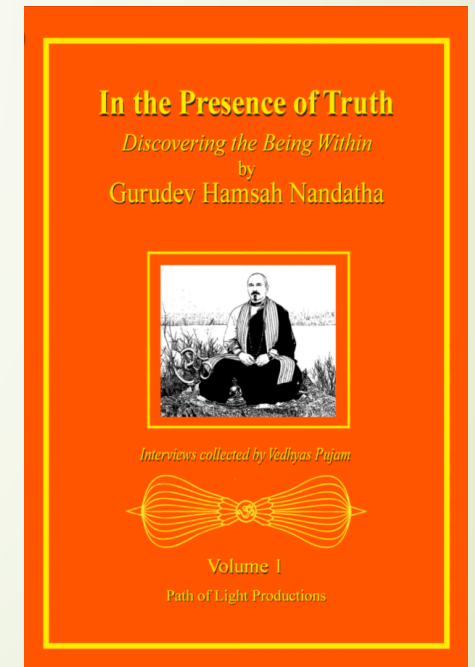
Succession Issues



- Second, interviewed by me, members insisted that the Lord Hamsah Manarah *did* provide for a collegial leadership of the religion after his death, even if “just as for the Buddhists of the Karma Kagyu School in relationship to His Holiness the Karmapa, Aumists await the next Hierokarantine, who will be the 2nd of the Initiate Lineage”

Schisms

- It has been, as usual, impossible to avoid schisms. Some 100 members followed Christophe Crom (Gurudev Hamsah Nandatha), who opened an “alternative Mandarom,” the Adi Vajra Shambhasalem Ashram in Wasa, British Columbia, Canada. Others belong to a “free zone,” offering teachings by both the Lord Hamsah Manarah and other sources independently from the Mandarom. But the majority remains in the parent organization



A Solid Organization

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La secte du Mandarom fait condamner la France devant la Cour des droits de l'homme

A la Une



La statue de Gilbert Bourdin, fondateur de la secte du Mandarom, domine le lac de Castillon le 13 août 2001 à Castellane Boris Horvat AFP

- Third, as Melton predicted, the Mandarom survived because it had incorporated in the form of associations independent from Bourdin as an individual. They were able to manage the properties and also to score an important legal victory against France in 2013 at the European Court of Human Rights

Surviving Persecution



- Sociological theories predict that persecution is a more serious threat than the death of a founder. In 2011, when I served as the Representative of the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions, I proposed a model of religious persecution at a conference held in Rome on September 12, 2011

The Rome Model

- At the Rome conference I introduced what was later called in international publications the “Rome Model,” predicting a slippery slope:

Intolerance



Discrimination



Persecution

The Persecution of Mandarom

- As Susan Palmer has demonstrated, the attack against the Mandarom during the “cult wars” started with intolerance, in the forms of media attack and ridicule, but quickly escalated to administrative discrimination and outright persecution – in a country, France, which by the way proves the Stark-Finke theory that discriminating against “cults” did not reverse the mainline churches’ dramatically negative trend in worship attendance





Effects of the Persecution

- As sociological theories predict, persecution *did* damage the Mandarom, more than the death of the Lord Hamsah Manarah. Members decreased from 1,300 in 1990 to 300 in 2001. However, this decline proved not to be irreversible. The number of Aumists started increasing again in the 21st century, reaching ca. 500 in 2017

Growth in Africa

- How did Aumism partially overcome persecution? In a globalized world, possibilities of resistance and even of growth always exist by moving to new countries. Aumism, as noted by some media, kept for years a low profile in France, while expanding in Africa. 25% of all centers of the religion are now in the Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville)



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Survival through Organization



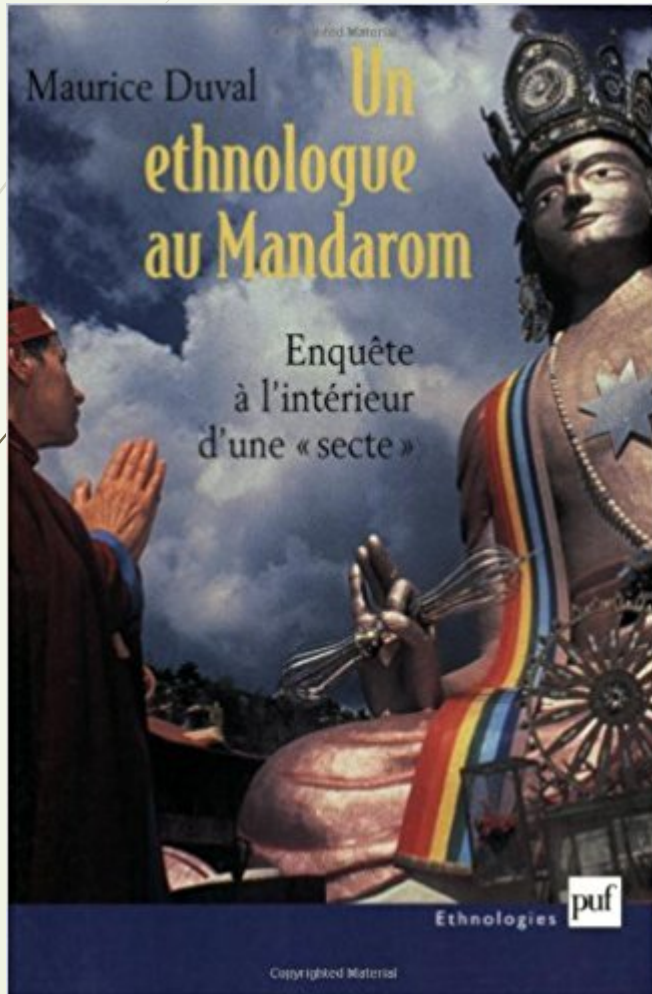
- In my interviews, members reported that “organization is the basis of our survival.” The founder did establish the doctrine in 22 canonical books, but also created a viable organization, capable of withstanding the persecutions

Opening to the World

- Aumists also claimed that it was important for them not to remain entrenched in their monastery in the French Alps, fighting local opponents, but “open to the world,” starting with a dialogue with the local Catholic parish priest but expanding to the World Parliaments of Religion (right) held in Cape Town (1999), Barcelona (2004), and Salt Lake City (2015). Indeed, Aumists described these events as crucial for their self-consciousness as members of a religion that wants to expand its outreach and is not happy with survival only



Dialogue with the Scholars



- Finally, and quite interestingly, members mentioned as crucial for their communication strategy the openness of their religion to scholars of new religious movements. They are often invited to Aumist conferences. In fact, Aumism has attracted more scholarly attention than larger new religions, and the academic studies have proved useful in resisting attacks by anti-cultists

A Tale of Resistance



- Mandarom would probably never become a mainstream movement, due to its very original beliefs and claims about its founder. However, its resistance to discrimination and persecution prove that even small movements may survive, and even grow, in a hostile environment and that new religious movements are less easily destroyed than their opponents would like to believe



➤ For further information, please contact Dr Massimo Introvigne at maxintrovigne@gmail.com