

OVIDIUS UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANTA  
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DOMAIN: THEOLOGY

**SUMMARY PHD THESIS**  
**MISSIONARY CHALLENGES FROM**  
**THE ANANDA MARGA GROUP AT THE**  
**ADDRESS OF ROMANIAN LIFE AND**  
**ECLESIAL MISSION. MISSIONARY**  
**EVALUATION**

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This PhD thesis seeks an analytical, theological and missionary exploration of a new-religious movement in the public space of the nineteenth century and too little analyzed by the Church and civil authorities: Ananda Marga.

It is unquestionable that today, in the logic of a globally and secularly secular society, religion does not disappear from the attention of contemporary man. Instead, new forms of religiosity and spirituality are emerging that bring religion out of its traditional identity and relate it to new socio-cultural, even economic, trends. What we call General New Religious Movements essentials this complex reinterpretation of the religious dimension into new patterns that are foldable to today's and tomorrow's man's mentality.

Ananda Marga can be defined in various forms depending on the perspective we look at: the Hindu sect, the socio-political movement, the nonreligious movement, the spiritual exercise, etc. What is certain is that Ananda Marga struggled through various actions that brought her to the attention of the contemporary world.

In 1972 in Patna, India, a railway workshop's accountant was convicted for criminal conspiracy and murder of six people. He was given a life sentence. Six years later, in July 1978, a second trial acquitted him of all charges. Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar was released from prison.

This affair would be of little interest if tens of thousands of people did not believe the accused to be an incarnation of God and the murders for which he was tried were not those of his own ex-disciples. Known to his disciples as Sri Sri Anandamurti, literally "the incarnation of Bliss," Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (1920-1990) is the guru of Ananda Marga, an Indian Saiva religious group founded in 1955 in Bihar. His trial, conviction and incarceration in the 1970s on the basis of a close disciple's testimony greatly influenced the shaping of the movement, perhaps leading some members to commit a series of acts of violence. Protesting the incarceration of their guru, some disciples immolated themselves in public places in India and abroad, while others were put on trial for political assassinations and acts of terrorism. This article will address the controversy concerning alleged violence inside Ananda Marga. In what ways has the accusation that the guru was a murderer affected the shaping and development of the movement?

Usually, studies concerning; violence in religious movements are based on assumptions that violence occurs due to members' reactions to government action or

internal crisis, or as a result of individual lack of self-control. Scholarly efforts are then made to understand the context and reasons for the violence, with attention paid to how it could have been avoided, or how similar violence can be prevented in future cases.

Although I entirely admit the importance and necessity of these efforts, in this thesis I adopt a different perspective. Violence in Ananda Marga is seen here as an integral part of the group's internal dynamics, and the murders for which the guru was convicted and exonerated appear only as the public face of these dynamics. Through the analysis of one event—the violence imputed to the guru in the trial—I explore the role violence plays within the movement. I argue that acknowledgment of and involvement in violence within the group is part of an esoteric initiatory process, which requires strategies of dissimulation and secrecy, characteristic features of tantric religious movements.

Despite the interest that Ananda Marga aroused in the Indian media, the movement has been totally neglected by the social science literature. Its ideology, religious practices, and organizational structures have escaped in-depth study. Ananda Marga was founded in 1955 by Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, a Bengali from a lower middle-class family. Ananda Marga literally means "Path to Bliss." It designates both an organization of people engaged in spiritual practices leading to a state of blissfulness, as well as the doctrine on which those practices are based.

Ananda Marga involves tens of thousands of disciples in different parts of the world, but the greatest number is in India, particularly in West Bengal, the home state of the founder. Unlike Hindu sects (sampraddya) in India, which base the guru's legitimacy on a spiritual lineage (parampara), Ananda Marga does not claim a lineage. Sarkar was not a disciple of a guru. His disciples consider him to be an avatar (abatdra, Sanskrit avatdra) of Siva, a detail of importance for this study. He is seen as being an all-knowing (antarydmi), omnipotent (sarbasktimdna), and ever-present entity (sarbabhute birdjamana)? Disciples commonly refer to him as Anandamurti, literally "Embodiment of Bliss," or more affectionately as Baba, a kinship term meaning "father." Although he died in 1990, Anandamurti is still worshipped as the movement's guru. No spiritual successor has been appointed: the actual leaders of the group retain administrative powers but not the spiritual status of Anandamurti.

Regarding religious doctrines and practices, Ananda Marga's mottos are "self-realization" and "service to humanity." Disciples are engaged in a tantri spiritual discipline (tantrika sddhand) to achieve liberation (moksa). Although Tantrism is a very

loose term difficult to define,<sup>9</sup> Ananda Marga disciples use it to refer to a particular ideology in which microcosm and macrocosm correspond and interact through energy, and a vast range of body-centered spiritual practices ranging from softcore to hard-core. "Soft-core" practices are those commonly found within the broad Hindu tradition. I use the term "hard-core" to designate secret practices associated with Tantra. As we will see in greater detail below, Ananda Marga's spiritual practices include restrictions on diet, recitation of mantras, and different types of meditation depending on the initiation degree.

In addition to the quest for individual transformation, Ananda Marga insists on the necessity of rendering sendee to humanity. Disciples run schools and children's homes, and they coordinate relief work in different parts of the world. The clear influence can be seen of the nineteenth-century Indian socio-religious reform movement, which transformed social action (sebd, Sanskrit sevd) into a path to liberation. Further, Ananda Marga's ideology is marked by political aspirations, according to which disciples of high spiritual development should rule the world and defend an ideal socio-cosmic order (dharma). In the pursuit of that aim some disciples have run for elected offices in India, although with very limited success.

Logo of Ananda Marga



The objectives of this PhD thesis are: the historical-phenomenological analysis of the Ananda Marga group, the exploration of its spirituality and doctrine, the emphasis on the dimension of violence in the political philosophy of Ananda Marga, the evaluation of the Ananda Marga group from the Christian point of view and the elaboration of missionary strategies blurring of group proliferation.

Anandei Marga's Christian theological research, its evaluation will allow us to provide pastoral measures from a missionary perspective to counteract the dynamics of seizing new adherents at least in Romania. This is more than necessary, as today's pluralist and global society more accessiblly accesss the interaction between religions and different theological identity cultures. This dynamic, impossible to control, generates the possibility of a new-religious nonconformism as an expression of the syncretism of various elements in the fusion of new synthetic patterns. Besides this deviant cultural, there is also an importation of oriental elements into the West by all kinds of self-dubbed gurus that only distort the authentic significance of some Indian doctrinal elements by presenting them in new ways to Westerners.

For these reasons, a fair, correct assessment of Ananda Marga will allow us to offer missionary and pastoral criticism of these movements, which in fact only lead to the depersonalization of the adept without any real improvement on the social, religious, and cultural level.

Through influence of theory on religion and secularization, Peter Berger suggests that with the advent of the modern world, religions will be forced to adapt to two new realities. First of all, in this context, religion has become a matter of choice; religious guidelines no longer reflect the legitimacy demanded by society, as much as individual and family preferences. Religion has come to be privatized. In the modern world, as P. Berger notes, religion manifests itself as a public rhetoric and a private virtue. In other words, the common religion is missing the reality, and as long as it is real, it lacks communion. Secondly, religion needs to embark on a new reality of pluralism. Monopoly religions of the past have lagged behind and never seem to return, at least under the strict conditions of advanced capitalism.

In the view of American sociologist P.Berger, this means that religious traditions that authoritatively imposed now have become commercialized, meeting the standards imposed by the psycho-market. They must be sold to customers who are no longer forced to buy. Religious institutions have become marketing agencies, and religious traditions have become the product of buyers.

This transfer based on the social circumstances of religious organizations has had consequences both in the structure and ideology of contemporary religions. In order to compete in the new psychopia, religions must rationalize their efforts. At this end, as with the other institutions of modernity, religious organizations have become increasingly bureaucratic and more business-like. An unexpected consequence of this

bureaucratization is that religious groups have become similar in forms and functions as subjects of extra-religious criteria of efficiency. The products of religion fall prey to the danger of homogenization. In economic terms, under these market conditions, the products are subject to standardization and marginal differentiation. Having the consumer driving this machine, every religion tries to make fashion what is required. The line of competition is maintained by developing and maintaining marginal differences in style and approach, minimizing any real differentiation of substance. For example, in terms of essence and style, the product has to comply with the requirements of new institutional locations - the private sphere. Religion that makes a priority to meet the specific needs of private life (eg sexuality, marriage, child raising, family norms and activities) gains a great competitive advantage. Or at least that's what it is. Moreover, in this way do the religions that offer a product "in consonance with the secularized conscience" of the inhabitants of the area of industrialized states (according to the scientific results). Consequently, Berger deplores the fact that in this competition of similar religions their veracity is undermined by their relativized content. The religious beliefs of a nomos are "un-objectified", that is, they lack the status of guarantor of objective reality. The veracity of the claimed truth becomes a matter of subjective consciousness and singular convictions.

In conclusion, Berger proposes two options that seem appropriate for religion in the modern world. They aim either to accommodate this situation by themselves, by playing a plan of pluralistic religious actions, by modifying their product according to the demand of consumers, or refusing to adapt themselves, fortifying themselves behind all the socio-religious structures they can maintain or build them, and continue to prophesy the old goals as much as possible, as if nothing has happened.

In the face of this diagnosis, the idea of assigning a greater role to the social and cultural significance of the New Religious Movements is greatly diminished. This is more evident in Bryan Wilson's case. Like Berger, Wilson believes that the macro-social changes associated with secularization have limited the capacity of all New Religious Movements to ever change the privatization of religion in Western culture. He believes this because all New Religious Movements are the broad product of the modern social system, unlike its opponents.

New religious movements, whether they are Christian, Hindu or Buddhist, are not regarded in the strict sense of the word as rebirths of ancient traditions, but are rather regarded as adaptations of the religious to new social circumstances. In their own

style and due to their interests, they are an adaptation to the new conditions and amount to a lot of arrogance and facilities, encouraged by the development of a rational secular sphere. This is how many such New Religious Movements are themselves confessors of secularization; they often use the most secular methods of evangelism, funding, publishing and mobilizing adherents. It is very common to abandon all the traditional, symbolic or aesthetic symbols of traditional religions, more pragmatic attitudes and a system of control of accounting, propaganda and even doctrinal content, being very close to the style of secular enterprises than to the style of secular enterprises of traditional systems. The new religiosity indicates a continuous interest in spiritual comfort and trust for many individuals, because in the West, most of them appear to be the creation of a secularized society.

This is the dominant perspective of most sociologists, especially the sociological reflection of the place of religion in the globalized postmodern society, despite the claim often made by the opposite of this analysis of detecting a new role of religion in the contemporary world. In these analyzes, the social and cultural significance of religion in our social, old or new environment continues to be either mere resistance to the consequences of modernity, postmodernity, or globalization (as in the case of many fundamentalist movements), or to tacitly subscribe to the cultural agenda of modernity, postmodernity, or globalization.

Until now, at least in the Romanian theological space, we do not find a PhD thesis that analyzes in detail what Ananda Marga defines as a Neoreligious Movement. In Romania, the issue of the New Religious Movements came in particular to the attention of the theological doctoral research, a fact confirmed by a series of doctoral theses sustained after the year 2000. We mention here: Pr. Ciprian Marius Cloșcă, The Dimension of the Neoreligious Phenomenon in the Current Romanian Society, "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iasi, Faculty of Orthodox Theology (2008); Assist. univ. Constantin Iulian Damian, Handling Techniques Specific to New Religious Movements, "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iasi, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, (2011), Grigore Georgiu, New Religious Movement Offensive (NMR) and reversibility of secularization," 1 Decembrie 1918 "University of Alba Iulia, Faculty of Orthodox Theology (2013). However, Ananda Marga is too little presented in these works, as well as in some specialized papers by some Romanian theologians. In our country, the concern for this new religious reality promoted by the New Religious Movements was effectively expressed after 1989, when, on the basis of the political and social liberalism

that had taken over the authoritarian communism, there was an increasing presence of the proliferation of New Religious Movements Oriental invoice (for example, Transcendental Meditation). We note the contribution of Father Petre I David, who perhaps brings for the first time in Romanian theology the problem of the non-religious phenomenon: *Christian guide. Sectology*, Episcopiei Argeșului Publishing House, Curtea de Argeș, 1994. Prof. univ. Dr. Nicolae Achimescu in 2002 opens the study of the New Religious Movements in Romanian Theology by publishing the book: *The New Religious Movements*, Limes Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, an Orthodox theological presentation, analysis and theoretical answer to the esoteric-neognostic movements, the movements with an Oriental religious foundation, groups and currents with a religious-philosophical and psychological character and occultism. Prof. prof. Univ. Dr. Gheorghe Petraru publishes in 2006 *Neoproteant Sects and New Religious Movements in Romania*, Vasiliana '98 Publishing House, Iași, which adds more relevance by presenting the New Religious Movements with an esoteric-occultic, extremist religious base in Romania, and Prof. prof. Univ. Dr. Gheorghe Istodor is the only one who writes about the MISA group: *M.I.S.A. and Yoga in the Light of Orthodoxy*, published in 2005.

On the international level, we find the Ph.D. Thesis *The Spiritual Teachings of Prabhat Raijan Sarkar: Descriptive philosophy and critical comparisons* supported by Chris Kang at the University of Queensland in 2003.

We note here important scholars who have opened and shaped the study of New Religious Movements in a theological and sociological plan, where Ananda Marga is analyzed alongside other movements whose works are of paramount importance: Bryan R. Wilson, Rodney Stark, John A. Saliba, Elisabeth Arweck, William Sims Bainbridge, Johannes Aagaard, George D. Chryssides, Lorne L. Dawson, Irving Hexham, James R. Lewis, Ron Rhodes, Eileen Barker, James A. Beckford, David G. Bromley, J. Gordon Melton.

As far as the research methods of the proposed theme are concerned, we will combine the systematic approach, highlighting Anandei Marga's doctrinal background content, in particular, the non -religious phenomenon in general, and comparative one in which we will analyze in a critical perspective what promote this Hindu sect by their assessment from the angle of Orthodox theology. We will have the opportunity to draw some critical lines about the presence of Ananda Marga on the current religious scene.

We mention that, as regards the bibliography that was consulted in the drafting of this PhD thesis, this is largely in English, given that the vast majority of the fundamental works of sociology and theology which have as objective the New Religious Movements, syncretist oriental sects were written in English. We will appeal to the opera that frames the doctrines of Ananda Marga and to the work of the contemporary theologians who have dealt with this sect.

A thorough, detailed knowledge of the theme proposed for research offers the opportunity for logically and efficiently argued answers, and not the expression of unconscious opinions unknowingly. For the missionary evaluation of the issues in question we will use theological literature in Romanian, which will allow us to point out that the Romanian Orthodox Church has all the resources to respond missionary to the challenges of new forms of religiosity. Interpreting key concepts, technical terms, will involve calling to specialized dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

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