



Religious Freedom is the Cornerstone of all Freedom

We are actively working to address violations of religious freedoms with the support of religious and geopolitical leaders, and religious freedom advocates.

A tragic precedent for the curtailment of religious freedom is happening in Japan

The assassination in Nara, Japan, of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022, is being followed by a campaign of intolerance, discrimination, and persecution of the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU). The assassin was not a member of the FFWPU, but his mother is, and he is resentful toward the organization because of his mother's involvement and her history of substantial donations.

FFWPU is a religious organization, a church. Everyone acknowledges that the church has committed no crimes and has operated within the laws governing religious behavior in Japan.

No guilt on the part of the church is presumed by the courts. The FFWPU is a strong voice for human rights, their support of the family as the best environment for raising children, and a high standard of integrity and morality in the goal for the conduct of public affairs and personal relations. It is not easy to openly challenge the prevailing winds of situation ethics and a hypersexualized culture, but the FFWPU believes the survival of society depends on raising our standards.

Nevertheless, anti-religious elements within the Japanese media are blanketing the airwaves and front pages of the media in that country with wall-to-wall innuendo and unfounded accusations this church.

Furthermore, any public figure who has been a friend or supporter of these cherished religious beliefs, is being hounded relentlessly on every front page, every day.

Members of the church awaken to find defamatory slogans painted on the walls of their homes. The human rights of the members of the Unification Church in Japan are being seriously, systematically, and blatantly

violated. Very direct efforts are being made to use the FFWPU as a scapegoat, and even to dissolve the FFWPU's right to exist in Japan by whipping up hysteria against the church in the media.

Again, the Japanese courts have investigated the church for years and have absolved it and its leaders of any crimes and wrongdoing.

Thankfully, courageous defenders of religious freedom worldwide are starting to come forward to address the issues of the FFWPU directly.

Voices for Religious Freedom in Japan

Video Messages



Hon. Mike Pompeo

U.S. Secretary of State (2018-2021)

"The nations that most threaten us, the nations that put our lives and our freedoms most at risk, are the very same nations that deny religious freedom to their own."



Hon. Newt Gingrich

U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives (1995-1999)

"I am concerned that those pushing these discriminatory actions are really seeking to weaken the security and peace of Japan, making Japan weaker in the face of threats from China and North Korea."



Amb. Sam Brownback

U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom (2018-2021)

"Modern democracies, open democracies like Japan, South Korea, the United States, our Hallmark, one of the hallmarks of our nations is religious freedom, to allow people to pursue and do with their own soul as they see fit. Don't walk away from it."



Pastor Paula White-Cain

Senior Pastor, City of Destiny



Bishop Don Mearns

Senior Pastor, Evangel Cathedral



Mr. Doug Bandow

Senior Fellow, Cato Institute

“We are confident that the current prime minister and all leadership of Japan will uphold the high principle of defending religious freedom for all faiths.”

“Why do we Americans refer to religious freedom as the first freedom?... Because it enables and it protects other human freedoms like the freedom of speech. You cannot have freedom of speech, if you do not have first religious freedom. The culture of liberty and peaceful democracy in the United States, in large part, emerged from its firm respect for religious freedom.”

“Regimes which make religion an instrument of politics are unlikely to allow free speech, debate and elections.”

Letters and Documents

- [Statement to The United Nations' Human Rights Committee in Geneva \(9/9/22\)](#) by CAP-LC
- [Supplemental Statement submitted to the 136th session, Human Rights Committee \(10/10/2022- 11/4/2022\)](#) by CAP-LC
- Article: [“Unification Church pushes back against ‘abusive’ media reports in wake of Shinzo Abe assassination”](#) by The Washington Times
- Journal: [“The Assassination of Shinzo Abe and the Unification Church”](#) by Massimo Introvigne
- Article: [“Prime Minister Shinzo Abe: A historic leader”](#) by Newt Gingrich, op-ed in The Washington Times

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Universal Peace Federation USA
3600 New York Ave. NE, Washington
D.C., 20002
info@us.upf.org
(202) 636 4748

Statement submitted to The United Nations' Human Rights Committee in Geneva on Friday 9th September 2022 by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, ("CAP-LC") a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with ECOSOC

Subject: Intolerance, Discrimination, and Persecution of the Unification Church/Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in Japan

The assassination in Nara, Japan, of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022, was followed by a campaign of intolerance, discrimination, and persecution of the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (we will use "*Unification Church*" and "*Family Federation for World Peace and Unification*" interchangeably here, as most media do, although we are aware of the historical nuances and differences). During the course of this campaign, the human rights of the members of the Unification Church in Japan were seriously, systematically, and blatantly violated.

CAP-LC will detail what happened in Japan based on a study conducted by CESNUR, the highly respected Center for Studies on New Religions, whose results have been anticipated in the daily magazine "*Bitter Winter*" and are being published in the scholarly *The Journal of CESNUR*. Parts of CESNUR's report are reprinted here with permission.

1. Five Basic Facts

It seems appropriate to start from five basic facts.

First, the assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, was not and had never been a member of the Unification Church/Family Federation.

Second, his mother did join the Unification Church in 1998, and remains a member. Yamagami's mother declared bankruptcy in 2002, a fact both Abe's killer and her brother-in-law blamed on the excessive donations she had made to the Church. After the brother-in-law complained, two Church members returned in installments 50% of the donations.

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Third, Shinzo Abe was not a member of the Unification Church either. He participated via video in a 2021 event, and send a message to another event in 2022, of the Universal Peace Federation, an NGO founded by the leaders of the Unification Church. So did Donald Trump, former European Commission presidents José Manuel Barroso and Romano Prodi, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen, and dozens of other politicians of all persuasions (Amicarelli et al. 2022).

Fourth, his mother's bankruptcy, as he reported himself, caused Yamagami's hatred for the Unification Church. However, the bankruptcy occurred in 2002 and Yamagami killed Abe in 2022, twenty years later. What triggered Yamagami's killing frenzy in 2022, and not before? We know for a fact that Yamagami followed the hate campaigns against the Unification Church prevailing in Japan. He interacted on social media with fellow enemies of the Unification Church. The day before killing Abe, Yamagami wrote a letter to Kazuhiro Yonemoto (Yamagami 2022). Although Yonemoto deserves credit for having, in the past, opposed the practice of kidnapping members of the Unification Church for the purposes of deprogramming or "de-converting" them, he remains an opponent of the Church. Yamagami interacted with the anti-Unification-Church milieu, and was exposed to the hate speech against the Church, which may easily have turned his weak head.

Fifth, before killing Abe, Yamagami had planned to assassinate Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, the leader of the Family Federation (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2022). He also tested his weapon by shooting at a building that had once been used as a Family Federation church (*The Japan Times* 2022a).

Yamagami hated the Church, and this hate was fueled by the hate speech of the anti-Unification-Church activists. To hide their responsibility, they blamed the Unification Church, which was clearly a victim, as if it were the perpetrator.

2. Violations of Articles 17 and 19.3.a ICCPR: Arbitrary Interference with Privacy and Attacks on Honor and Reputation

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After the assassination of Abe, all of a sudden even non-Japanese media became familiar with a group called the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales. The network, now including some 300 lawyers, was established in Japan in 1987 to combat the Unification Church, although it occasionally targeted other religious movements as well.

To avoid the possible criticism that the campaigns of the hostile lawyers had excited the feeble mind of the killer, the Network decided to strike preemptively. It held press conferences blaming the Unification Church for what happened, turning the perpetrator into the victim and vice versa.

Most international media bought the version of the Network, without investigating who exactly these lawyers are. They also ignored a precedent that once caught the international attention of human rights activists and even of the U.S. Department of State (see U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2010). From 1966 to 2015, some 4,300 adult members of the Unification Church were kidnapped at the instigation of their parents, locked in apartments, and submitted to "deprogramming" (Fautré 2012), a practice invented in the United States but declared illegal by courts of law there.

Members of religions their parents did not approve of were kidnapped, privately detained, and submitted to heavy physical and psychological pressures until they accepted to abandon their faith. Deprogramming had been forbidden in most democratic countries of the world, and only survived in Japan and South Korea.

Deprogramming in Japan also targeted the Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religions (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2010), and was particularly rough. A female member of the Unification Church accused a deprogrammer of having raped her for several months while he was trying to "deconvert" her (although she later became scared and withdrew the accusation). Having learned of the rape, years later her father committed suicide out of his shame for having hired the deprogrammer (Yoemoto 2008, 200–1).

Unification Church member Toru Goto was confined in apartments for more than twelve years in the unsuccessful attempt to deprogram him (Fautré 2012). It was his case

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that led the Supreme Court in 2015 to declare the deprogramming illegal and grant significant damages to Goto (two Unification Church believers had won cases before him, but had received only small awards of damages). After this decision, the practice ceased, although in 2021 there was a new case, when parents detained a Unification Church member in their home rather than in an apartment, then claimed it was just a family affair.

The most visible lawyers in the Network, Hiroshi Yamaguchi (who represented Goto's main tormenter, Takashi Miyamura), Hiroshi Watanabe, and Masaki Kito, were involved in defending those accused of having acted as deprogrammers. Some attorneys in the Network relied on deprogrammers who sent to them their deprogrammed victims. They were then persuaded to sue the Unification Church, generating significant revenues for the lawyers.

It is also more than a curiosity that in the case of Yamaguchi, his enmity towards the Unification Church pre-dates the foundation of the Network. In 1979, Soviet KGB agent and top spy in Japan Stanislav Levchenko defected to the U.S. He testified that prominent Japanese politicians, mostly connected with the Socialist Party of Japan (SPJ), including the SPJ Chairman Seiichi Katsumata (1908–1989) were paid Soviet agents (Levchenko 1988). Although Levchenko's revelations were later confirmed by documents discovered in Russian archives after the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1983 (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2005, 300), the SPJ answered by denouncing a conspiracy organized by the CIA through the International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC), an organization connected with the Unification Church. IFVOC sued the SPJ. Yamaguchi represented the SPJ but lost the case, which was later settled with the SPJ paying two million yen to IFVOC as a settlement fee.

Not all the Network's lawyers supported the kidnappings. According to CESNUR's research, to his credit one of them, Yoshiro Ito, suggested in 1996 that the Network should cease its cooperation with Miyamura. As late as the 2021 case, however, a Network's lawyer, Yasuo Kawai, assisted the parents who tried to revive the illegal practice of deprogramming.

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For some lawyers in the network the campaigns against the Unification Church were tools to protect deprogramming and the subsequent lawsuits by deprogrammed ex-members against the Church, both lucrative businesses. A not less lucrative venture is suing the Unification Church on behalf of donors persuaded by the lawyers that they can recover their donations. The Network's lawyers are keen to offer figures about these donations, but how much money they made as attorneys out of these cases is not disclosed.

They are also not above resorting to questionable tactics. In a case the Unification Church won against an ex-member at the Tokyo District Court on March 1, 2021, the judge found that the plaintiff had altered and backdated a personal notebook to fabricate evidence against the Unification Church (Tokyo District Court 2021).

We can safely conclude that the attorneys of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales are not knights in shining armor slaying the dragons of "*cults*," as their own propaganda claims, which is all too easily accepted by Japanese and international media. Although there are different positions among them on the issue of deprogramming, some prominent Network members defended violent kidnappers—and even Soviet spies—, submitted false documents fabricated by their clients to the judges, and spread slanderous information against the Unification Church that they knew was not true, including on donations, in violations of the part of Articles 17 and 19.3.a ICCPR forbidding slander of honor and reputation.

It is a cause for great concern that lawyers from the Network, which is certainly not an unbiased organization, nor one friendly to religious liberty, are currently participating in official "*commissions of experts*," including one convened by the Consumer Affairs Agency and the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, which are suggesting further measures against the Unification Church.

It is an old topic of anti-religious propaganda that religionists "*only want to make money*." Totalitarian states invariably use this argument to justify religious persecution. We are now witnessing the same propaganda at work against the Unification Church/Family Federation in Japan. The main argument used by the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales is that countless Japanese people have been ruined by

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both donations and the purchase of worthless artifacts sold by the Unification Church at extravagant prices.

"Spiritual sales" is a label coined by anti-Unification-Church leftist media in Japan in the 1980s. A company called *"Happy World"* imported into Japan and sold vases and miniature pagodas. Some of those who bought them were connected to small new religions other than the Unification Church, and declared that these artifacts were imbued with a good spiritual energy. Not surprisingly, Happy World was happy about it, and raised the prices. The Unification Church did not sell the vases and pagodas, and had nothing to do with claims about their alleged mystical powers. However, those who operated Happy World were Unification Church members, and donated to the Church part of their profits. Thus, they were accused of *"spiritual sales,"* particularly after the hostile lawyers' association was founded in 1987.

After 1987, the sales of vases and pagodas stopped, but other Unification Church members had businesses selling artworks, jewelry, and seals or stamps used in Japan to confirm signatures. These stamps were exquisitely crafted and made of expensive materials, but they were sold at prices higher than usual, also because it was claimed they brought good luck, a common claim for different artifacts in Japan. Again, these items were not sold by the Unification Church but by members who then used part of their profits to donate to the Church.

In 2000, an existing law on door-to-door sales was significantly amended, and its name was changed to *"Act on Specified Commercial Transactions."* It prohibited to *"intimidate or disturb"* prospective buyers in order to conclude a sale. Based on this law, members of the Unification Church who sold seals were detained, and eventually received suspended jail sentences. The then President of the Church in Japan acknowledged responsibility for not having instructed members about the new law and their duty to respect it. He resigned in 2009, and the Unification Church adopted a new policy counseling members whose businesses sold *"lucky"* artifacts, including stamps, to strictly comply with the 2000 law.

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The hostile lawyers used the label "*spiritual sales*" also for donations to the Unification Church, a different matter. They claimed that the Church was "*selling*" eternal salvation, both for the living and their deceased loved ones, against donations. They managed to persuade some Japanese courts to establish the dubious principle that if the amount of donations was high, it should be presumed they had been obtained through "*fraudulent or threatening*" means, or "psychological techniques" depriving the donors of their "*free will*" (a notion dangerously close to the discredited and pseudo-scientific theory of brainwashing: see Richardson 1993, 2015; Introvigne 2022).

Tokens of appreciation given to the donors may also be maliciously confused with items sold through "*spiritual sales*." In some Catholic organizations, those who make important donations receive a book or diploma autographed by the Pope. Obviously, they are not "*buying*" the diploma or the book for an extravagant price. The book or the diploma are just symbolic reminders that the Church is grateful for their donations.

The lawyers relied on a frequent fallacy of campaigns against the groups labeled as "*cults*." They present as unique practices they have in common with mainline religions. The Catholic Church believes that many souls after death go to Purgatory, a temporary state between Heaven and Hell. Time in Purgatory can be shortened by their relatives and friends through prayers, Masses for which they pay an honorary to the priest—and donations. Indeed, one of the reasons Martin Luther (1483–1546) separated from the Church of Rome was his dislike for the Catholic doctrine of indulgences, which taught that monetary offerings may automatically shorten time served in Purgatory. Buddhist orders have similar teachings, connecting donations with deceased relatives' better reincarnations and escape from the dreaded Cold Hells.

Hundreds of Protestant churches maintain the Biblical principle of tithing, and ask members to donate ten percent of their income. Tithing is suggested as a possibility, although it is not mandatory, in the Unification Church too, which also has specific practices such as donating for four years in multiples of thirty, acknowledging the collective responsibility of humankind for Judas' betrayal of Christ, whom he sold for

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thirty pieces of silver (Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity 1992 [1991]).

In its general principles, the Unification Church's theology of donations is surprisingly similar to its Catholic and Protestant counterparts. Japanese courts of law have started recognizing it, also because donors now sign notarized statements where they state that they are donating freely, understand all the implications, and will not sue the Unification Church in the future. In 2021, the Family Federation still lost one donation case but won two others (including Tokyo District Court 2021).

We are deeply concerned by the fact that proposals in Japan that the already restrictive 2000 law should be amended to prohibit soliciting donations as well are seriously considered, including by the above-mentioned official commission, where voices are heard that clearly state that the aim is to prevent donations to the Unification Church. Obviously, this would violate a number of ICCPR provisions, including freedom of religion or belief (Article 18), non-discrimination (Article 26), and unreasonable limitations of rights and freedoms of associations to self-organize themselves and obtain the necessary resources for their operations (Article 22). Donations to a certain religion would be treated differently from donations to other religions, based on the idea that this religion practices something called "*psychic marketing*," a bizarre label unknown to international scholars of religion that hides the discredited and pseudo-scientific idea of "*brainwashing*" (Richardson 1993, 2015; Introvigne 2022).

We are also concerned with the inauguration on September 5, 2022, of a government-operated "*telephone consultation service*," through which officers will direct those who are "*experiencing trouble*" with the Unification Church to "*professional consultation entities including those offering legal help*," by which they presumably mean anti-Unification-Church lawyers (*Japan Today* 2022). The fact that this service is offered only with respect to the Unification Church and not to countless other religious (and non-religious) groups whose members may be "*experiencing trouble*" is a clear case of discrimination prohibited by the ICCPR.

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Ultimately, the problem is theological and philosophical. For a believer, donations may be deep spiritual experiences. For an atheist, or somebody who believes that groups such as the Unification Church are not “real” religions, no caution would be good enough, and no donation would ever be recognized as the fruit of a free and reasonable choice.

3. Violation of Article 25 ICCPR

On August 11–15, 2022, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), an organization formally independent from the Unification Church/Family Federation but created by its same founders, the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012) and his wife, held its Summit 2022 and Leadership Conference in Seoul, South Korea. Among those who were present and lectured—many others attended through videos—were prominent American politicians such as Mike Pompeo and Newt Gingrich. It was not a purely conservative gathering, as dozens of cabinet ministers and others attended from all over the world, and from all sorts of political persuasions.

All mentioned their gratitude not only to the UPF but specifically to Reverend and Mrs. Moon for their work on behalf of world peace. They probably knew that in Japan, media and some politicians were proposing purges and laws against politicians who attend UPF meetings, but they did not care. Indeed, some of the speakers expressed concern for what was happening in Japan, a blatant violation of Article 25 ICCPR, which guarantees the right of political participation to all citizens irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, or religion.

The Japanese critics of the Unification Church published lists to name and shame Japanese politicians who had attended events of the UPF and other organizations connected with the Unification Church. They called for them to publicly disassociate themselves from these organizations, and even asked cabinet ministers to resign.

Rumors were also spread in Japan and reported by international media without fact-checking. One was that Abe's grandfather, Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi

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(1896–1987), invited the Unification Church to expand from Korea to Japan, hoping it could offer support to his conservative agenda. This claim is false. Korean missionaries brought the Unification Church to Japan in 1959, long before a Japanese member met Kishi in the mid-1960s. It is also false that, as some media claimed, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) “*largely relies*” on the votes and campaign volunteers of the Unification Church to win elections. The LDP has some 20 million voters and more than one million active members (*Nikkei.com* 2020). Unification Church devotees may only account for a small percentage of these. Finally, it is false that only LDP politicians attend events of Unification-Church-related organizations. The same hostile media listed MPs of other parties who also participated (*The Japan Times* 2022b).

What is true is that Abe and his grandfather Kishi expressed sympathy not so much for the Unification Church as a religion but for a church-related organization called International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC), which had emerged as the leading anti-communist organization in Japan. It is not surprising that it called to support anti-communist politicians, and in turn politicians concerned with the Communist threat supported the IFVOC.

And why shouldn't they? Seen from any other democratic country, the Japanese controversy appears both surrealistic and dangerous. In Japan, the Komeito party, the junior partner of the LDP in the current government coalition, was founded by members of the largest local Buddhist movement, Soka Gakkai. Although formally separated from Soka Gakkai since 1970, it maintains close relationships with the Buddhist movement (McLaughlin 2019). Other religious groups, including liberal left-wing Catholics, have emerged as vocal critics of the LDP and support its opponents. Indeed, there is a century-old tradition in Japan of “*non-separation between religion and politics*,” although it always had its critics too (Busacchi 2017).

In a democratic society, all citizens have a right to participate in political debate, support politicians of their choice, and campaign for one or another party. It would be deeply undemocratic to deny to religious believers a right recognized for all other citizens. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI (see Introvigne 2012), as well as scholars and

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leaders of other religions, have emphasized the distinction between secularity and secularism. While secularity is a needed protection against any confusion between religious and political authorities of the type prevailing in societies many label as "theocratic," secularism is an ideology that would forbid religious believers inspired by their faith to freely participate in politics, with the same rights and duties as all other citizens.

Excluding those who believe in God from political activism or office in the name of secularism makes them into second class citizens, deprived of their fundamental right of participating in the life and institutions of their country. Not less anti-democratic is excluding members of certain unpopular religions from politics. International institutions rightly censor Pakistan for preventing members of a religious minority called Ahmadiyya from voting and holding office (U.K. All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community 2020, 42–4).

Investigating and denouncing politicians who attend events of the Unification Church and its related organizations carries with it a simple message. In Japan both the freedom of citizens who happen to be believers to fully participate as believers in the democratic process, and the freedom of politicians to consult and cooperate with leaders and members of religions of their choice, both protected by Article 25 ICCPR, are at risk.

The actions of political parties that, scared by media campaigns, ask their members not to cooperate with the Universal Peace Foundation or the Unification Church, also violate Article 25 ICCPR. In a democratic system, political parties should also respect the ICCPR in their activities and statements.

In fact, some radical voices in the Japanese media ask precisely that politicians should be prevented from cooperating in any way not only with the Unification Church but with any religion. This is not healthy separation of church and state. It is ideological, anti-democratic, discriminatory secularism. Defending the rights of politicians to attend events of the Unification Church, or any other religion, and to have religionists among

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their supporters and volunteers without risking their seats and careers, means defending at the same time the religious liberty of all religions—and of all Japanese citizens.

4. Violation of Articles 9 and 18.3 ICCPR

Some members of the Unification Church/Family Federation in Japan have experienced violations of their rights to personal security (article 9 ICCPR) and not to be discriminated because of their belief in the workplace and in schools and other educational establishments (article 18.3 ICCPR) after the Abe assassination, with anti-cult lawyers and media suggesting that “cults” such as the Unification Church should be publicly shamed and punished.

As we have mentioned above, hate speech against the Unification Church is liberally disseminated in Japan. Not all those who listen to hate speech against religious minorities commit hate crimes, but some do. In Japan, the hate disseminated against the Unification Church even lead to death threats against some of its members.

Articles by Japanese media reporting these incidents offered to readers the possibility of posting comments. Some commented by adding more death threats. I hope the Japanese police are paying attention to these posts. We now know that Abe's assassin started his career as a Unification Church hater by posting insults and threats on social media. We all know how the story ended.

Hate speech is, by its very nature, pervasive. Once it is disseminated through the media or the Internet, its effects can no longer be controlled. The CESNUR investigation collected reports of members of the Unification Church in Japan insulted in the streets, ridiculed in the workplace, bullied in schools and even divorced by their spouses. We can only hope and pray that verbal violence will not escalate to physical violence and perhaps murder. Fatal effects of hate speech are not only a thing of the past. Every month, if not every week, Ahmadis are killed in Pakistan. They are members of a religious movement targeted by hate speech in the media and in sermons by preachers of the majority

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religion (UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community 2020).

Hate speech also prepares the ground for discrimination, i.e., for laws targeting members of a minority group and making them second class citizens. It is already happening with the Unification Church in Japan. While donations to religions are tax-exempt, as happens in every democratic country in the world, it is argued that donations to the Unification Church are not given to a “*real*” religion but to a fraudulent “*cult*,” and should be regarded as consideration paid for sales and taxed as such. This is a violation of article 18 ICCPR, which forbids the use of any discriminatory tool targeting a particular religion or belief.

In 2011 and 2013 The European Court of Human Rights had to examine the case of France, which has a discriminatory official policy against “cults,” now hailed as a model by some in Japan, and which argued that donations to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other groups it included in a list of “cults”, were not gifts but payments for goods or services and should be taxed. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that the redefinition of donations as payments for sales was just a tool used to discriminate against religious groups the French authorities did not like and labeled as “cults.” France had to give back the taxes the Jehovah’s Witnesses and two other religious movements had already paid, plus legal fees and damages (European Court of Human Rights 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

Japan is not part of the European Convention of Human Rights but has signed the ICCPR, which has parallel provisions in its article 18, which in turn corresponds to article 18 of the UDHR. In an official interpretation of the latter called General Comment no. 22, issued in 1993, the United Nations stated that “*Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions.*” The United Nations warned against “*any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community*” (United Nations Human Rights Committee 1993, no. 2).

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It should be obvious to everybody that giving the authorities the power to decide which religions are good and which are bad or "*cults*," and to tax the donations to the latter by declaring they are not real donations, threatens all religious groups. It transforms the institutions of allegedly secular states into latter-day inquisitions.

In 1895, French anthropologist Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) published what was to become an immensely influential book, "*The Crowd*" (Le Bon 1895, 1896). 20th century dictators admitted they found in the book a source of inspiration (Reicher 1996). Le Bon established a new science, which he called the "*psychology of the crowds*." However, most of the crowds he described were bent on socially destructive action, and in contemporary English would rather be called "*mobs*."

Le Bon described three stages of the process of creating a mob. The first is suggestion. He believed that citizens of modern societies are easily influenced and manipulated by the media and propaganda, a prophetic comment considering that he wrote well before the age of television and of the Internet. The second stage is contagion. In these days of epidemic, we are all well aware that a virus spreads invisibly but unstoppably. The same, Le Bon noted, happens with myths and disinformation, what we would today call fake news.

Le Bon's third stage was anonymity. Individuals in a mob may not know each other, yet they exhibit the same behavior and seem to be governed by a "*group mind*," which like a malignant spider at the center of an invisible web directs their actions. Acting anonymously, but knowing millions are doing what they do at the same time, those in a mob believe they do not have a personal responsibility, and experience an intoxicating feeling of invincibility.

Le Bon's book is surprisingly modern, and might have been written with contemporary social media in mind. Protected by anonymity, millions of self-styled warriors in mob-like cyberwars insult their targets believing they can escape liability, and feeling they are anonymous soldiers in an invincible army.

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Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan is witnessing a textbook example of how a mob is created through suggestion, contagion, and anonymity. In the crime there is a culprit, Abe's killer, and there are victims, Abe himself and the Unification Church, whose leader the assassin also planned to kill. Yet, mob psychology works independently of logic and facts.

Mobs are not created spontaneously. The Unification Church in Japan has powerful opponents. As we have seen, they spread suggestion to the media, manipulating many into believing that, rather than being a victim, the Church was somewhat responsible for Abe's death. Contagion spread the suggestion, and an anonymous mob was formed, in which individuals who did not know each other followed a group mind, insulted, threatened, and in some cases committed crimes, feeling protected by being part of a crowd or by hiding behind their phones or computers.

In the period from Abe's assassination to the end of August 2022, the Unification Church in Japan had documented more than 400 hate incidents against its churches, organizations, and individual members. But they continue, and the number is probably higher, since not all local incidents are necessarily reported to the headquarters.

Examining the documentation on these cases makes for alarming reading. It shows how easily and quickly mobs are created today, with a technology that did not exist in Le Bon's time. Many of those who placed threatening phone calls, which were recorded, to the headquarters or branches of the Family Federation, started with sentences such as "*I read the media*" or "I watched TV." Through the typical process of mob psychology, they believed what they heard, persuaded that the media by definition "*the truth tell.*" Not only did they believe they had become instant "*experts*" on the Unification Church, but they also felt ready to "*do something*" and take the law into their own hands.

Because they had read it or heard it on TV, they believed they knew, and shouted at the phone or wrote on the Internet, that the Unification Church "*killed Abe*"—who was in fact killed by a fanatical opponent of that Church —, "*uses brainwashing*"—a notion discredited as pseudo-science long ago by mainline scholars of new religious movements (Richardson 1993, 2015; Introvigne 2022)—and "*commit crimes.*"

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There is also a disturbing racist undertone in several phone calls and comments: "*You are Koreans, go back to Korea,*" "*We know, Koreans are only interested in money,*" "*You are a Korean anti-Japanese group.*" While the Unification Church was founded by Koreans, members in Japan are overwhelmingly Japanese.

Just as Le Bon predicted, anonymity and the toxic feeling of not being responsible, increasingly lead those in this mob to commit crimes. On July 17, somebody posted in an electronic bulletin board "*Tomorrow morning I will come to your headquarters and kill all with a knife.*" Death threats were received by Unification Church branches in Aichi, Hokkaido, and Osaka. In Nara, threats to kill the pastors reported to the police led to the precautionary closure of the local church.

In Tokyo, Nara, and Osaka, sound trucks cruised around the churches and shouted hostile slogans. Some were operated by right-wing extremists, who in Osaka on August 4 screamed "*Korean anti-Japanese group, get out of Japan!*"

In Aichi, on August 15, the church's mailbox was painted black, and graffiti hailing Abe's killer were spray-painted on it.

The suffering of individual members is growing and alarming. On July 18, a female believer in Gunma Prefecture was physically assaulted by her son and reported to the hospital with a broken rib. On July 23 in Aichi, a husband entered the premises of the Unification Church and beat his wife there. On August 16, in Nagano, a believer was badly beaten by her husband because she refused to leave the Unification Church. In several cases, believers were threatened with divorce by spouses who are not members of the Church. In some cases, divorce proceedings have indeed started. A couple in Gunma Prefecture who lived with their son and daughter-in-law was expelled from the latter's home on July 15, because they refused to leave the Unification Church. Many believers reported their spouses or other relatives had destroyed their Unification Church literature and, in some cases, even their cell phones, trying to prevent them from communicating with the Church.

To fully understand the danger of all this, we need to go back to Le Bon. One or two isolated incidents may be dismissed as minor, although it is always possible that death threats escalate into actual violence. One hundred or more incidents demonstrate that a

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mob of anonymous self-appointed vigilantes is now at work. They are unknown to each other but are all manipulated by the malignant spider at the center of the web—a spider that hates, slanders, discriminates, and may one day kill.

5. Violation of Article 18.1 ICCPR

On June 6, 2014, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Pope Francis in the Vatican. He offered him a replica of a Japanese 17th-century “*secret mirror*.” It looks like a normal mirror but, when inclined to intercept a ray from the sun, it reveals an image of Jesus Christ. Christians in Japan had to use the secret mirrors at that time since, if they were caught with a Christian image or symbol, they were executed. Abe apologized to the Catholic Church for the more than 5,000 Catholics who had been killed in Japan during the persecutions of the 16th and 17th centuries and beyond. Many of them were crucified (Respinti 2022).

As late as 1829, three women and three men were paraded through the streets of Osaka and crucified for being members of the “*evil cult*” of Christianity (perhaps they weren’t) and for recruiting followers through the use of black magic (Miyazaki, Wildman Nakai, and Teeuwen 2020).

Abe’s apology was commendable, but it might on the face of it be taken to refer to atrocities of a remote past. Or perhaps not. Scholars such as James T. Richardson and Wu Junqing have noted that not much has changed from the times when witches were burned in the West and “*evil cults*” were bloodily persecuted in Imperial China and Japan (Kilbourne and Richardson 1996; Wu 2016, 2017). The only difference is that black magic has been secularized into brainwashing, a pseudo-scientific concept implying that “*cults*” now bewitch their followers through mysterious psychological techniques.

Ironically, while Abe apologized for the persecution of Christianity in Japan as an “*evil cult*” that used black magic, his assassination is being used to label the Unification Church/Family Federation as a “*cult*” that obtains donations through brainwashing, the modern version of black magic, and call for a crackdown on “*cults*” in general. Rather

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than blaming the assassin, and the hate campaigns against the Unification Church that may have excited him, the victims are put on trial in a spectacular reversal of both logic and fairness.

But what is a "*cult*"? A large majority of scholars of religions agree that there are no cults (Ashcraft 2018). "*Cult*" is just a label used to discriminate against groups that powerful lobbies, for whatever reasons, do not like. It was not always so. "*Cult*" and its functional equivalents in other languages derived from the Latin word "*secta*" such as the French "*secte*"—to be translated "*cult*" rather than "*sect*"—had a precise meaning in early-20th-century sociology. They indicated young religions, where most or all members had converted as adults rather than being born into the faith. The example used by the early sociologists was that Jesus and the apostles were part of a "*cult*" as none of them was born as a Christian; they were all converted Jews. After some centuries, those born Christians became the majority, and Christianity evolved from "*cult*" (or "*secte*" in French) to church. Most of the scholars who used this terminology were themselves Christians, and clearly for them the word "*cult*" had no negative implications.

However, during the course of the 20th century, with some older precedents, a new science, criminology, started using the word "*cult*" with a very different meaning. A "*cult*" was a religious group that systematically committed crimes or would likely commit crimes in the future. This meaning of "*cult*" was similar to the expression "*evil cult*" used to persecute and crucify Christians in Imperial Japan. It also created a confusion. A sociologist in the 1960s, asked whether Jesus and the apostles were part of a "*cult*," should have answered "yes" based on traditional sociological categories but, since the criminological use of the term was conquering the media as well, would have risked to be misunderstood and accused of having labeled the first Christians as criminals (see Introvigne 2018, 2022).

For this reason, since at least the 1980s, international scholars of religion, led by British sociologist Eileen Barker, abandoned the word "*cult*" and adopted "*new religious movements*" for the newly established groups where most members were first generation converts (Barker 1984). They were aware of the use of "*cult*" by criminologists, and did not deny the existence of groups that routinely commit crimes in the name of religion,

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among “*new*” but also among “*old*” religious traditions—such as networks of pedophile Catholic priests or terrorists who use or misuse the name of Islam. Since the word “*cult*” would only create confusion, they adopted other expressions, which later included “*criminal religious movements*,” suggested by the undersigned (Introvigne 2018).

Criminal religious movements are groups that systematically commit or at least incite the commission of common crimes such as physical violence, rape, child abuse, or murder. Since the late 1960s, activist “*anti-cult*” groups have appeared calling for the activities of “*cults*” to be limited. They defined them not as movements committing common crimes such as homicide or sexual abuse but as groups guilty of an imaginary crime, brainwashing. The word “*brainwashing*” was coined during the Cold War by the CIA to designate mysterious techniques allegedly used by the Chinese Maoist and the Soviets to turn almost instantly otherwise “*normal*” citizens into Communists. It was later applied to “*cults*.” By 1990, it had been debunked by religious scholars, as pseudo-science simply used to discriminate against certain groups, and rejected by courts of law, at least in the United States (for an overview, see Introvigne 2022).

The Abe assassination is now being used as a pretext for reviving the dead horse of brainwashing and of theories claiming that bad “*cults*,” unlike good “*religions*,” recruit members and donors through mental manipulation. Just as happened during the European witch hunts and the Japanese persecution of Christians for which Abe apologized, accusations of black magic—of which brainwashing is only the secularized version—and of operating an “*evil cult*” lead to the dehumanization and persecution of, as well as discrimination against, those so accused.

Some in Japan even call for a new anti-cult law following the model of the About-Picard statute passed in France in 2001. This law was passed 21 years ago, and three points are now clear, at least to the international human rights community and to the academic community of scholars of new religions.

First, the law violates several ICCPR articles and violates in particular Article 18 on freedom of religion or belief. When the French tax authorities tried to use the law and its faulty distinction between “*religions*” and “*cults*” to impose taxes on donations to “*cults*,” they were hit by the European Court of Human Rights, which condemned

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France in relation to three different "*cults*" (European Court of Human Rights 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

Second, the law is based on the idea that mysterious "*techniques able to alter the judgement*" exist. Domestic and international protests led to the elimination from the text of the law of the words "*manipulation mentale*" (literally "*mental manipulation*," the French version of "*brainwashing*") that were part of its first draft. However, the "*techniques able to alter the judgement*" were just a new metamorphosis of the old discredited and pseudo-scientific notions of brainwashing and mind control.

Third, after 21 years, scholars have confirmed what Canadian academic Susan Palmer had already noticed on the 10th anniversary of the law in 2011, i.e., that the About-Picard law only worked to limit the religious liberty of small groups with insufficient resources to hire good lawyers. It was never successfully enforced against the stereotypical large "*cults*" its proponents hoped to hit (Palmer 2011). It wasn't, because by doing a modicum of homework a lawyer may easily find that an overwhelming majority of scholars of religion have concluded that the "*techniques able to alter judgement*" allegedly used by the "*cults*" are just a myth.

In several countries, the use of the word "*cults*" is a tool used to violate Article 18.1 ICCPR and to deny to unpopular groups their freedom of religion. In Japan, today, they come for the Unification Church. Tomorrow, they may come for any religion that has among its enemies lobbies powerful enough to persuade the media it is a "*cult*." The persecution of the Unification Church in Japan should be stopped today. Tomorrow, it may be too late.

6. Conclusions

Japan is a signatory of the ICCPR. The national emotion surrounding the assassination of the former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is used by some lobbies as an opportunity to violate the civil and political rights of a specific religious minority, the Unification Church/Family Federation. Both its rights as a religious organization and the human rights of its members are blatantly violated. Rather than punishing slander and

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defamation, certain official institutions endorse and promote it. Laws and other punitive measures are being proposed that would limit the freedom of religion or belief of one specific religion, deny the right of its members to fully contribute to the democratic process as Japanese citizens, deny to politicians the rights to consult and cooperate with devotees of the same specific religion, treat donations to this religion differently from donations to other religious groups and movements.

All this is not allowed by the ICCPR, and Japan should be reminded that the commitments it assumed when it signed the ICCPR cannot be held hostage to the shifting winds of public opinion.

While respecting freedom of expression, Japan should also regulate its media, taking into account documents from the U.N. and other international institutions about hate speech and media discrimination against minority religions.

We dare to hope that, in view of the ongoing suffering of the members of the Unification Church/Family Federation in Japan, these matters may be addressed urgently.

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Unification Church pushes back against ‘abusive’ media reports in wake of Shinzo Abe assassination

Organization says coverage 'encourages religious persecution'



Tomihiko Tanaka, the President of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification attends a press conference Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2022, in Tokyo. Tanaka denied any “political interference” with specific political parties and said Prime Minister Kishida’s call for his party members to distance themselves from the church was “regrettable.” Kishida reshuffled his Cabinet on Wednesday in an apparent bid to distance his administration from the Unification Church, whose ties to the assassinated leader Shinzo Abe and senior ruling party leadership caused a major drop in approval ratings. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

By Guy Taylor – Wednesday, August 10, 2022

The Unification Church spoke out Wednesday against what it called “biased news coverage” in Japan in the wake of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s assassination, asserting that “abusive” reporting over the past month has included “hate speech” and “encourages religious discrimination.”

The coverage, emanating mainly from left-leaning news outlets, amounts to “religious persecution” and risks triggering violence against believers, according to Rev. Tomihiko Tanaka, who heads the Japan branch of the church, formally called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU).

“Our churches in Japan have been subject to death threats and threatening phone calls, abusive language blasting out of sound trucks, and obstruction of assemblies, with some members of the media harassing ordinary members,” Rev. Tanaka said at a press conference in Tokyo.

It's a sobering development that comes as the FFWPU works with investigators amid fallout from the Abe assassination, which has thrust a spotlight onto the delicate intersection between religion and politics in Japan. The investigation into the July 8 killing is ongoing, according to authorities who say a psychological evaluation of Mr. Abe's alleged shooter, Tetsuya Yamagami, will carry on until at least late November.

The 41-year-old suspect's reported claim to have targeted Mr. Abe out of anger over the former prime minister's ties to the conservative FFWPU has sparked a spirited debate in Japan.

Church representatives say unfair coverage has resulted in a “bizarre situation” in which criticism of the FFWPU in Japan has become more heated than that for the alleged assassin, despite the reality that the investigation remains ongoing.

“Details of the motive for the suspect's crime have yet to be officially announced,” Rev. Tanaka said Wednesday, adding that “we are fully cooperating with the requests of the investigation headquarters.”

Despite questions about the shooting suspect's psychological well-being, media outlets have run with the narrative that Mr. Yamagami carried out the assassination because he was outraged by large donations his mother made to the Unification Church.

Japanese media have published a letter Mr. Yamagami reportedly wrote days prior to the assassination, in which he claimed the donations had bankrupted his family.

While it remains unclear why the suspect directed his animus at Mr. Abe rather than at the FFWPU directly, some press reports suggest he targeted Mr. Abe as an act of revenge against the church because he viewed the former prime minister as one of its most prominent sympathizers in Japan and his previous attempts to identify and target church members had failed.

Mr. Abe was widely regarded as a nationalist and conservative who pushed for a restoration of traditional practices in Japan. He was not a member of the FFWPU and is known to have fostered positive ties with a number of other faith-based organizations, likely in an effort to win support from conservatives for Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

The former prime minister provided a pre-recorded video message to a “Rally of Hope” event that the FFWPU hosted last September with the Universal Peace Federation, an outfit associated with the church.

Organizers said the event was aimed at bringing together prominent international figures to promote freedom, world peace and conservative family values, while also drawing attention to efforts aimed at the non-violent reunification of North and South Korea.

Mr. Abe told the rally that “the need for more solidarity between countries that share the values of freedom and democracy — such as Japan, the United States, Taiwan and South Korea — is more pressing than ever.”

“We will need passionate leaders if we are to achieve solidarity between countries sharing freedom and democracy, maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and achieve peaceful reunification on the Korean Peninsula. These Rallies of Hope will give us much strength,” he said in his pre-recorded remarks. “Of that, I am confident.”

The message resonated with conservatives around the world amid heightened international concern over increasingly aggressive military and economic moves made by China and its ruling Communist Party.

Political controversy

But Mr. Abe’s shocking assassination — in a country where violent attacks are exceedingly rare — has focused new scrutiny on interactions between the ruling LDP and the Unification Church, which has a long history of standing against religious oppression by communist governments.

Leftist political activists in Japan, including several within the fringe Japanese Communist Party, have demanded investigations into “collusion” between the FFWPU and Japan’s lawmakers.

Church representatives assert there is no evidence of such. But the spiraling media and political pressure campaign has reached all the way to current Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who faced pressure from leftist lawmakers to clarify the connections between the government and the Unification Church’s Japan operations.

Mr. Kishida announced Wednesday a major Cabinet shake-up, spurred in part by falling public opinion polls for the government but also by what Tokyo political insiders say was an effort to reassign or demote those with past interactions with the FFWPU. Mr. Kishida said that he had only appointed Cabinet ministers who had agreed to review their relationship with the Unification Church.

“Freedom of religion should be ensured,” he said. “But politicians need to be careful in building a relationship with a group that is perceived as problematic.”

But some LDP members have been critical of that approach. “Frankly speaking, I don’t really know what the problem is,” Tatsuo Fukuda, a prominent figure in the party’s younger generation told reporters in late July.

Rev. Tanaka told the news conference in Tokyo that it was natural that conservative, anti-Communist politicians like Mr. Abe and other LDP leaders would find common cause with a church that promoted similar values. He denied there was any “political interference” by the Unification Church and called Mr. Kishida’s remarks “regrettable.”

“We’ve worked together with politicians who have clear views against communism in order to build a better country,” Mr. Tanaka said. “We are pursuing the activity not only in Japan but as part of our global network against communism.”

FFWPU documents express pride over the organization’s decades-long legacy in Japan, which once included respectful relations with Mr. Abe’s grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who served as prime minister from 1957 to 1960 and was famously aligned with U.S. concerns over the spread of communism in Japan.

The Unification Church was founded in 1954 by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, a Cold Warrior and fierce proponent of religious freedom who had grown up beneath the oppression of communist North Korea. The Rev. Moon’s widow, Hak Ja Han Moon, has led the FFWPU in the years after his death in 2012. Together, the two devoted their lives to the promotion of world peace and the reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

What began with a tiny, embattled church the Rev. Moon founded in South Korea has evolved through the decades into a global spiritual movement and an affiliated commercial empire comprising hundreds of ventures in more than a half-dozen countries, including hospitals, universities and newspapers, including The Washington Times.

The Unification Church opened its first Japan chapter in 1959 and has grown to have some 300,000 believers in the country today.

Membership, as well as financial support from followers, grew during Japan’s rise as a global economic power in the 1980s.

Rev. Tanaka acknowledged on Wednesday that the church has faced lawsuits related to its donations policies, but said reforms in 2009 established compliance measures designed “ensure that no large donations are made in proportion to a person’s assets.”

“Looking back 13 years ago, 2009 was a major turning point for FFWPU. The economic activities of some of our members were prosecuted as criminal cases, and some of our local facilities and other properties were raided by the police in relation to these investigations,” he said. “The president of FFWPU at that time took moral responsibility for the occurrence of these incidents and resigned.”

“Unfortunately, there are cases in which people have requested the return of a donation they once made after experiencing a decline in their faith,” Rev. Tanaka said. “We have responded appropriately to these requests on a case-by-case basis.”

The reverend said there are currently 5 ongoing litigation cases, far fewer than some “78 cases that went to trial in 1998 alone.”

At a previous press conference, Rev. Tanaka said Mr. Yamagami’s mother had joined the Unification Church in the late 1990s.

The shooting suspect’s uncle has reportedly said the mother donated some \$1 million to the church. The New York Times has reported that church representatives have claimed an agreement was reached with the Yamagami family in 2009 to repay about \$360,000 of the money she had donated over the years.

Media in Japan, meanwhile, have quoted the mother as having told police in the wake of the Abe assassination that she is “sorry that my son caused the terrible incident.”

Mr. Yamagami was not an FFWPU member. In the letter he reportedly wrote prior to the assassination, Mr. Yamagami claimed to have determined that attacking the church directly would not be worthwhile.

Investigators are attempting to untangle the suspect’s true motivation for targeting Mr. Abe, whom Mr. Yamagami reportedly described as “not my enemy” and “nothing more than one of the Unification Church’s most powerful sympathizers.”

In the interim, church representatives say they are wary of ongoing blowback from the media firestorm in Japan.

“A number of media outlets are fueling anxiety, fear and prejudice in the audience by portraying FFWPU as being a criminal group,” Rev. Tanaka said Wednesday.

“We strongly condemn the fake news and abusive language disseminated by a heartless media, which as hate speech, encourages religious discrimination, undermines the rights of individuals and, if anything, violates people’s freedom of religion,” he said.

Guy Taylor can be reached at gtaylor@washingtontimes.com

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THE ASSASSINATION OF
**SHINZO
ABE**

AND THE
UNIFICATION CHURCH



BY MASSIMO INTROVIGNE

WITH PROLOGUE FROM
CENTER FOR STUDIES ON NEW RELIGIONS
& HUMAN RIGHTS WITHOUT FRONTIERS

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The Assassination of Shinzo Abe
and the Unification Church

by Massimo Introvigne
CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)
maxintrovigne@gmail.com

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Prologue

“**T**he cult is just the other,” famously wrote Swiss historian Jean-François Mayer. From many decades, if not centuries, those who want to discriminate against certain religious minorities claim that they are not “genuine” religions but “cults,” a lesser category with no right to religious liberty. In the 19th century, the label was used to deny their rights to Latter-day Saints, popularly known as Mormons, in Ohio and Illinois. Hundreds were killed, including their founder. As often happens in history, however, they had the last laugh. Compelled to move to faraway Utah, they built from there what is today a large global religion with more than 16 million members.

In the late 20th century, as new religions continued to flourish, organized anti-cult movements were formed in several countries. Incapable of stopping the growth of the new religions, they called on governments to crack down on them and their supposed practice of “brainwashing,” a mysterious technique that is supposed to explain how they convert their members. Often, they also used illegal means such as “deprogramming,” i.e. kidnapping adult members of the new movements, who were detained and submitted to various forms of pressure and violence, until they accepted to leave their religions. The Unification Church was one

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of the main targets of anti-cultism and deprogramming.

In the U.K. in the late 1970s and throughout most of the 1980s, the British government's policy towards so-called "cults" was largely determined by the agenda and views of the anti-cult movement there. In 1984 this prompted the U.K. Attorney-General to initiate a major lawsuit against the Unification Church to remove its charitable status on the grounds that it was "not for the public benefit."

However, the evidence adduced by the Attorney-General was very largely sourced from the anti-cult movement, and was countered by the expertise of a number of the world's leading sociologists of religion, including Bryan Wilson, Eileen Barker and Joseph Fichter.

Based largely on their expert opinions, the government's evidence was roundly discredited and, after four years of protracted litigation, the government was forced to drop the case before it could go to trial. Furthermore, it was obliged to pay the Unification Church's costs of the case, amounting to £1.79 million (at 1989 prices, roughly equivalent to £4.94 million at 2022 prices).

Even more importantly, the case helped to prompt a fundamental re-think of the British government's way of looking at and dealing with new religions.

The anti-cult lobby's approach was rejected, and the approach of leading sociologists such as Eileen Barker was adopted. With the support of the U.K.'s Ministry of Home Affairs, the Church of England and other mainline churches, Barker established an organization to be known as "INFORM" (an acronym of Information Network Focus on Religious Movements). INFORM is an educational charity that exists to provide information about minority religions and spiritualities that is as accurate, up-to-date, and evidence-based as possible. In 2018 its base was moved from The London School of Economics to Kings College London.

One after the other, Western democratic countries outlawed deprogramming, while it continued in Japan well into the 21st century.

The anti-cult movement lost momentum in Western courts of law in the late 20th century, after academic scholars of new religions had exposed both the idea that there is an essential difference between “cults” and religions and the theory of brainwashing as pseudo-scientific pretexts used to discriminate against certain groups.

However, it continued to influence the media, and was supported by some governments in countries with a strong secular tradition suspicious of religion in general such as France and Belgium. In turn, Russia and China were happy to be supported by Western anti-cultists in their repression of religious minorities they labeled as “cults.” Alliances were established between these totalitarian regimes and international anti-cultists, including those part of the European anti-cult federation FECRIS.

2022 started as a very bad year for the anti-cult movement. When Russia invaded Ukraine, it was impossible to hide that for decades Russian anti-cultists with prominent positions within FECRIS had supported fake news campaigns against the Ukrainian governments and democratic movements, claiming “cults” inspired them. The same Russian anti-cultists offered their full support to the Russian invasion.

FECRIS and other international anti-cultists tried to hide their past and present cooperation with their Russian counterparts, but this proved impossible. Soon, many realized the problem was not only about Russia.

The anti-cult movement supported Russian (and Chinese) repression and violence because violence and repression was what it had always been all about. In June, dozens of organizations and individuals signed a letter asking that FECRIS should be stripped of the consultative status it enjoys at the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

Scholars of new religions and human rights activists had always been critical of anti-cultists, but this time the letter was also signed by general-purpose Christian religious liberty organizations and by everybody who is somebody in the field of the academic study of religion in Ukraine.

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The anti-cult movement was thus experiencing a global crisis in mid-2022. It was anxiously looking for an incident that may reverse the prevailing trend. As if an evil spirit had heard their malignant prayers, the incident came in the shape of the Abe assassination. As this booklet demonstrates, Abe's assassin was not a member of any "cult."

If anything, he had been exposed to anti-cult propaganda, which explains why he killed Abe to punish the former Prime Minister's participation in two events of an organization connected with the Unification Church (now called Family Federation for World Peace and Unification; we keep the term "Unification Church" since it is more often used in the journalistic narrative).

The man who killed Abe in 2022 claimed he did it because his mother went bankrupt in 2002, twenty years earlier. He blamed her bankruptcy on donations she made to the Unification Church.

The details are discussed in this text, but one thing is clear. Abe was the victim of the crime, together with the Unification Church, whose leader the killer also planned to assassinate. However, with a trick comparable to those of the card sharpers, who switch the cards on the table to defraud those who unwisely play with them, anti-cultists managed to present the Unification Church not as the victim but as if it were somewhat responsible of the assassination.

The card sharpers' tricks are as old as the playing cards themselves, which date back to the Middle Ages, but they continue to succeed. So is the strategy of blaming the victims, which is used against all sorts of persecuted groups. If they are persecuted, it is argued, it should be in some way their fault.

The strategy worked. Media all around the world broadcast the news that the Unification Church was somewhat responsible for the Abe assassination. While international media lost interest after a while—but the effects of the slander will persist for years—, in Japan a political and media frenzy led to an unprecedented assault against the Unification Church. Political parties assured their voters that their members would no longer be allowed to attend events connected with that Church. Governmental

agencies created anti-Unification-Church commissions, and hotlines through which callers will be connected with militant anti-cult lawyers. Some even suggested to import into Japan the French anti-cult laws and institutions, which had been criticized for years by the international communities of academics studying new religions and religious liberty activists.

Why this happened is a matter for another book, and perhaps not a small one. There is not a single answer. Obviously, there are powerful anti-cult lobbies, including greedy lawyers out for clients and money. They are supported by governments that should justify their repressive policies. They are more rich, powerful, and well-connected than either the new religions themselves or the scholars who study them.

More generally, since the time of the anti-religious gazettes of the French Revolution, lurid tales about religion always sell, the more so when spiced with stories, true or false, of sexual abuse and money accumulated by voracious religionists.

Power, money, and sex sell well by definition. It is a general problem of a media system governed by shares and sales rather than objectivity and truth. That a priest or pastor abuses young boys sells. That he sincerely devotes his life to the welfare and education of children doesn't.

Reforming the media system is either impossible or a long-term project. Religious movements unfairly labeled as "cults," and academics aware that most accusations against them are false, should of course react. However, they would do well to re-read the "*The Art of Being Right*," a surprisingly modern text German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote in 1831.

As if anticipating modern media, Schopenhauer listed a series of gimmicks used to make a fake theory prevail. Fake information is spread by playing on existing prejudices of the readers, and counting on the fact few would read a denial.

An old newsroom joke is that "*publishing a denial is publishing the same news twice.*" In fact, simply denying an accusation never works. "*We do not defraud our followers*" simply confirms in the audience the idea that a group has something to do with fraud.

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As Schopenhauer taught, the argument should be truly reversed, without being defensive only, and by turning the discourse back on whoever the accusers are, what their motivations are and why they do not occupy any higher moral ground.

That is the aim of this short book. It is also our way of telling the persecuted and slandered members of the Unification Church/Family Federation in Japan that they are not alone.🌻

The Making of an Assassin

“Calling a stag a horse” is a proverbial expression in Chinese (Zhang 2005, 112–15). Zhao Gao (?–207 BCE) was the corrupt prime minister of the second emperor of unified China, Ying Huhai or Qin Her Shi (231?–207 BCE), who reigned at the end of the third century BCE. Zhao planned to usurp the throne but needed to know who in the court would support him. So, he presented the emperor with a stag and called it a horse. When the emperor objected it was indeed a stag, he asked the courtiers to confirm it was a horse. Many did, as they were afraid of Zhao. He had those who insisted the stag was a stag beheaded, and proceeded with his coup (Sima Qian 1993, 70).

“Calling a stag a horse,” or turning the meaning of the words upside down for evil purposes, is often done today to discriminate against religious minorities. When they become victims of crimes, it is suggested that it is their fault. The victims are called aggressors, and vice versa. It is reminiscent of an old strategy of shyster lawyers who defend rapists. They invariably blame the raped woman, who perhaps did not dress modestly enough.

On June 16, 2022, in South Korea a man killed his ex-wife and the wife of his ex-brother-in-law, seriously wounding the latter. Although personal reasons might have been his main motivation, he claimed he had committed the crime because the wife was

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a member of a new religious movement called Shincheonji. 24 hours before the crime, the assassin had consulted with the Heresy Research Center, an organization specialized in fighting groups it regards as heretic “cults.” The Center did not suggest that the man commit murder, but excited his hatred against Shincheonji. After the crime, the Center called a press conference claiming that the murderer was indeed the victim, and Shincheonji was responsible: had his wife not joined Shincheonji, they said, the poor man would not have had to spend the rest of his life in jail, a likely outcome of his case (Nam 2022).

On January 3, 2019, a teenager entered the premises of the Church of Scientology, of which his mother was a member, in Sydney, Australia, and fatally wounded a Scientologist with a knife (Duffin 2019). At trial, he was later recognized not criminally responsible as two experts pronounced him schizophrenic (Gerathy 2021), but real paranoids have real enemies.

Although he had quarreled with his mother for different reasons, propaganda depicting Scientology as evil may also have excited his feeble mind. Again, anti-Scientologists told the media, without shedding a tear for the victim, that Scientology was to blame for having allegedly created hostility between mother and son.

Whatever one may think of Shincheonji or Scientology, these are egregious cases of turning the victims into perpetrators. The most spectacular case of this twisted logic of them all is the murder of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954–2022) on July 8, 2022, in Nara, Japan.

Let’s consider five basic facts. First, the assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, was not and had never been a member of the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (I would use “Unification Church” and “Family Federation for World Peace and Unification” interchangeably in this text, although I am aware of the historical nuances and differences).

Second, his mother did join the Unification Church in 1998, and remains a member (uncredited information in this text derives from interviews with Japanese lawyers and members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in August

2022, and legal and other documents supplied by them; I also followed social media postings by both members and opponents of the Unification Church after July 8, and interacted with some of them). Yamagami's mother declared bankruptcy in 2002, a fact both Abe's killer and her brother-in-law blamed on the excessive donations she had made to the Church. After the brother-in-law complained, two Church members returned in installments 50% of the donations.

Third, Shinzo Abe was not a member of the Unification Church either. He participated through a video to a 2021 event, and send a message to another event in 2022, of the Universal Peace Federation, a NGO founded by the leaders of the Unification Church. So did Donald Trump, former European Commission presidents José Manuel Barroso and Romano Prodi, and dozens of other politicians of all persuasions (Amicarelli et al. 2022).

Fourth, his mother's bankruptcy, as he reported himself, caused Yamagami's hatred for the Unification Church. However, the bankruptcy occurred in 2002 and Yamagami killed Abe in 2022, twenty years later. What triggered Yamagami's killing frenzy in 2022, and not before? We know for a fact that Yamagami followed the hate campaigns against the Unification Church prevailing in Japan.

He interacted on social media with fellow enemies of the Church. The day before killing Abe, Yamagami wrote a letter to Kazuhiro Yonemoto (Yamagami 2022). Although Yonemoto deserves credit for having opposed in the past the practice of kidnapping members of the Unification Church for the purposes of deprogramming or "de-converting" them, he remains an opponent of the Church. Yamagami interacted with the anti-Unification-Church milieu, and was exposed to the hate speech against the Church, which may easily have turned his weak head.

Fifth, before killing Abe, Yamagami had planned to assassinate Mrs. Hak Ja Han Moon, the leader of the Family Federation (Mainichi Shimbun 2022). He also tested his weapon by shooting at a building that had once been used as a Family Federation church (The Japan Times 2022a).

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Yamagami hated the Church, and this hate was fueled by the hate speech of the anti-Unification-Church activists. To hide their responsibility, they blamed the Unification Church, which was clearly a victim, as if it were the perpetrator.

Twisting words has dire consequences. After calling a stag a horse, Zhao Gao had an ephemeral success but ended up causing the ruin of the Qin dynasty and being killed himself. Calling the victims perpetrators and the perpetrators victims has a similar destructive social potential—one those who manipulate the facts of the Abe assassination to advance their anti-Unification-Church agenda should perhaps pause to consider. 🌐

Enter the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales

After the assassination of Abe, all of a sudden even non-Japanese media became familiar with a group called the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales. The network, now including some 300 lawyers, was established in Japan in 1987 to combat the Unification Church, although it occasionally targeted other religious movements as well.

To avoid the possible criticism that the campaigns of the hostile lawyers had excited the feeble mind of the killer, the Network decided to strike preemptively. It held press conferences blaming the Unification Church for what happened, turning the perpetrator into the victim and vice versa.

Most international media bought the version of the Network, without investigating who exactly these lawyers are. They also ignored a precedent that once caught the international attention of human rights activists and even of the U.S. Department of State (see U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2010).

From 1966 to 2015, some 4,300 adult members of the Unification Church were kidnapped at the instigation of their parents, locked in apartments, and submitted to “deprogramming” (Fautré 2012), a practice invented in the United States but declared illegal by courts of law there.

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Members of religions their parents did not approve of were kidnapped, privately detained, and submitted to heavy physical and psychological pressures until they accepted to abandon their faith. Deprogramming had been forbidden in most democratic countries of the world, and only survived in Japan and South Korea.

Deprogramming in Japan also targeted the Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religions (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2010), and was particularly rough.

A female member of the Unification Church accused a deprogrammer of having raped her for several months while he was trying to "deconvert" her (although she later became scared and withdrew the accusation). Having learned of the rape, years later her father committed suicide out of his shame for having hired the deprogrammer (Yoemoto 2008, 200-1).

Unification Church member Toru Goto was confined in apartments for more than twelve years in the unsuccessful attempt to deprogram him (Fautré 2012; I personally interviewed Goto as well). It was his case that led the Supreme Court in 2015 to declare the deprogramming illegal and grant significant damages to Goto (two Unification Church believers had won cases before him, but had received only small awards of damages).

After this decision, the practice ceased, although in 2021 there was a new case, when parents detained a Unification Church member in their home rather than in an apartment, then claimed it was just a family affair.

The most visible lawyers of the Network, Hiroshi Yamaguchi (who represented Goto's main tormenter, Takashi Miyamura), Hiroshi Watanabe, and Masaki Kito, were involved in defending those accused of having acted as deprogrammers. Some attorneys in the Network relied on deprogrammers who sent to them their deprogrammed victims. They were then persuaded to sue the Unification Church, generating significant revenues for the lawyers.

Not all the Network's lawyers supported the kidnappings.

According to my interviews, to his credit one of them, Yoshiro Ito, suggested in 1996 that the Network should cease its cooperation with Miyamura. As late as the 2021 case, however, a Network's lawyer, Yasuo Kawai, assisted the parents who tried to revive the illegal practice of deprogramming.

In the case of Yamaguchi, his enmity towards the Unification Church pre-dates the foundation of the Network. In 1979, Soviet KGB agent and top spy in Japan Stanislav Levchenko defected to the U.S. He testified that prominent Japanese politicians, mostly connected with the Socialist Party of Japan (SPJ), including the SJP Chairman Seiichi Katsumata (1908–1989), were paid Soviet agents (Levchenko 1988).

Although Levchenko's revelations were later confirmed by documents discovered in Russian archives after the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1983 (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2005, 300), the SPJ answered by denouncing a conspiracy organized by the CIA through the International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC), an organization connected with the Unification Church. IFVOC sued the SPJ. Yamaguchi represented the SPJ but lost the case, which was later settled with the SPJ paying two million yen to IFVOC as a settlement fee.

For some lawyers in the Network the campaigns against the Unification Church were tools to protect deprogramming and the subsequent lawsuits by deprogrammed ex-members against the Church, both lucrative businesses.

A not less lucrative venture is suing the Unification Church on behalf of donors persuaded by the lawyers that they can recover their donations. The Network's lawyers are keen to offer figures about these donations, but how much money they made as attorneys out of these cases is not disclosed.

They are also not above resorting to questionable tactics. In a case the Unification Church won against an ex-member at the Tokyo District Court on March 1, 2021, the judge found that the plaintiff had altered and backdated a personal notebook to fabricate evidence against the Unification Church (Tokyo District Court 2021).

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We can conclude that the attorneys of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales are not knights in shining armors slaying the dragons of “cults,” as their own propaganda claims, too easily accepted by Japanese and international media. Although there are different positions among them on the issue of deprogramming, some prominent Network members defended violent kidnappers—and even Soviet spies—, submitted false documents fabricated by their clients to the judges, and spread against the Unification Church slanderous information they knew was not true.✿

Donations and the Unification Church: Separating Facts from Fiction

The Terror of the French Revolution killed some 30,000 priests, nuns, and lay Catholics. To excite the public opinion against the Catholic Church, the architects of the Terror used an argument they knew is always effective: money. Countless pamphlets, gazette articles, and caricatures showed greedy priests ruining families by soliciting extravagant donations (Dumont 1984, Escande 2008).

Communist propaganda learned and applied the lesson (Mayer 2000). When Mongolia was under a Communist regime, some 60,000 Buddhist monks were killed. The regime prepared it with a massive propaganda poster campaign, where monks were depicted as vampires sucking the blood of the Mongolian population by asking for heavy donations (Kaplonski 2014).

We are now witnessing the same propaganda at work against the Unification Church/Family Federation in Japan after the assassination of Shinzo Abe. The main argument used by the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales is that countless Japanese have been ruined by both donations and the purchase of worthless artifacts sold by the Unification Church at extravagant prices.

“Spiritual sales” is a label coined by anti-Unification-Church leftist media in Japan in the 1980s. A company called Happy World imported to Japan and sold vases and miniature pagodas.

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Some of those who bought them were connected to small new religions other than the Unification Church, and declared that these artifacts were imbued with a good spiritual energy. Not surprisingly, Happy World was happy about it, and raised the prices. The Unification Church did not sell the vases and pagodas, and had nothing to do with claims about their alleged mystical powers. However, those who operated Happy World were Unification Church members, and donated to the Church part of their profits. Thus, they were accused of “spiritual sales,” particularly after the hostile lawyers’ association was founded in 1987.

After 1987, the sales of vases and pagodas stopped, but other Unification Church members had businesses selling artworks, jewelry, and seals or stamps used in Japan to confirm signatures. These stamps were exquisitely crafted and made of expensive materials, but they were sold at prices higher than usual, also because it was claimed they brought good luck, a common claim for different artifacts in Japan. Again, these items were not sold by the Unification Church but by members who then used part of their profits to donate to the Church.

In 2000, an existing law on door-to-door sales was significantly amended, and its name was changed to “Act on Specified Commercial Transactions.” It prohibited to “intimidate or disturb” perspective buyers in order to conclude a sale. Based on this law, members of the Unification Church who sold seals were detained, and eventually received suspended jail sentences. The then President of the Church in Japan acknowledged responsibility for not having instructed members about the new law and their duty to respect it. He resigned in 2009, and the Unification Church adopted a new policy counseling members whose businesses sold “lucky” artifacts, including stamps, to strictly comply with the 2000 law.

The hostile lawyers used the label “spiritual sales” also for donations to the Unification Church, a different matter. They claimed that the Church was “selling” eternal salvation, both for the living and their deceased loved ones, against donations. They managed to persuade some Japanese courts to establish the dubious principle that if the amount of donations was high, it

should be presumed they had been obtained through “fraudulent or threatening” means, or “psychological techniques” depriving the donors of their “free will” (a notion dangerously close to the discredited and pseudo-scientific theory of brainwashing: see Richardson 1993, 2015; Introvigne 2022).

Tokens of appreciations given to the donors may also be maliciously confused with items sold through “spiritual sales.” In some Catholic organizations, those who make important donations receive a book or diploma autographed by the Pope. Obviously, they are not “buying” the diploma or the book for an extravagant price. The book or the diploma are just symbolic reminders that the Church is grateful for their donations.

The lawyers relied on a frequent fallacy of campaigns against the groups labeled as “cults.” They present as unique practices they have in common with mainline religions. The Catholic Church believes that many souls after death go to Purgatory, a temporary state between Heaven and Hell. Time in Purgatory can be shortened by their relatives and friends through prayers, Masses for which they pay a honorary to the priest—and donations. Indeed, one of the reasons Martin Luther (1483–1546) separated from the Church of Rome was his dislike for the Catholic doctrine of indulgences, which taught that monetary offerings may automatically shorten time served in Purgatory (although Luther may have over-simplified the teachings of his arch-enemy Johann Tetzel, 1465–1519, for polemical purposes, as often happens in religious controversy: see Lenhart 1958). Buddhist orders have similar teachings, connecting donations with deceased relatives’ better reincarnations and escape from the dreaded Cold Hells.

Hundreds of Protestant churches maintain the Biblical principle of tithing, and ask members to donate ten percent of their income. Tithing is suggested as a possibility, although it is not mandatory, in the Unification Church too, which also has specific practices such as donating for four years in multiples of thirty, acknowledging the collective responsibility of humankind for Judas’ betrayal of Christ, whom he sold for thirty pieces of silver (Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity 1992 [1991]).

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In its general principles, the Unification Church's theology of donations is surprisingly similar to its Catholic and Protestant counterparts. Japanese courts of law have started recognizing it, also because donors now sign notarized statements where they state that they are donating freely, understand all the implications, and will not sue the Unification Church in the future. In 2021, the Family Federation still lost one donation case but won two others (including Tokyo District Court 2021).

Ultimately, the problem is theological and philosophical. For a believer, donations may be deep spiritual experiences. For an atheist, or somebody who believes that groups such as the Unification Church are not "real" religions, no caution would be good enough, and no donation would ever be recognized as the fruit of a free and reasonable choice.🌐

No Religious Liberty for the Politicians?

On August 11–15, 2022, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), an organization formally independent from the Unification Church/Family Federation but created by its same founders, the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012) and his wife, held its Summit 2022 and Leadership Conference in Seoul, South Korea. Among those who were present and lectured—many others attended through videos—were prominent American politicians such as Mike Pompeo and Newt Gingrich. It was not a purely conservative gathering, as dozens of cabinet ministers and others attended from all over the world, and from all sorts of political persuasions.

All mentioned their gratitude not only to the UPF but specifically to Reverend and Mrs. Moon for their work on behalf of world peace. They probably knew that in Japan media and some politicians were proposing purges and laws against politicians who attend UPF meetings, but they did not care.

The Japanese critics of the Unification Church published lists to name and shame Japanese politicians who had attended events of the UPF and other organizations connected with the Unification Church.

They called for them to publicly disassociate themselves from

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these organizations, and even asked cabinet ministers to resign.

Rumors were also spread in Japan and reported by international media without fact-checking. One was that Abe's grandfather, Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (1896–1987), invited the Unification Church to expand from Korea to Japan, hoping it could offer support to his conservative agenda. This claim is false. Korean missionaries brought the Unification Church to Japan in 1959, long before a Japanese member met Kishi in the mid-1960s. It is also false that, as some media claimed, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) “largely relies” on the votes and campaign volunteers of the Unification Church to win elections. The LDP has some 20 million voters and more than one million active members (*Nikkei.com* 2020). Unification Church devotees may only account for a small percentage of these. Finally, it is false that only LDP politicians attend events of Unification-Church-related organizations. The same hostile media listed MPs of other parties who also participated (*The Japan Times* 2022b).

What is true is that Abe and his grandfather Kishi expressed sympathy not so much for the Unification Church as a religion but for the church-related organization called International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC), which had emerged as the leading anti-communist organization in Japan. It is not surprising that it called for support for anti-communist politicians, and in turn politicians concerned with the Communist threat supported the IFVOC. And why shouldn't they? Seen from any other democratic country, the Japanese controversy appears both surrealistic and dangerous. In Japan, the Komeito party, the junior partner of the LDP in the current government coalition, was founded by members of the largest local Buddhist movement, Soka Gakkai. Although formally separated from Soka Gakkai since 1970, it maintains close relationships with the Buddhist movement (McLaughlin 2019). Other religious groups, including liberal left-wing Catholics, have emerged as vocal critics of the LDP and support its opponents. Indeed, there is a century-old tradition in Japan of “non-separation between religion and politics,” although it always had its critics too (Busacchi 2017).

In a democratic society, all citizens have a right to participate in political debate, support politicians of their choice, and campaign

for one or another party. It would be deeply undemocratic to deny to religious believers a right recognized for all other citizens. As a Catholic, I am inspired by famous pages by Popes John Paul II (1920–2005) and Benedict XVI distinguishing between “secularity” as a healthy separation between church and state and “secularism” (see Introvigne 2012) but leaders of other religions have emphasized the same distinction as well. While secularity is a needed protection against any confusion between religious and political authorities of the type prevailing in Iran, secularism is an ideology that would forbid religious believers inspired by their faith to freely participate in politics, with the same rights and duties as all other citizens.

Excluding those who believe in God from political activism or office in the name of secularism makes them into second class citizens, deprived of their fundamental right of participating in the life and institutions of their country. Not less anti-democratic is excluding members of certain unpopular religions from politics. International institutions rightly censor Pakistan for preventing members of a religious minority called Ahmadiyya from voting and holding office (All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community 2020, 42–4).

Investigating and denouncing politicians who attend events of the Unification Church and its related organizations carries with it a simple message. In Japan both the freedom of citizens who happen to be believers to fully participate as believers in the democratic process, and the freedom of politicians to consult and cooperate with leaders and members of religions of their choice, are at risk.

In fact, some radical voices in the Japanese media ask precisely that politicians should be prevented from cooperating in any way not only with the Unification Church but with any religion. This is not healthy separation of church and state. It is ideological, anti-democratic, discriminatory secularism. Defending the rights of politicians to attend events of the Unification Church, or any other religion, and to have religionists among their supporters and volunteers without risking their seats and careers, means defending at the same time the religious liberty of all religions—and of all Japanese citizens.🌐

Hate Speech and Discrimination Against Unification Church Members in Japan

Whoever has received a death threat knows it is not fun. At first, you dismiss it as just a bad joke but then a still small voice keeps telling you that the world is full of crazy guys and some of them may be dangerous. Every time you hear a suspicious noise at night, in a corner of your mind you wonder whether the crazy guy is finally coming to get you.

This is the experience of some members of the Unification Church/Family Federation in Japan after the Abe assassination, with anti-cult lawyers and media suggesting that “cults” such as the Unification Church should be publicly shamed and punished.

In 2011, I served as the Representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, of which the United States and Canada are also participating states) for combating racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance and discrimination. An important part of my portfolio were hate crimes and hate speech.

Not all those who listen to hate speech against religious minorities commit hate crimes, but some do. In Japan, the hate disseminated against the Unification Church led to death threats against some of its members.

Articles by Japanese media reporting these incidents offered readers the possibility of posting comments. Some commented

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by adding more death threats. I hope the Japanese police are paying attention to these posts. We now know that Abe's assassin started his career as a Unification Church hater by posting insults and threats on social media. We all know how the story ended.

Hate speech is, by its very nature, pervasive. Once it is disseminated through the media or the Internet, its effects can no longer be controlled. I collected reports of members of the Unification Church in Japan insulted in the streets, ridiculed in the workplace, bullied in schools, even divorced by their spouses. We can only hope and pray that verbal violence will not escalate to physical violence and perhaps murder. Fatal effects of hate speech are not only a thing of the past. Every month, if not every week, Ahmadis are killed in Pakistan. They are members of a religious movement targeted by hate speech in the media and in sermons by preachers of the majority religion (All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community 2020).

Hate speech also prepares the ground for discrimination, i.e., for laws targeting members of a minority group and making them second class citizens. It is already happening with the Unification Church in Japan. While donations to religions are tax-exempt, as happens in every democratic country in the world, it is argued that donations to the Unification Church are not given to a "real" religion but to a fraudulent "cult," and should be regarded as consideration paid for sales and taxed as such.

The Japanese are not inventing anything. France, which has a bizarre official policy against "cults," now hailed as a model by some in Japan, once argued that donations to the Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups it included in a list of "cults" were not gifts but payments for goods or services and should be taxed. The European Court of Human Rights did not buy it. It ruled that the redefinition of donations as payments for sales was just a tool used to discriminate against religious groups the French authorities did not like and labeled as "cults." France had to give back the taxes the Jehovah's Witnesses and two other religious movements had already paid, plus legal fees and damages (European Court of Human Rights 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

Japan is not part of the European Convention of Human Rights

but has signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has parallel provisions in its article 18. In an official interpretation called General Comment no. 22, issued in 1993, the United Nations stated that “Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions.” The United Nations warned against “any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community” (United Nations Human Rights Committee 1993, no. 2).

It should be obvious to everybody that giving the authorities the power to decide which religions are good and which are bad or “cults,” and tax the donations to the latter by declaring they are not real donations, threatens all religious groups. It transforms the institutions of allegedly secular states into latter-day inquisitions.

Some Japanese media object that the Unification Church is not a religion with “normal” beliefs but makes bizarre claims for its founder, Reverend Moon. But this is true for most religions. For instance, I also believe in a religion making grandiose claims for its founder. Its name is Christianity. As a Christian, I believe that a Jew executed two thousand years ago as a criminal is still alive today. I also believe that he was born of a virgin mother and resurrected the dead. Surely, this is more than any claim members of the Unification Church may make for Reverend Moon.☸

How to Create a Mob

In 1895, French anthropologist Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) published what was to become an immensely influential book, *The Crowd* (Le Bon 1895, 1896). While not without its academic critics, it will be studied by Vladimir Il'ich Lenin (1870–1924), Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), and Benito Mussolini (1883–1945)—who all admitted they found in the book a source of inspiration (Reicher 1996). Le Bon established a new science, which he called the “psychology of the crowds.” However, most of the crowds he described were bent on socially destructive action, and in contemporary English would rather be called “mobs.”

Le Bon described three stages of the process creating a mob. The first is suggestion. He believed that citizens of modern societies are easily influenced and manipulated by the media and propaganda, a prophetic comment considering that he wrote well before television and the Internet. The second stage is contagion. In these days of epidemic, we are all well aware that a virus spreads invisibly but unstopably. The same, Le Bon noted, happens with myths and disinformation, what we would today call fake news.

Le Bon's third stage was anonymity. Individuals in a mob may not know each other, yet they exhibit the same behavior and seem to be governed by a “group mind,” which like a malignant

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spider at the center of an invisible web directs their actions. Acting anonymously, but knowing millions are doing what they do at the same time, those in a mob believe they do not have a personal responsibility, and experience an intoxicating feeling of invincibility.

Le Bon's book is surprisingly modern, and might have been written with contemporary social media in mind. Protected by anonymity, millions of self-styled warriors in mob-like cyberwars insult their targets believing they can escape liability, and feeling they are anonymous soldiers in an invincible army.

Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan is witnessing a textbook example of how a mob is created through suggestion, contagion, and anonymity. In the crime there is a culprit, Abe's killer, and there are victims, Abe himself and the Unification Church, whose leader the assassin also planned to kill. Yet, mob psychology works independently of logic and facts.

Mobs are not created spontaneously. The Unification Church in Japan has powerful opponents. As we have seen, they spread suggestion to the media, manipulating many into believing that, rather than a victim, the Church was somewhat responsible for Abe's death. Contagion spread the suggestion, and an anonymous mob was formed, in which individuals who did not know each other followed a group mind, insulted, threatened, and in some cases committed crimes, feeling protected by being part of a crowd or by hiding behind their phones or computers.

In the period from Abe's assassination to the end of August 2022, the Unification Church in Japan had documented more than 400 hate incidents against its churches, organizations, and individual members. But they continue, and the number is probably higher, since not all local incidents are necessarily reported to the headquarters.

Examining the documents of these cases makes for alarming reading. It shows how easily and quickly mobs are created today, with a technology that did not exist in Le Bon's time. Many of those who placed threatening phone calls, which were recorded, to the headquarters or branches of the Family Federation, started with

sentences such as “I read the media” or “I watched TV.” Through the typical process of mob psychology, they believed what they heard, persuaded that the media by definition “tell the truth.” Not only did they believe they had become instant “experts” on the Unification Church, they also felt ready to “do something” and take the law into their own hands.

Because they had read it or heard it on TV, they believed they knew, and shouted at the phone or wrote on the Internet, that the Unification Church “killed Abe”—who was in fact killed by a fanatical opponent of that Church—, “uses brainwashing”—a notion discredited as pseudo-science long ago by mainline scholars of new religious movements (Richardson 1993, 2015; Introvigne 2022) —and “commits crimes.”

There is also a disturbing racist undertone in several phone calls and comments: “You are Koreans, go back to Korea,” “We know, Koreans are only interested in money,” “You are a Korean anti-Japanese group.” While the Unification Church was founded by Koreans, members in Japan are overwhelmingly Japanese.

Just as Le Bon predicted, anonymity and the toxic feeling of not being responsible, increasingly lead those in this mob to commit crimes. On July 17, somebody posted in an electronic bulletin board “Tomorrow morning I will come to your headquarters and kill all with a knife.” Death threats were received by Unification Church branches in Aichi, Hokkaido, and Osaka. In Nara, threats to kill the pastors reported to the police led to the precautionary closure of the local church.

In Tokyo, Nara, and Osaka, sound trucks cruised around the churches and shouted hostile slogans. Some were operated by right-wing extremists, who in Osaka on August 4 screamed “Korean anti-Japanese group, get out of Japan!”

In Aichi, on August 15, the church’s mailbox was painted black, and graffiti hailing Abe’s killer were spray-painted.

The suffering of individual members is also growing and alarming. On July 18, a female believer in Gunma Prefecture was physically assaulted by her son and reported to the hospital with a broken rib. On July 23 in Aichi, a husband entered the premises of the

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Unification Church and beat his wife there. On August 16, in Nagano, a believer was badly beaten by her husband because she refused to leave the Unification Church. In several cases, believers were threatened with divorce by spouses who are not members of the Church. In some cases, divorce proceedings have indeed started. A couple in Gunma Prefecture who lived with their son and daughter-in-law was expelled by the latter's home on July 15, because they refused to leave the Unification Church. Many believers reported their spouses or other relatives had destroyed their Unification Church literature and in some cases even their cell phones, trying to prevent them from communicating with the Church.

To fully understand the danger of all this, we need to go back to Le Bon. One or two isolated incidents may be dismissed as minor, although it is always possible that death threats escalate into actual violence. One hundred or more incidents demonstrate that a mob of anonymous self-appointed vigilantes is now at work. They are unknown to each other but are all manipulated by the malignant spider at the center of the web—a spider that hates, slanders, discriminates, and may one day kill.🕸

Conclusion: The Word “Cult,” A Tool for Discrimination

On June 6, 2014, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Pope Francis in the Vatican. He offered him a replica of a Japanese 17th-century “secret mirror.” It looks like a normal mirror but, when inclined to intercept a ray from the sun, it reveals an image of Jesus Christ. Christians in Japan had to use the secret mirrors at that time since, if they were caught with a Christian image or symbol, they were executed. Abe apologized to the Catholic Church for the more than 5,000 Catholics who had been killed in Japan during the persecutions of the 16th and 17th centuries and beyond. Many of them were crucified (Respinti 2022).

As late as 1829, three women and three men were paraded through the streets of Osaka and crucified for being members of the “evil cult” of Christianity (perhaps they weren’t) and for recruiting followers through the use of black magic (Miyazaki, Wildman Nakai, and Teeuwen 2020).

Abe’s apology was commendable, but it would seem to refer to atrocities of a remote past. Or perhaps not. Scholars such as James T. Richardson and Wu Junqing have noted that not much has changed from the times when witches were burned in the West and “evil cults” were bloodily persecuted in Imperial China and Japan (Kilbourne and Richardson 1986; Wu 2016, 2017). The

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only difference is that black magic has been secularized into brainwashing, a pseudo-scientific concept implying that “cults” now bewitch their followers through mysterious psychological techniques.

Ironically, while Abe apologized for the persecution of Christianity in Japan as an “evil cult” that used black magic, his assassination is being used to label the Unification Church/Family Federation as a “cult” that obtains donations through brainwashing, the modern version of black magic, and call for a crackdown on “cults” in general. Rather than blaming the assassin, and the hate campaigns against the Unification Church that may have excited him, the victims are put on trial in a spectacular reversal of both logic and fairness.

But what is a “cult”? A large majority of scholars of religions agree that there are no cults (Ashcraft 2018). “Cult” is just a label used to discriminate against groups that powerful lobbies, for whatever reasons, do not like. It was not always so. “Cult” and its functional equivalents in other languages derived from the Latin word “secta” such as the French “secte”—to be translated “cult” rather than “sect”—had a precise meaning in early-20th-century sociology.

They indicated young religions, where most or all members had converted as adults rather than being born in the faith. The example used by the early sociologists was that Jesus and the apostles were part of a “cult” as none of them was born as a Christian; they were all converted Jews. After some centuries, those born Christians became the majority, and Christianity evolved from “cult” (or “secte” in French) to church. Most of the scholars who used this terminology were themselves Christians, and clearly for them the word “cult” had no negative implications.

However, during the course of the 20th century, with some older precedents, a new science, criminology, started using the word “cult” with a very different meaning. A “cult” was a religious group that systematically committed crimes or would likely commit crimes in the future. This meaning of “cult” was similar to the expression “evil cult” used to persecute and crucify Christians in Imperial Japan. It also created a confusion. A sociologist in

the 1960s, asked whether Jesus and the apostles were part of a “cult,” should have answered yes based on traditional sociological categories but, since the criminological use of the term was conquering the media as well, would have risked to be misunderstood and accused of having labeled the first Christians as criminals (see Introvigne 2018, 2022).

For this reason, since at least the 1980s, international scholars of religion, led by British sociologist Eileen Barker, abandoned the word “cult” and adopted “new religious movements” for the newly established groups where most members were first generation converts (Barker 1984).

They were aware of the use of “cult” by criminologists, and did not deny the existence of groups that routinely commit crimes in the name of religion, among “new” but also among “old” religious traditions—such as networks of pedophile Catholic priests or terrorists who use or misuse the name of Islam. Since the word “cult” would only create confusion, they adopted other expressions, which later included “criminal religious movements,” suggested by the undersigned (Introvigne 2018).

Criminal religious movements are groups that systematically commit or at least incite to the commission of common crimes such as physical violence, rape, child abuse, or murder. Since the late 1960s, activist “anti-cult” groups have appeared calling for the activities of “cults” to be limited. They defined them not as movements committing common crimes such as homicide or sexual abuse but as groups guilty of an imaginary crime, brainwashing.

The word “brainwashing” was coined during the Cold War by the CIA to designate mysterious techniques allegedly used by the Chinese Maoists and the Soviets to turn almost instantly otherwise “normal” citizens into Communists. It was later applied to “cults.”

By 1990, it had been debunked by religious scholars, as pseudo-science simply used to discriminate against certain groups, and rejected by courts of law, at least in the United States (for an overview, see Introvigne 2022).

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The Abe assassination is now being used as a pretext for reviving the dead horse of brainwashing and of theories claiming that bad “cults,” unlike good “religions,” recruit members and donors through mental manipulation. Just as it happened during the European witch hunts and the Japanese persecution of Christians for which Abe apologized, accusations of black magic—of which brainwashing is only the secularized version—and of operating an “evil cult” lead to the dehumanization and persecution of, as well as discrimination against, those so accused. Today, they come for the Unification Church. Tomorrow, they may come for any religion that has among its enemies lobbies powerful enough to persuade the media it is a “cult.”✿

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About the author

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy).

He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and of the executive board of University of California Press' *Nova Religio*. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

WHAT IS HUMAN RIGHTS WITHOUT FRONTIERS?

Human Rights Without Frontiers International (HRWF) is a non-profit association that seeks to shape European and international policy in ways that strengthen democracy, uphold the rule of law and protect human rights globally. The organisation works with associated member organisations in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Denmark, France, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Pakistan, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, South Korea, Ukraine, United Kingdom and the US.

Since its inception, the executive director has been Willy Fautré, a long-standing human rights activist.

HRWF International conducts research, field missions, analysis and monitoring of a wide range of human rights concerns in many countries around the world. An international network of correspondents provides the NGO with first-hand information.

HRWF International works to strengthen the culture of human rights by sharing information, publishing reports and organising seminars and events that educate policy makers and inform the general public. HRWF Int'l focuses particular attention on freedom of religion or belief, women's rights and gender equality, LGBTQI people and human rights, and human rights violations in China, North Korea, Ukraine, Russia and Iran.

The foundation for HRWF International advocacy is the body of international covenants and treaties that bind its parties to the respect of fundamental rights and freedoms. These instruments include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and legal precedents set by decisions of the European Court of Human Rights.

The organisation addresses its advocacy primarily through EU institutions, the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

HRWF runs a global Database of over 6000 cases of FoRB prisoners of all faiths.

www.hrwf.eu

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe: A historic leader



The portrait of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is seen on the altar during his state funeral at Nippon Budokan in Tokyo, Japan, Tuesday, Sept. 22, 2022. (Franck Robichon/Pool Photo via AP)

By [Newt Gingrich](#) - - Wednesday, September 28, 2022

OPINION:

The assassination of former Prime Minister [Shinzo Abe](#) on July 8, by a tragically deranged 41-year-old man has unleashed forces that caused me to take a new look at how [Japan](#) is evolving.

The assassination of Mr. [Abe](#) was apparently the act of a single mentally ill individual. However, the demons that have been unleashed since then into the Japanese political system were the result of a long buildup of anti-Abe sentiment. It was as though the spell Prime Minister Abe had cast over [Japan](#) from 2006 to 2020 was suddenly shattered.

The forces of communism, anti-religious hostility, and anti-American resentment, all came pouring into the public square in a deeply emotional effort to destroy Mr. Abe's memory – and with it the forces of anti-communist, pro-freedom, and pro-American sentiment that Mr. Abe had so powerfully and effectively represented.

Prime Minister Abe was the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japanese history. He led [Japan](#) in 2006 and 2007 and again from 2012 to 2020. He was a dynamic leader. Like Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, and Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump in the United States, Abe's dedication to a strongly nationalist policy – and strong defense – was deeply opposed by a significant part of Japanese society. If Ms. Thatcher stood for Britain first, Mr. Netanyahu stood for Israel first, and Mr. Reagan and Mr. Trump stood for America first, Mr. Abe stood for [Japan](#) first.

Mr. Abe was particularly marked by his commitment to remain close to the United States and to work with other nations to contain an increasingly powerful and assertive Communist China. Mr. Abe understood that [Japan](#) by itself could not survive as an independent country if it had to cope with China alone. The sheer size of China in population and economic growth required a coalition-alliance approach to contain it.

At the same time, Mr. Abe realized that the United States was the key to [Japan's](#) survival as an independent nation. Part of his affection for America came from his own personal expertise growing up. As he explained to a Joint Session of Congress on April 29, 2015, his first experience with America occurred when he went to California as a student. A woman had kindly opened her home to him so that he could go to school in America. The woman was a good cook and people would always stop by her house to visit. The young Mr. Abe was moved by this community interaction.

As he told Congress: "They were so diverse. I was amazed and said to myself, 'America is an awesome country.' Later, I took a job at a steelmaker, and I was given the chance to work in New York. Here in the U.S. rank and hierarchy are neither here nor there. People advance based on merit. When you discuss things, you don't pay

much attention to who is junior or senior. You just choose the best idea, no matter who the idea was from. This culture intoxicated me.”

Mr. Abe went on to tell the American Congress that his belief in America went far deeper than this personal experience: “The Japanese, ever since they started modernization, have seen the very foundation for democracy in that famous line in the Gettysburg Address. The son of a farmer-carpenter can become the President... The fact that such a country existed woke up the Japanese of the late 19th century to democracy. For [Japan](#), our encounter with America was also our encounter with democracy. And that was more than 150 years ago, giving us a mature history together.”

Mr. Abe entitled his speech “Toward an Alliance of Hope.”

It was this optimistic, anti-communist, pro-freedom, pro-religious liberty future that Mr. Abe’s critics have sought to destroy in the aftermath of his assassination.

Rather than mourning the death of the longest-serving Japanese Prime Minister, his enemies and those jealous of his achievements have sought to smear his memory, drive his supporters into political exile, and eliminate the religious liberty which makes [Japan](#) so different from Communist China and Communist North Korea.

The leftist Japanese news media has been a partner in undermining and distorting the Abe legacy – and helping drive his supporters and friends out of public life.

[Japan](#) has not seen this kind of hysteria and viciousness since the politics of the 1930s.

It is a great tragedy that the advocate of an alliance of hope has been replaced by a movement willing to destroy religious liberty, smear its opponents, and drive citizens out of public life.

Prime Minister Abe deserves a better farewell from the country which he served so long.

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/sep/28/prime-minister-shinzo-abe-historic-leader/>