

MEDIA INFLUENCES ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Paper presented by Camillo Maffia at the Side Event organized by Soteria International at the OSCE meeting (Warsaw, 2013)

In Italy, equal opportunities are not always guaranteed by media, and several forms of media stigmatization occur in the ethnic and religious field. For instance, we often assist to offensive and discriminating representations of the Roma minorities, depicted as a sort of security trouble; in the same way, Jehova's Witnesses are often depicted as a dangerous, destructive cult in TV specials, without giving their representatives any chance to defend themselves or to tell the painful story of their religious movement; even the deportation by the Nazis of both minorities is not acknowledged.

Worldwide experts talk about "moral panic" especially about new religious movements: media social alarm about thousands of dangerous cults is mainly unreal in a country where only 2.5% of the population belongs to religious minorities, according to CESNUR. This moral panic is mainly spread by the media, like the moral panic about Islam spread after the 11/9 tragedy, which luckily faded due to the absence of new terroristic attacks the Western world feared in those years, although forms of media stigmatization still interest the Islam minority in our country.

This kind of disparity of treatment is harmful for religious human rights and for the cohabitation and inclusion of religious minorities, as well as for freedom of conscience. The MISA Yoga case is a good instance of misrepresentation and disparity of treatment in Italian media: what Italian public opinion knows about this incident is that a religious movement, MISA Yoga, broke into the news after the intervention of the Florence Substitute Prosecutor Angela Pietroiusti who started the penal proceeding nr 4858/12 and initiated a broad police action against MISA. At the dawn of 6th of December 2012 the Operating Team (Squadra Mobile) in collaboration with Florence Anti-cult Police Department, broke into the private houses of 25 Italian citizens and foreign residents in Italy, connected in various fashions to the School of Yoga affiliated to MISA from Romania, and even in the private houses of family members and friends. Of those, 18 are still investigated, while the others were considered people informed of the facts. Charges against them are: criminal conspiracy, prostitution, pornography, enslavement and sexual violence.

Press omitted the following facts about the controversial side of these investigations:

In 2005 MISA's founder Gregorian Bivolaru asked for and obtained political asylum at Sweden: Stockholm court rejected the query of extradition by Romania Government since "he would not have received an equal process in Romania"

In 2010 he was acquitted in Romania from all the accusations (the same that Pietroiuști is now supposing) in first grade (Sibiu Court) and even in appeal (Appeal Court of Alba Iulia)

In 2011 he won a dispute (Bucarest Court decision) where it has been acknowledged that he has been a political persecuted in the years of communist regime of Ceaucescu.

In 2012 various Europarlament members asked clarifications at Romanian Justice Minister, and the Europarlament Italian member Rita Borsellino presented an interrogation at European Parliament on question regarding the ongoing process in front of Romanian Cassation.

Even if organizations like OSCE, Soteria and Human Rights Without Frontiers reported several violations of human rights in the MISA's case and there are five open dossiers on their persecution at the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg, the Italian press never mentioned this side of the matter.

After many unfounded investigations brought on by the Anti-cult Police Department, Members of Parliament and experts began to pose several questions about the work and the existence of this special team and the choice of its referents, who are mainly FECRIS anti-cult associations and even Catholic religious groups. Necessity, costs, operations and even constitutionality of this Department, as well as its compatibility with European recommendations and standards, have been the subject of political and academic debates: three Parliament interpellations have been presented to former governments, who never answered.

Even the high pitched debate about the Anti-cult Police Department, as well as the Parliament interpellations about it, has never been reported by media. Facts show a scenery that doesn't match the picturesque representation of cult panorama in our country: nowadays, not a single dangerous cult in the history of Italian trials has ever been discovered, nor a case in the religious field where the behavior of a member could have been extended to the entire religious group, nor even a case where the religious group ordered or covered crimes committed by some of their members, with the only exception of the covering of sex abuses on children in the Catholic Church – which has never been described as an abusive cult by the media, however.

Italian Anti-sect Police Department closely cooperates with FECRIS associations, who have a radical point of view in the matter of cults and have raised several trial cases who turned out to be unfounded. Furthermore, the decree itself that constitutes the Department provides for the cooperation of the Police Department with the Anti-cult Service of a Catholic group, the Papa Giovanni XXIII Community, which is known for their extremist positions on themes concerning laity.

Italian police cooperation with Catholic organizations in the religious field came on the media in 2002, when a Catholic priest, don Aldo Buonaiuto, was summoned as a "cult

expert” in a presumed case of ritual crimes (that, again, turned out to be completely unfounded), and the media representation of this case at that time ignored the risk this cooperation represented for laity and religious equal opportunities, describing instead the priests’ role in the investigations as a sort of struggle between good and evil. The same happened with other cases of presumed crimes connected with alternative spirituality, religious minorities or Satanism, when even exorcist priests were interviewed to explain the danger of disciplines like Yoga and to warn the public opinion against the danger of Satan who comes when you abandon the Catholic faith and turn to different religions or beliefs.

Some experts and commenters have speculated on the existence of a “scientific creation of moral panic”. This theory finds support in Italian media’s history and evolution in this field as we think of 1998’s Ministerial report on dangerous cults and new religious movements.

This internal report, that showed an unreal scary scenery of mysterious and dangerous cults all over the country, ended “by mistake” in the hands of the press, who published it immediately generating panic in the public opinion. Instead, the wide and transversal criticism that followed didn’t find any room inside the press, even if it came from the most important experts and scholars of religions and cults.

The struggle against cults begins in the Eighties, right when Catholicism ceased to be State religion and after the abolition of the crime of mental manipulation. Opposition to minority cults comes out all of a sudden at that time from two main organizations: a Catholic anti-cult movement (GRIS), which may have had founded worries about the loss of prestige the abolition of Catholicism as State religion could have meant for the Church and for the competition of other religious movements in the attempt of gaining new followers, which initially focuses mainly on Jehova’s Witnesses; and a lay anti-cult movement (ARIS), supported by Communist Members of Parliament and politicians, which had the political objective of reintroducing the crime of mental manipulation and of interfering with the rise of Scientology, seen by some exponents of the Communist Party as an American interference on Italian territory in the last years of the cold war.

Anti-cult campaign continued on the media (always keeping lid on the political aspects of this matter) in the 90’s, when GRIS focused especially on Satanism raising one of the biggest unfounded case of Satanic cults with Marco Dimitri’s Children of Satan, and ARIS tried deprogramming techniques on a Scientologist, Alessandra Pesce, who was kidnapped and suffered fracture on her feet after the deprogrammers’ abusive action, while media spread an unjustified Satanism alarm in the public opinion and described the Church of Scientology as a destructive cult, as it still is seen by many people in our country. The birth of more lay anti-cult organizations, which joined FECRIS, and the involvement of Papa Giovanni XXIII Community raised other cult cases on television and newspapers, along with comments of experts talking of thousands of dangerous religious movements in the Italian territory, warning institutions against any agreement with or tolerance of minorities like Jehova’s

Witnesses or Soka Gakkai, and ingenerating in the Italian citizens an increasing diffidence and a lack of tolerance towards freedom of religion and belief.

Political exponents, Members of Parliament, religion experts, jurists and constitutionalists repeatedly launched alarms against this situation, especially after the Arkeon case and the involvement of the famous scholar Raffaella Di Marzio, charged to be a “guru” who wanted to reconstruct a dangerous cult only because of an article where she analyzed the Arkeon movement (under investigation at that time) and came to the conclusion, which turned to be right after the end of the trial, that it was not a dangerous cult, but an open and free religious community; and because of the opening of a Web Forum on her website where former and actual members could freely talk and compare their different points of view, as she believed in a dialogical scientific approach: the involvement of dr. Di Marzio in police investigations revealed the danger for democracy and religious freedom that anti-cult campaigns represent, and after her final discharge important commenters started to publicly worry about the constitutionality of the Anti-cult Department and its cooperation with Catholic priests and FECRIS organizations. Important jurists like Mauro Mellini fought hard, in the Sixties and in the Seventies, along with famous Italian intellectuals like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Umberto Eco, Elsa Morante and Marco Pannella, for the abolition of the crime of mental manipulation because of the dramatic case of Aldo Braibanti, an Italian intellectual who was convicted for mental manipulation before the abolition of the crime by the Constitutional Court, because of his socially unaccepted homosexual relationship with a younger man; and now the same jurists, along with academic and political exponents, warn against the danger of the attempt to restore the crime of mental manipulation in the wake of the anti-cult campaigns.

The crime of mental manipulation, abolished in 1981, was included in the Italian code by the Fascist regime: it is worth to remember that, even if the Italian Constitution decrees freedom of religion as an inviolable human right, some Fascist laws have never been abolished, including the ones about “tolerated religions”. Nowadays in Italy political exponents and religious experts still ask for the reintroduction of the penalty invoking the dangers of some religious minorities: it is interesting to notice that the main conferences about cults, in Italy, where the police, many experts and political exponents learn about the “menace of abusive cults”, take place in the Ateneo Regina Apostolorum, an institute which is owned by the Legionaries of Christ (maybe one of the most controversial religious movements in the world after Father Maciel’s scandal); but media have always kept the lid on such contradictions.