

The Media Construction of Victims: Apple TV's "Twisted Yoga"

Rosita Šorytė

International Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB)

rosita_soryte@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes the 2026 Apple TV documentary "Twisted Yoga," which portrays the Romanian spiritual movement MISA and its founder, Gregorian Bivolaru. It argues that the documentary selectively reproduces anti-cult narratives while omitting court decisions, historical context, and contradictory evidence. Regarding the origins of MISA, "Twisted Yoga" uncritically relies on Securitate files from Ceaușescu's regime, ignoring the 2011 Romanian court ruling that rehabilitated Bivolaru and documented the political fabrication of charges against him. The documentary also relies on information supplied by Hugues Gascan, a marginal anti-cult activist whose personal conflicts, prior criminal conviction, and shifting claims nonetheless shaped the French investigation into MISA. The paper then evaluates testimonies of "apostate" ex-members featured in the documentary, noting inconsistencies, prior media careers, and the absence of corroboration in Romanian court proceedings. Finally, the paper highlights the documentary's reliance on the discredited theory of "brainwashing," contrasting it with the testimonies of the women allegedly "rescued" in the 2023 French raids—none of whom considered themselves victims and many of whom later filed complaints against the police. "Twisted Yoga" exemplifies how sensationalist media can distort minority religions through selective evidence, ideological framing, and reliance on anti-cult stereotypes.

KEYWORDS: MISA, Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, "Twisted Yoga," Apple TV, Anti-Cult Movement, Brainwashing.

Introduction

The subject of this article is not yoga, nor even a particular spiritual movement, but the way contemporary media constructs victims and perpetrators through selective storytelling. My case study is the Apple TV 2026 documentary "Twisted Yoga," which claims to investigate the Romanian spiritual movement MISA (Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute) and its founder, Gregorian Bivolaru (Apple TV 2026).

What it actually offers is a polished, emotionally charged narrative that relies on omission, insinuation, and the familiar tropes of anti-cult ideology. My aim is not to defend (nor condemn) any individual. It is to examine how a narrative is constructed, how evidence is selected or discarded, and how a documentary that presents itself as balanced ultimately reinforces a predetermined storyline.

Romania: Dictatorship Files as “Evidence”

The documentary begins in Romania, and so must we. Its central Romanian witness is a journalist openly hostile to MISA who treats the archives of the Securitate, Nicolae Ceaușescu’s (1918–1989) secret police, as if they were neutral historical documents. She even claims to be the first to have studied them, a claim that would surprise the Romanian scholars who have worked on these files for decades (Andreescu 2008).

The journalist explains that Bivolaru was arrested as a young man, not because he taught yoga, but because he had acquired pornographic material from abroad. She states that he was imprisoned “because he owned and distributed pornographic materials.” She emphasizes that “He was not jailed because he was a yoga practitioner. This is what we see from the [Securitate] files.”

Obviously, totalitarian regimes rarely include in their files that they have arrested dissidents for their opinions. Dissidents are often “found” in possession of pornographic pictures or drugs, a practice still ongoing in present-day Russia, reflecting ingrained habits from Soviet times. What “Twisted Yoga” does not specify, however, is that, as Andreescu documented, the “pornographic material” the Securitate claims to have found in Bivolaru’s possession consisted of several issues of *Playboy* and the serious book by Italian esoteric author Julius Evola (1898–1974), *The Metaphysics of Sex* (Andreescu 2008).

The journalist also takes at face value the assessment by the Securitate’s psychiatrists, who sent Bivolaru to the notorious Poiana Mare asylum: he was, she says, “subject to psychiatric exam, which says that he lacks the mental capacity to assess his own actions, his own deeds.” The problem is that similar “diagnoses” were given to several political dissidents, who also ended up in Poiana Mare.

That the Securitate’s accusations against Bivolaru were fabricated is not only the opinion of scholars. He was officially rehabilitated by a decision from the 3rd Civil

Division of the Bucharest Law Court on July 1, 2011 (copy in my files). The court examined both the pornography charges and the psychiatric assessment. It concluded that the real reason for his conviction was that the regime wanted to “discredit and dismantle” those with dissident opinions. The court cited several statements in the Securitate files that said Bivolaru’s activities should be stopped because of their “occult,” “mystical” nature, and because he criticized the regime, and “attracted followers.” The 2011 ruling and the documents it references are completely ignored by “Twisted Yoga.” It is quite unbelievable that some people still defend the Securitate, its files, and its methods in 2026.

Operation Christ: A Raid Without Results

The pro-Securitate journalist also presents her own version of the 2004 raid in Romania in “Twisted Yoga.” She fails to mention that the Orthodox Church and the media had campaigned against the “heretical” ideas and practices of Bivolaru for about ten years before the raid. Since the early 1990s, MISA yoga sessions across Romania were disrupted, police interrogated yoga practitioners, and some lost their jobs. Romanian intelligence agencies monitored MISA since 1997, claiming it posed a threat to national security (Andreescu 2013).

Official and media hostility towards MISA peaked with the March 18, 2004, raids, which Romanian police named “Operation Christ.” Masked gendarmes and special forces, armed with machine guns and Makarov pistols, accompanied by prosecutors and TV cameras, broke down the doors and entered 16 MISA ashrams across Romania simultaneously at 7 a.m. Main TV channels echoed the official statement, claiming that “today at 7:00 a.m., police carried out the largest operation against drugs and human trafficking in Romania’s post-Revolution history.” This exemplifies the early-morning militarized raids on “cults,” as studied in a book by Susan Palmer and Stuart Wright (Wright and Palmer 2016). These raids typically serve more as theatrical displays than effective law enforcement, reinforcing society’s vigilance against “cults” and signaling intolerance. As in many similar cases, no drugs were discovered, and the raid yielded little substantive evidence against MISA.

Through the European Court of Human Rights decision *Amarandei and others v. Romania* of April 26, 2016, 26 members of MISA who had been mistreated during the 2004 raid received €291,000 in damages from the

Romanian government. The decision stated that the raid was based on insufficient evidence and that the excessive use of physical and psychological violence violated the complainants' human rights and dignity (European Courts of Human Rights 2016). On February 28, 2017, in *Bivolaru v. Romania*, the European Court of Human Rights ordered Romania to pay Bivolaru €6,980 for his illegal detention in 2004 (European Court of Human Rights 2017).

The journalist is correct to note that Bivolaru was convicted on one charge, but she does not provide the full context. In all the Romanian cases against him, Bivolaru was convicted only once, for an alleged sexual relationship with 17-year-old Mădălina Dumitru. I do not use “alleged” out of a pro-Bivolaru bias, but because the Supreme Court of Sweden, when granting him political asylum in 2005, concluded that he had never had sex with Dumitru and that the accusations were fabricated for political reasons (Šorytė 2022).

Dumitru was 17 during the alleged relationship, with Romania's age of consent at 15. Bivolaru was not convicted of statutory rape but for abusing a teacher-student relationship, as the Romanian Supreme Court in 2013 considered being a yoga teacher equivalent to being a schoolteacher, even though Dumitru testified she never attended yoga classes directly taught by Bivolaru.

In 2024, Dumitru published a voluminous book, in which she explained that she had been abused not by Bivolaru but by the Romanian police and prosecutors, who coerced her into signing a false statement. She maintained that she never had any sexual relationship with Bivolaru (Dumitru 2024).

Thus, the Romanian segment of “Twisted Yoga” already exposes the documentary's bias. It only presents the anti-Bivolaru version of the facts, even when court decisions contradict it.

France: The Curious Rise of Hugues Gascan

If the Romanian section of the documentary is selective, the French section is positively surreal. Here we meet Hugues Gascan, presented as a heroic investigator who single-handedly uncovered MISA's alleged crimes in France.

Gascan is the shadowy founder of a small French anti-cult organization called GÉPS (Groupe d'étude du phénomène sectaire, Study Group of the Cult Phenomenon). The story, as he recounts it in the documentary, is that Gascan

had been involved in fighting against these types of movements and cults for many years. So that's how I began to be interested in MISA. I wanted to understand the *modus operandi*, what was going on with MISA in France. And I started to read and slowly investigate... I put in some keywords on my computer: Paris, Romania, Guru, Cult. And I quickly found this article in Australian newspapers... So, I was in touch with Ashley and transmitted this testimony to the Department of Police in charge of what is going on in terms of cults in France.

Thus began the French investigation. Or so he claims.

Anyone who has watched the recent wave of true-crime-meets-spiritual-panic TV series will recognize the formula: a sinister "cult," a heroic investigator, a breathless chase across borders, and a final revelation that ties everything together with the neatness of a Netflix storyboard. But reality, as usual, is messier, stranger, and far less obedient to narrative structure.

Before November 2023, GÉPS was so obscure that even seasoned observers of the French anti-cult scene would have struggled to identify it. Yet its roots stretch back more than a decade, to a research laboratory in Angers and a scientist whose professional life took a turn that no screenwriter could have plotted with a straight face.

Gascan was, by all accounts, a respected medical researcher at the University of Angers, publishing in peer-reviewed journals and collaborating with colleagues, including P.J., a female scientist. Then came a rupture—partly about alternative cancer therapies (Darbois 2012), partly about personalities, and partly about something more nebulous. Gascan became convinced that P.J. had fallen under the influence of a "cult" called Omalpha, led by the Canadian Tantric teacher Jean Bouchart d'Orval (Hertel 2012). He went further, claiming that Bouchart d'Orval was entangled with Ashram Shambhala, a Russian movement whose founder, Konstantin Rudnev, had been sentenced in 2013 in Novosibirsk to eleven years in prison for the charges (which scholars regard as fabricated: Introvigne and Vardé 2026) of running a "cult" and sexually abusing a follower. After Rudnev's imprisonment, the movement splintered into dozens of independent offshoots—some denouncing him as a fallen guru, others insisting he was a political dissident framed with fabricated evidence and punished for criticizing the Putin regime.

The quarrel inside the laboratory escalated to the point that, in 2012, the University of Angers shut down the entire research center (Syndicat National de la Recherche Scientifique 2012). Gascan later portrayed himself as the victim of a "cultic" infiltration. The French courts, however, told a different story. P.J. filed

criminal charges for harassment, and Gascan was convicted in the first instance, on appeal, and finally by the Court of Cassation on May 14, 2013 (Cour de Cassation 2013). The rulings described behavior that went well beyond professional disagreement: surveillance, pressure, and attempts to coerce colleagues into providing false statements. The Cassation decision noted that P.J. was “not the only one to have borne the brunt of Mr. X [Gascan]’s all-powerful behavior,” listing multiple colleagues who testified to similar treatment. One research engineer recounted that Gascan had summoned her and suggested she send an email falsely claiming that P.J. had tried to recruit her into a “group,” adding, “That’s the exact word used by Mr. X...,” and that she refused. The judges also cited a forensic psychological evaluation confirming that P.J. was mentally sound, and even the French governmental anti-cult agency MIVILUDES reported that although it had “elements of concern” about “Omalpha and Mr. D’Orval ..., particularly about his conception of democracy... no cultic deviances had been identified” there. Gascan received a suspended four-month sentence and emerged from the incident with a lifelong hostility toward anything Tantric.

Enter Alban Bourdy, a former member of the Soledad Domec offshoot of Ashram Shambhala, who later reinvented himself as an anti-cult activist. In his autobiographical book *Un Bisounours au pays des se(x)ctes* (Bourdy 2018), he recounts that in 2015 he received a phone call from Gascan (Bourdy 2018, 391), followed by another in December in which Gascan proposed that they join forces to expose Tantric groups. Yet even in this new alliance, Gascan’s fixation on P.J. resurfaced: he accused Bourdy of being in contact with her (Bourdy 2018, 393).

Shortly before Christmas 2015, Bourdy visited MIVILUDES in Paris and spoke with a “high representative” of the agency (Bourdy 2018, 397). Soon after, both he and Gascan were approached by television journalist Raphaël Tresanini. Then, on February 26, 2016, a development shifted the landscape: Gregorian Bivolaru was arrested in France. Romania wanted him extradited for the Dumitru case. At the same time, Sweden—where he had been granted political asylum—warned that extradition was legally impossible. The MIVILUDES, thus, was eager to gather material against Bivolaru. Bourdy realized that the agency’s support depended on his ability to link Ashram Shambhala to MISA.

He tried, writing:

Many websites have suggested that the two organizations [MISA and Ashram Shambhala] may be connected. It is a version supported by anti-cult organizations worldwide (Bourdy 2018, 398).

The only “connection” he could identify was that the French Tantric teacher Éric Baret had reportedly taught seminars for both Shambhala-derived groups and MISA in Latin America (Bourdy 2018, 398). Even if accurate, this was how neo-Tantric networks operate, not evidence of organizational ties.

When Tresanini’s TV report aired, Bourdy says MIVILUDES was displeased because it was not sufficiently hostile to Bivolaru, despite including an interview with one of the most embittered former members (Bourdy 2018, 400–1). The agency then steered Gascan and Bourdy toward journalists more attuned to its expectations (Bourdy 2018, 406–7). On July 22, 2016, France extradited Bivolaru to Romania despite Sweden’s objections. MIVILUDES appeared to have achieved its immediate goal, but the story continued.

Following the agency’s advice, Gascan approached the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme (LDH), the venerable French human-rights and pro-secularism organization established in 1898. In 2020, he founded the “Groupe Phénomène Sectaire (GPS) de la Ligue des Droits de l’Homme.” The partnership was short-lived. By 2022, tensions had escalated to the point that the group dissolved. In an email dated September 22, 2022, a copy of which is in my archives, Gascan announced the cancellation of a planned conference and the dissolution of GPS, citing “constant obstructions” from the LDH leadership, difficulties accessing MIVILUDES funding, and the fact that some LDH officials had told him that “the LDH’s vocation is not to fight against cults.” The email’s repeated references to budgets and financial obstacles were a reminder that the French anti-cult ecosystem is not only ideological but also competitive, with MIVILUDES distributing substantial public funds.

In November 2023, Gascan and several associates founded a new independent anti-cult group: the Groupe d’étude du phénomène sectaire (GéPS). They told the media they would continue focusing on MISA and Bivolaru. In truth, Gascan’s original grievance had been with Omalpha, which he insisted was a branch of Ashram Shambhala—an assertion contradicted by the facts, though Omalpha had indeed organized joint seminars with groups of Shambhala origin. Bouchart d’Orval eventually distanced himself from Rudnev’s ideas, and according

to Bourdy, even claimed to have become an expert in deprogramming, offering his services to “liberate” Rudnev’s followers (Bourdy 2018, 177), while maintaining close ties with Soledad Domec.

After Bivolaru’s arrest in 2023, Gascan declared that MISA was “a second branch” of Ashram Shambhala (Hertel 2023), a statement demonstrably false. In the same interview, he contradicted himself by admitting that the two movements “are two movements with shared beliefs but separated apart from a few sporadic points of contact.” Even those “shared beliefs” were non-existent, but MIVILUDES had long been invested in a campaign against Bivolaru, and Gascan’s narrative conveniently aligned with that agenda.

When Finland, following complaints by disgruntled female ex-members, placed Bivolaru on the Interpol most-wanted list in October 2017, he became a fugitive pursued by multiple police forces. The idea that a small private group like GéPS succeeded where Interpol had not belonged more to folklore than to criminology. Gascan claimed that the method was simple: contacting non-French women he identified through Google searches who recounted cloak-and-dagger stories of being “brainwashed” in their home countries during MISA courses, invited to Paris, blindfolded by drivers, and taken to secret locations in France where they were allegedly forced into sexual encounters with Bivolaru. French media presented this as the fruit of GéPS’s detective brilliance, but these stories had circulated for years. The late Swedish scholar Liselotte Frisk (1959–2020) had encountered them in 2018 while investigating the Finnish case and found them difficult to believe (Frisk 2024). Some of the women had published their accounts online, in books, or in civil litigation.

French police and other agencies had read these sensational accounts, too. The November 2023 raids bear the imprint of intelligence-style operations, and the insistence on highlighting GéPS’s “private investigation” raises intriguing questions. Parenthetically, the fact that the French Court of Cassation removed the 2013 embarrassing decision against Gascan from its online database just days after *Bitter Winter* referred to it (Introvigne and Šorytė 2026)—a naïve move, since the page survives on archive.org—also suggests that certain forces were at work to protect GéPS against critics.

In France, founding new anti-cult groups is practically a cottage industry, partly because the government distributes generous funding, and competition is fierce. But why target MISA, which has very few French members? In 2016, the agency

needed to support the government's decision to extradite Bivolaru despite Sweden's objections. But why continue afterward?

One explanation is that, although sociological studies—including those by the late American scholar Anson D. Shupe (1948–2015: Shupe 1995, 1998, 2000, 2007)—have shown that sexual abuse is statistically more prevalent in mainstream religions than in new religious movements, it is in the interest of MIVILUDES to portray sexual crimes as typical of “cults.”

Another explanation is legislative. For years, the agency had been campaigning for a new version of the 2001 About-Picard law. The original law, intended to target Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses, had repeatedly failed against its intended targets. The attempt to criminalize “brainwashing” as “mental manipulation” was struck down on constitutional grounds, and the law settled for punishing “abuse of weakness.” For years, anti-cult groups pushed for a broader criminalization of “psychological subjection,” which entered a 2023 government draft bill.

Despite opposition in France and abroad, the amendment ultimately passed in 2024, giving France one of the most expansive legal definitions of psychological influence in Europe. One does not need to indulge in conspiracy theories to notice that the spectacular arrests occurred just days before the parliamentary debate on the new anti-cult law. As legislators prepared to decide whether to make it easier to prosecute “cults” for “brainwashing,” a group accused of kidnapping and raping women suddenly dominated the headlines. Only a devout believer in coincidence would fail to raise an eyebrow.

Some may argue that, regardless of political timing, if the French police rescued women held captive and about to be raped, they deserve praise, and if Bivolaru is guilty, he should be punished. I agree. But the crucial word is “if.” The trial must determine whether the women were actually imprisoned or whether they chose to visit Bivolaru in France of their own free will. If they were kidnapped, confined, and assaulted, those responsible should face appropriate penalties.

But were they?

The Construction of Victims

What we see in “Twisted Yoga” is a construction. The documentary constructs victims by privileging apostate narratives, ignoring judicial decisions, omitting exculpatory evidence, relying on anti-cult ideology, presenting speculation as fact, and framing adult agency as “brainwashing.” This is not new. It is a pattern documented in the sociology of new religious movements for decades. But “Twisted Yoga” offers a contemporary, high-budget example of how the pattern continues.

None of the documentary’s witnesses was “rescued” in the 2023 French raid. All of them left MISA well before and are typical “apostates,” a term scholars use to designate the minority of ex-members who become militant opponents of the religious group they have left (most ex-members are not apostates: Bromley 1998).

One witness is Agnes Arabela Marques, born Mureșan, whose testimony is presented as a shocking revelation. She recounts an alleged sexual initiation with Gregorian Bivolaru at fifteen and a half, describing blood, tears, and emotional distress. Yet “Twisted Yoga” never pauses to explain who Agnes is, or how her story has evolved over time. Long before Apple TV discovered her, she had already published a semi-fictionalized memoir in Portugal, in which MISA appears under thinly disguised pseudonyms and where her life unfolds with the dramatic freedom of a novel rather than the constraints of sworn testimony (Marques 2016). In that book, she describes entering the movement at fifteen, becoming sexually involved with its leader, being sent to Japan as a performer, and eventually escaping with the help of a wealthy Japanese businessman who later became her husband. The Portuguese book served as background for *The Believer*, published in English in 2024 (Marques 2024).

Her public persona was shaped by reality television: she became a minor celebrity in Portugal after appearing on “Casa dos Segredos,” one of the infinite variations of “Big Brother,” where each participant had a secret, and hers was that she had been “kidnapped and brainwashed by a cult.” Her notoriety in Portugal only grew. She became a fixture in tabloids, thanks to her singing career, her tumultuous romantic life involving various celebrities, and her willingness to pose semi-nude. But fame cuts both ways. The same tabloids that elevated her also investigated her. They reported that her Japanese husband, Katsuno Yasunori, was financially comfortable but not a millionaire, and was not the father of her child,

who was, in fact, born of a relationship with an Iranian partner. The money she received appears to have come from a settlement between Katsuno and the Iranian, who had been business associates. One tabloid even alleged that Marques worked in the pornography industry “after” leaving MISA (*TV 7 Días* 2014).

Tabloid reporting—whether flattering or accusatory—always requires caution. That caution was notably absent in the Romanian press, which repeatedly and incorrectly claimed that Marques was responsible for sending Bivolaru to prison. In 2013, *Evenimentul Zilei* ran a story titled “The Model Who Put Bivolaru in Prison.” In 2016, *Libertatea* published an unsigned piece calling her “the blonde who sent Bivolaru to jail. Guru made her his sexual slave; she made him a... jailed man” (Atudorei and Swenninger 2018, 50).

Court documents show that these claims were pure fiction. Bivolaru was imprisoned for the Dumitru case discussed earlier in this series; he was never convicted of having had sexual relations with Marques when she was underage. Her involvement in the Cluj human trafficking case was marginal, and Bivolaru and MISA ultimately won. DIICOT, the Romanian anti-terrorism and organized crime agency, attempted to use her testimony to reframe the Cluj accusations from “human trafficking” to “trafficking minors,” based on her assertion that she had worked without pay for MISA before turning eighteen, including in an erotic video-chat operation. In 2021, the Cluj Court of Appeal explicitly stated that Marques had provided no convincing evidence for her allegations (Curtea de Apel Cluj 2021, 80).

“Twisted Yoga” omits the fact that Romanian judges—despite their well-documented hostility toward Bivolaru—never found Agnes’ accusations credible. He was never convicted of any alleged sexual relationship with her as a minor.

Marques’ stories may have inspired another participant in “Twisted Yoga,” in the French case, and in reality shows, Ashleigh Freckleton of “Bachelor Australia” fame, who, in 2021, announced that she, too, had “survived a cult.” She described attending a yoga camp in Romania and then being taken to Paris for a sexual initiation with the “guru,” from which she says she escaped. Although she did not name the group, the identity was obvious (Jepsen 2021). Gascan certainly recognized it and says he connected her with French authorities.

Unlike Agnes—whose claims were contradicted by Romanian courts—Ashleigh does not allege that she had sexual contact with Bivolaru. Nor does she say she was unaware of what the Paris trip entailed. In “Twisted Yoga,” she recounts being told that Bivolaru was in hiding because Interpol wanted him and that she fully understood the initiation would be erotic in nature. “I was completely intrigued by the possibility that I could have a deeply spiritual experience in lovemaking,” she says. At some point, she changed her mind and decided not to participate. Viewers might expect the “cult” to have coerced her into staying. Instead, she reports that she was “allowed to leave.” She was asked to sign and record a statement affirming that she had not been sexually abused—which, by her own account, was true. One may question the legal value of such a document, but the precaution itself was not irrational.

Another witness featured in the documentary is Miranda Grace, already known from the BBC podcast “The Bad Guru,” which I analyzed in 2025 (Šorytė 2025). In “Twisted Yoga,” she repeats that she initially enjoyed the group and appreciated its teachings on the sacredness of the body. She then traveled to France. “And here was this opportunity for beyond satisfaction, a kind of ultimate happiness and enlightenment. It was a promise. You will experience these things, and everything will change,” she recalls.

There is no reason to doubt that Miranda now interprets her experience negatively, even if she acknowledges earlier positive aspects. Erotic rituals can be experienced very differently by different individuals. Some MISA students have engaged—privately—in unconventional erotic activities: adult films, performances at erotic festivals, erotic audio- and video-chat work, and pole-dancing in gentlemen’s clubs. Miranda’s accounts of chat line work are unsettling, but are not revelations. Massimo Introvigne openly discussed these practices in the 2022 book on MISA *Sacred Eroticism* (Introvigne 2022a, 112–14). The book, available in English and freely accessible online in French and Italian, situates these private activities of some students within a paradoxical strategy of entering the world of adult entertainment to introduce some participants to MISA’s alternative vision of eroticism.

To be absolutely clear, if any women were coerced into such activities, those responsible should be prosecuted. But to date, no MISA leader has been convicted of such crimes, despite accusations spanning decades. It also remains uncertain whether these activities were private ventures by individual members or connected

to leadership. The BBC podcast featured Mihai Rapcea, who was inaccurately described as Bivolaru's former personal lawyer and accurately described as a vehement opponent of MISA. Asked whether Bivolaru was directly involved in the video-chat business—beyond the indirect fact that students who earned more could donate more—Rapcea replied emphatically: "No, no, no, no. He was involved only in writing books, studying, and having affairs with girls."

"Twisted Yoga" portrays the witnesses as victims. MISA members we interviewed, who knew them personally, called them "liars" and emphasized that some of them have an agenda. Miranda seeks significant damages from the British yoga center where she learned about Bivolaru's ideas. Another "victim" featured in "Twisted Yoga," Bonnie, makes a living teaching "yoni mapping therapy" and methods to enhance female pleasure. She admits she developed these ideas after receiving her first yoni massage at the Tantra Temple in Copenhagen, where some MISA students and teachers used to work (Bliss 2017). Bonnie is now a competitor of MISA and has a vested interest in discrediting it, as do some of the Finnish apostates who accuse Bivolaru (not featured in "Twisted Yoga"), according to the late Liselotte Frisk's investigation (Frisk 2024, 21).

"Liar" is a moral label that holds little significance for social science. While some witnesses may have conflicts of interest, their stories closely resemble those of members of "cults" who were deprogrammed. Some admit they experienced forms of "therapy," which led them to reinterpret their experiences as abuse. They also acknowledge the strong influence of reading anti-cult literature; Ashley mentions "a constant reading rampage." It is this anti-cult socialization that led them to conclude they had been "brainwashed."

Finally, the documentary presents all these witnesses as a homogeneous group of victims, yet their narratives reveal a more complex picture. Some are pursuing civil damages. Some have built careers in erotic-spiritual coaching. Some have histories of media performance and self-fictionalization. Several acknowledge that the reinterpretation of their past was shaped by exposure to anti-cult literature, therapeutic interventions, or peer groups that encouraged them to view their experiences through the lens of trauma.

For understanding their narratives, this process of anti-cult socialization is crucial. Once individuals adopt the premise that they were "brainwashed," every aspect of their past may be reinterpreted as manipulation, even when their earlier accounts emphasized curiosity, agency, or positive experiences.

The documentary embraces these narratives without interrogating their origins, their internal contradictions, or their relationship to the judicial record. In doing so, it reinforces the broader anti-cult trope that adults who engage in unconventional spiritual or erotic practices must have been coerced, manipulated, or psychologically incapacitated. The result is a portrayal that is emotionally compelling but analytically impoverished, and that tells us more about the documentary's ideological commitments than about the lived experiences of the individuals it features.

“Brainwashing,” Again

Franck Dannerolle is a French police official who serves as the head of the OCRVP (Office central pour la répression des violences aux personnes—Central Office for the Suppression of Violence against Persons). He is often praised for his good work against the sexual exploitation of children, certainly a commendable activity.

In “Twisted Yoga,” however, he emerges as a true believer in the discredited, pseudo-scientific theory of brainwashing allegedly practiced by “cults” and “gurus.” That a high-ranking police officer shares gross anti-cult prejudices is cause for concern.

Paradoxically, he offers in the documentary one of the best representations of the brainwashing stereotype:

All the gurus tell you this: that the followers are free. They have no chains on their feet, they have no chains on their hands... This lack of freedom is because there are bars in the brain. Bars that the guru has put in their heads... In France, we have a specialized device to fight against the offenses that are committed in the cultic milieus. And in fact, this notion of mental imprisonment that we have developed in the context of cultic deviances, I know that this device is very particular in France... It's not a person who has a weakness because she is old or sick, but because she has been placed in a state of psychological suggestion. Gradually, through techniques, mental imprisonment will be implemented and will enable the victim's free will to be annihilated. A person loses her free will and accepts suffering things that she would never have accepted otherwise.

This is a standard description of the myth of “brainwashing,” which has entered French law under names such as “abuse of weakness” and “psychological subjection.”

For centuries, critics of unpopular or unfamiliar religious doctrines or practices have claimed that their followers must have been stripped of free will through some mysterious external force. Roman writers accused early Christians of sorcery; Chinese imperial officials said the same of unauthorized sects; medieval polemicists recycled the charge against groups they branded heretical; and nineteenth-century detractors of the Latter-day Saints insisted that no rational person could embrace Mormonism without falling under “mesmeric” influence. Modern anti-cult ideology replaced the vocabulary of magic with the vocabulary of psychology.

After Mao Zedong’s (1893–1976) victory in China and the Korean War, Western intelligence agencies speculated—without scientific basis—that Communist regimes had perfected methods of coercive “conversion,” and the term “brainwashing” was coined not by researchers but by a journalist with intelligence ties. These theories entered public discourse through sensationalist accounts rather than empirical evidence, and the U.S. government later acknowledged their speculative and political nature. Yet they became the template for later claims that new religious movements use similar techniques, even though courts and scholars repeatedly rejected them (Introvigne 2022b).

In 1990, a U.S. federal court in the *Fishman* case concluded that “Theories regarding the coercive persuasion practiced by religious cults are not sufficiently established to be admitted as evidence in federal courts of law,” excluding expert testimony based on such models (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990). European jurisprudence followed the same trajectory. The European Court of Human Rights stated in 2010 that “there is no generally accepted and scientific definition of what constitutes ‘mind control.’” It noted that behaviors often cited as evidence of coercion—intense commitment, deference to leaders, communal living, enthusiastic proselytism—are common across many religious traditions (European Court of Human Rights 2010). The Italian Constitutional Court had already abolished the Fascist-era crime of “plagio” (similar to “brainwashing”) in 1981 because it lacked scientific validity and violated religious liberty (Corte Costituzionale 1981).

These precedents reflect a broad international consensus: allegations of “psychological subjection” in religious contexts are too vague, too ideologically charged, and too easily weaponized to justify state intervention. They allow authorities to substitute their own value judgments for the lived experiences of

believers, creating a double standard in which mainstream religions are assumed to persuade legitimately. In contrast, minority religions are presumed guilty unless proven otherwise.

“Twisted Yoga” leans heavily on the idea of “brainwashing,” and so does the otherwise competent Officer Dannerolle, because without it, their entire narrative collapses. The first difficulty they face is that none of the women presented as “victims” in the documentary regarded themselves as such at the time of the events they describe. Their sense of having been harmed emerged only later, after exposure to anti-cult counseling and literature.

Supporters of the prosecution will undoubtedly argue that this is common in rape cases, where survivors may need years before they can articulate what happened. That is true, but it is also true that rape victims do not typically experience the assault as a profound spiritual encounter, nor do they voluntarily travel to meet the alleged perpetrator after being told in advance that the meeting will involve an erotic ritual. The initiations described by former MISA members took place within a framework of sacred eroticism, which requires a different interpretive lens. “Brainwashing” provides a convenient—if inaccurate—explanation: the women “thought” they were consenting or even joyful because their agency had supposedly been overridden. Only later, once they were told they had been manipulated, did they reinterpret their experiences as abuse.

The second reason the documentary and the French authorities rely so heavily on “brainwashing” is even more revealing, and it concerns what “Twisted Yoga” conspicuously avoids mentioning. Viewers are repeatedly told that on November 28, 2023, French police “rescued” dozens of women allegedly held captive by Bivolaru and MISA and on the verge of being raped. Yet none of these women appears in the documentary. Instead, the program features only apostate witnesses who left the movement years earlier. The women supposedly “liberated” in 2023 were not silent or inaccessible. Fourteen of them were interviewed in 2024 by Canadian scholar Susan Palmer. They all gave the same account: they had not been victims, had not been held against their will, had traveled to France freely, and had been mistreated not by MISA but by the police and prosecutors, who pressured them intensely to declare themselves abused. Not a single one said she had been in danger, assaulted, or raped (Palmer 2024). More than twenty later filed complaints alleging abuse—by the French police, not by Bivolaru.

This placed the authorities, the documentary's producers, and their preferred witnesses in an awkward position. The BBC's "The Bad Guru," biased though it was, at least acknowledged that none of the women "rescued" in 2023 identified as victims. "Twisted Yoga" omits this entirely, but leaves a ready-made justification between the lines: if the women deny being victims, it must be because they are "brainwashed."

As Argentinian scholar María Vardé has shown in her analysis of similar cases in Argentina, this logic grants extraordinary power to prosecutors influenced by anti-cult ideology. It deprives defendants of any meaningful defense and places members of minority religious movements in an impossible position. If they say they are victims, the prosecution wins. If they deny it, their testimony is dismissed as the product of "brainwashing," and the prosecution still wins (Vardé 2025).

In a documentary like "Twisted Yoga," where anti-cult journalists and apostate ex-members effectively serve as judge, jury, and executioner, the outcome is predetermined long before the credits roll.

Conclusion

Some may ask why this matters. Why spend time analyzing a documentary? It matters because narratives shape public opinion. Public opinion shapes policy. And policy shapes the lives of real people. When the media construct victims, they also construct perpetrators. They justify raids, arrests, and new laws. They reinforce stereotypes about minority religions. And they silence the voices of those who do not fit the script. We have a responsibility to examine these narratives critically, to ask what is shown and what is not shown, to ask who benefits from a particular framing, and to insist that evidence, not ideology, guide our understanding.

"Twisted Yoga" is not a documentary about a yoga group. It is a documentary about how a story is told. I hope I have shown that the story it tells is incomplete, selective, and shaped by forces that deserve far more scrutiny than the documentary itself provides.

References

- Andreescu, Gabriel. 2008. *Reprimarea mișcării yoga în anii '80*. Iași: Polirom.
- Andreescu, Gabriel. 2013. *MISA. Radiografia uni represiuni*. Iași: Polirom.
- Apple TV. 2026. *Twisted Yoga*. Documentary. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/43NpCqg>.
- Atudorei, Mugurel Calistrat, and Konrad Swenninger. 2018. "Discourse Analysis of the Public Communication Campaigns About the Yoga Teacher Gregorian Bivolaru." *World Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 4(1):20–60.
- Bliss, Bonnie. 2017. "My First Yoni Massage (and the Story of Where 'Yoni Mapping Therapy' Came From)." October 20. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/43SW9ey>.
- Bromley, David G. 1998. "The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles: Defectors, Whistle-blowers, and Apostates." In *The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, edited by David G. Bromley, 19–48. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Bourdy, Alban. 2018. *Un Bisounours au pays des se(x)ctes*. Norderstedt: Book on Demand.
- Corte Costituzionale. 1981. *Grasso*. *Giurisprudenza Costituzionale* 26:806–34.
- Cour de cassation. 2013. Judgment 12-81.743, May 14. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/4ag3GYx>.
- Curtea de Apel Cluj. 2021. "Decizia penală nr. 218/A/2021." February 16. Case 22351/3/2007.
- Darbois, Nelly. 2012. "La fasciathérapie « méthode Danis Bois ». Niveau de preuve d'une pratique de soin non conventionnel." M.A. Thesis. École de kinésithérapie du C.H.U. de Grenoble.
- Dumitru, Mădălina. 2024. *The Broken Flight: How I Unwillingly Became an Important Pawn in a Disgusting, Miserable, Cunning and Vile Plan*. Copenhagen: Natha Publishing House.
- European Court of Human Rights. 2010. *Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow and Others v. Russia*. June 10. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/44ozg2K>.
- European Court of Human Rights. 2016. *Amarandei and others v. Romania*, decision of April 26. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/3FBvIvV>.
- European Court of Human Rights. 2017. *Bivolaru v. Romania*, decision of February 28. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/3qFwJyH>.
- Frisk, Liselotte. 2024. "The Controversies Around Natha Yoga Center in Helsinki: Background, Causes, and Context." *The Journal of CESNUR* 8(1):3-33. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2024.8.1.1.

- Hertel, Olivier. 2012. "Quand la recherche marche sur la tête." *Sciences et Avenir*, April 5. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/4vjnzWY>.
- Hertel, Olivier. 2023. "L'homme qui a contribué à faire tomber la secte de yoga tantrique." *Le Point*, December 12. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/3Sih5Ju>.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022a. *Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA)*. Milan and Udine: Mimesis International.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022b. *Brainwashing: Reality or Myth?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Introvigne, Massimo, and María Vardé. 2026. "The Ashram Shambhala Saga: Esotericism and the Anti-Cult Repertoire in Russia and Argentina." *The Journal of CESNUR* 10(2):3–85. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2026.10.2.1.
- Introvigne, Massimo, and Rosita Šorytė. 2026. "Twisted TV: How a Documentary Bent the Facts Out of Shape. 2. Enter Hugues Gascan." *Bitter Winter*, March 23. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/4eVJvl9>.
- Jepsen, Belinda. 2021. "Three Years Before She Was a Contestant on The Bachelor, Ashleigh Freckleton Survived a Cult." *MamaMia*, August 6. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/3FljPdf>.
- Marques, Agnes Arabela. 2016. *A Adepta*. Lisbon: Chiado Books.
- Marques, Agnes Arabela. 2024. *The Believer*. London: Olympia Publishers.
- Palmer, Susan. 2024. "The Police Raids Against MISA in France, November 28, 2023." *The Journal of CESNUR* 8(2):89–110. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2024.8.2.3.
- Shupe, Anson D. 1995. *In the Name of All That's Holy: A Theory of Clergy Malfeasance*. Westport, CT, and London: Praeger.
- Shupe, Anson D., ed. 1998. *Wolves Within the Fold: Religious Leadership and Abuses of Power*. New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Shupe, Anson D. 2000. *Bad Pastors: Clergy Misconduct in Modern America*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Shupe, Anson D. 2007. *Spoils of the Kingdom: Clergy Misconduct and Religious Community*. Urbana, IL, and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Šorytė, Rosita. 2022. "The Swedish Asylum Case of Gregorian Bivolaru, 2005." *The Journal of CESNUR* 6(4):62–74. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2022.6.4.4.
- Šorytė, Rosita. 2025. "Sensationalized Media Representations of Sacred Esotericism Groups." *The Journal of CESNUR* 9(4):63–78. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2025.9.4.5.
- Syndicat national de la recherche scientifique. 2012. "Non au démantèlement d'un laboratoire de recherche à Angers. Communiqué de

- presse du SNCS-FSU et du SNTRS-CGT.” April 17. Accessed June 21, 2026. <https://bit.ly/4uTB1ch>.
- TV 7 Días*. 2014. “Mentiras, intereses e droga.” December 7.
- United States District Court for the Northern District of California. 1990. Opinion (Jensen J.), Case No. CR-88-0616 DLJ, *United States v. Steven Fishman*. April 13. 743 *F. Supp.* 713.
- Vardé María. 2025. “Anti-Cult Categories in Anti-Trafficking Policies in Argentina and Their Implications for ‘Victims’: A Case Study.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 9(5):21–44. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2025.9.5.2.
- Wright, Stuart A., and Susan J. Palmer. 2016. *Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities*. New York: Oxford University Press.