

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Pamphlets On Abuse Point To Japan's Abusive State

Knut Holdhus
March 18, 2024



"Could that be abuse?" from the cover of a pamphlet used in Japanese schools designed to demean religion

Controversial pamphlets on abuse distributed in Japanese schools bear the hallmarks of abusive state giving itself excessive powers.

by Matthias Stephan and Knut Holdhus

Symbol of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of Japan. Photo: 文部科学省 (MEXT Japan) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#)

Several organisations within the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) have sparked controversy by the content in pamphlets distributed to educate children in primary, middle and high schools about child abuse. Although the aim is to promote awareness and reporting, the contents have sparked a heated debate over their impact on religious freedom, especially

for certain religious organisations already being persecuted by the authorities, like the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#).

BITTER WINTER [Bitter Winter](#), the online magazine for human rights and religious freedom, reported about it on 8th March 2024 in an article by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, the Italian sociologist of religion who is regarded as one of the world's leading authorities on religious freedom and human rights. See the [Bitter Winter article](#).

The illustrated pamphlets, issued by the Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau and other departments under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), have caused concern because they define "child abuse" broadly, encompassing aspects of conservative religious upbringing. While they don't mention any particular religious groups, certain passages in the content seem to hint at practices often linked with organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the [Family Federation](#).



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, April 2023

While the pamphlets echo the guidelines provided in the "Q and A on Handling Child Abuse and Similar Cases Related to Religious and Similar Beliefs" by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2022, critics contend that the expansive definitions of abuse found in both the pamphlets and the guidelines may lead to unintended consequences. These critics fear that such broad definitions could encroach upon the rights of religious groups and their followers.

Introvigne writes that the meaning of the pamphlets,

"is, in certain parts, obscure but becomes clearer when one compares them to the 'Q and A on Handling Child Abuse and Similar Cases Related to Religious and Similar Beliefs' published at the end of 2022 by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. In fact, these 'Q and A' were sent to all boards of education in Japan and it is in accordance with them that schools began distributing the illustrated pamphlets on child abuse.

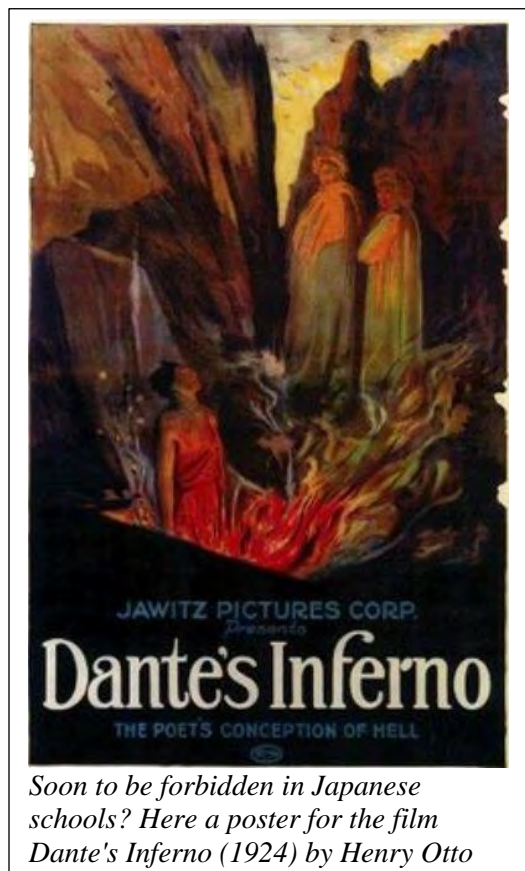
These 'Q and A', as a well-known journalist specialized in Japanese issues, Leo Lewis, noted in the Financial Times, were clearly designed to 'break down' the [Unification Church](#) and prevent it from passing its faith to the next generations. However, whoever drafted them also took into account post-Abe-assassination attacks against the Jehovah's Witness and conservative Christian groups. As Lewis concluded, 'in its rush to enact something, Japan has skipped

some extraordinarily nuanced theological questions and created potential trouble for a much larger circle of organizations and activities than it has bargained for."

A major point of contention regarding the pamphlets is their portrayal of specific religious practices as abusive. For instance, children are cautioned against "forced participation in religious activities" and being subjected to threats like "You will go to hell if you do certain things." Certain actions having eternal consequences, is a trait commonly found in religious teachings. This characterization raises concerns about parents' freedom to impart their religious beliefs to their children without state interference or fear of consequences.

The Bitter Winter article points out,

"The most bizarre and alarming references in the pamphlets are those regarding as 'abuse' telling children that if they 'do or don't do' certain things they 'will go to hell'. This is a very common teaching in conservative Christian churches and in other religions as well. Although perhaps less fashionable now, Christians of my generation remember how parents, as well as priests and pastors at Catholic Catechism or Protestant Sunday School did tell children that those who commit serious sins go to hell.



If instilling the fear of hell is a form of 'child abuse' perhaps Dante's 'Comedy', with its graphic depictions of hell, should be forbidden to minors in Japan, and Japanese travel agents should not take families with minors to the famous Medieval Cemetery of Pisa or to countless European cathedrals whose frescos or paintings show how devils will torment the sinners in the afterlife (Buddhist depictions of Cold Hells are not less terrifying, by the way). Both the Vatican-endorsed Catholic catechism for children YOUCAT and countless teaching aids for conservative Protestant Sunday Schools do teach that hell exists, is 'horrible to contemplate' (YOUCAT, no. 53), and that those who commit serious sins and do not repent may end up there."

Dr. Massimo Introvigne points out another peculiar aspect of the pamphlets,

"Children are also told in the pamphlets that they should be alert and report those who 'show them materials that contain sexual expression that are not appropriate to your age.' A casual reader may believe this is about pornography or adult magazines, but a look at the controversies in the Japanese media on the Jehovah's Witnesses and conservative Christian groups after the Abe assassination helps understanding that the reference is really to Biblical

stories about adultery and other sexual sins and the corresponding illustrations in Christian publications.

Obviously, not all Biblical accounts are appropriate for a five-year-old, while in 2024 no 17-year-old minor would be scandalized by them. It is also paradoxical that these comments are made in Japan, a country that has been repeatedly at the receiving end of criticism by the United Nations agency for the protection of children UNICEF for the large circulation and availability to minors in the country of comics and cartoons with inappropriate sexual content. Yet, religions and the Bible are singled out here."

Furthermore, the pamphlets have come under fire for including references to activities such as missionary work and religious confession as potential forms of abuse. While these references aim to protect children from harm, they risk stigmatizing longstanding religious practices and undermining the autonomy of religious institutions in Japan.

For organizations like the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), these pamphlets pose significant concerns. Amid accusations of financial exploitation and questionable practices, the categorization of conservative religious activities as "child abuse" raises fears of discrimination and persecution.

In response to these concerns, advocates for religious freedom have urged a reassessment of the pamphlets' content and distribution. They argue that while safeguarding children from abuse is crucial, it should not infringe upon the fundamental right to practice religion without fear of state interference or censure.

As the debate unfolds, the [Family Federation](#) and other religious groups in Japan are closely monitoring

the situation, mindful of its broader implications for religious freedom and autonomy. In a society that values diversity and tolerance, the state interfering with how parents raise their children, seems like a direct attack on religious diversity and tolerance. It certainly is odd that bureaucrats in the state administration know better how to raise children than religious parents. Religion is being treated as something dangerous.

This definitely brings up the issue of an "abusive state" that gives itself powers to forcefully remove children from their parents on the pretext of "protecting the children" from what anti-religious elements within the state administration claims to be abuse. Such as teaching your kids that hell exists. Where then is the state's tolerance and diversity? Is Japan becoming an abusive state?

"Pamphlets on Abuse Point to Abusive State" - text: Matthias Stephan and Knut Holdhus

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BITTER WINTER

A MAGAZINE ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Japan, Pamphlets Against Conservative Religion Distributed in Schools

03/08/2024 MASSIMO INTROVIGNE

A+ | A-

Minors are told that being admonished that by doing or not doing certain things they can go to hell, or being brought to religious activities, are forms of "abuse."

by Massimo Introvigne



A pamphlet's cover.

In Japan, the Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau, Policy Bureau, and other organizations of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) distribute in elementary, middle, and high schools illustrated pamphlets about child abuse, inciting schoolchildren to be aware of and report it timely. There are similar pamphlets in several other countries, and prevention of child abuse is certainly a commendable aim.

However, the pamphlets distributed in Japan in 2024 refer to a peculiar notion of "child abuse" and include in it also typical manifestations of conservative religion. Some passages specifically, without mentioning any religious group by name, seems to target the Unification Church (now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification), the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Roman Catholic Church.

Their meaning is, in certain parts, obscure but becomes clearer when one compares them to the "Q&A on Handling Child Abuse and Similar Cases Related to Religious and Similar Beliefs" published at the end of 2022 by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. In fact, these "Q&A" were sent to all boards of education in Japan and it is in accordance with them that schools began distributing the illustrated pamphlets on child abuse.

These "Q&A," as a well-known journalist specialized in Japanese issues, Leo Lewis, [noted in the "Financial Times,"](#) were clearly designed to "break down" the Unification Church and prevent it from passing its faith to the next generations. However, whoever drafted them also took into account post-Abe-assassination attacks against the Jehovah's Witness and conservative Christian groups. As Lewis concluded, "in its rush to enact something, Japan has skipped some extraordinarily nuanced theological questions and created potential trouble for a much larger circle of organizations and activities than it has bargained for."

The pamphlets make the situation even worse. They explain to children that the "forced participation in religious activities" is a case of "abuse." The adjective "forced," however, is ambiguous. It evokes the "religious police" that in some Muslim countries goes around the streets on Friday and brings forcibly to the mosques citizens who don't want to go there. This is certainly an abuse, because adult citizens have a right to freely dispose of their spare time. However, minors do not normally organize their time freely. It is generally regarded as appropriate that parents supervise it. If it was not so, some minors may be tempted to devote little time to studying and much more to having fun. Minors are normally brought to church by their parents. They may be more or less enthusiastic about it, but the parents' action in these cases is not an "abuse."





The pamphlets explain that children are abused by being "forced to participate in religious activities" and "threatened by words like "You will go to hell."

If the reference is to involving minors in missionary activities, this is something happening in most churches. The Vatican's website, for example, presents the activities of IMAC, the **International Movement of Apostolate of Children**, a Vatican-approved umbrella organization that supervises the evangelistic activities of children, based on the principle that "children are already fully persons, capable of transforming the world around them."

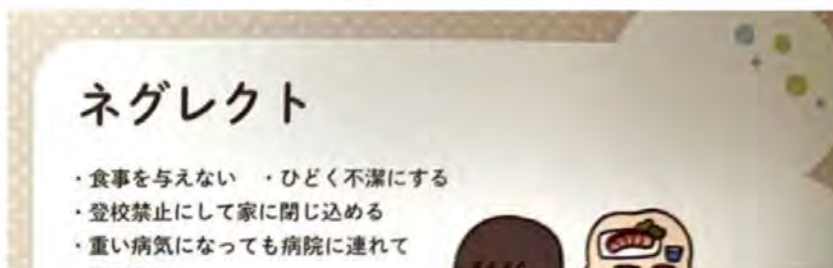
Children are also told in the pamphlets that they should be alert and report those who "show them materials that contain sexual expression that are not appropriate to your age." A casual reader may believe this is about pornography or adult magazines, but a look at the controversies in the Japanese media on the Jehovah's Witnesses and conservative Christian groups after the Abe assassination helps understanding that the reference is really to Biblical stories about adultery and other sexual sins and the corresponding illustrations in Christian publications. Obviously, not all Biblical accounts are appropriate for a five-year-old, while in 2024 no 17-year-old minor would be scandalized by them. It is also paradoxical that these comments are made in Japan, a country that has been repeatedly at the receiving end of criticism by the United Nations agency for the protection of children UNICEF for the large circulation and availability to minors in the country of comics and cartoons with inappropriate sexual content. Yet, religions and the Bible are singled out here.

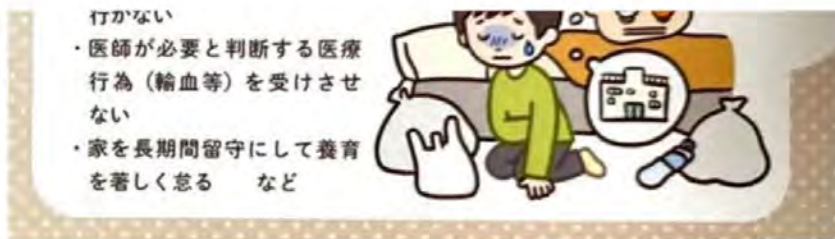


Among cases of child sexual abuse, being exposed to "materials that contain sexual expression that are not appropriate to your age" and being induced to "talk about sexual experiences" are listed.

Another reference in the pamphlets is to those who induce "children to talk about sexual experiences." Again, one may imagine that the implied reference is to pedophiles inciting minors to tell salacious stories. But a look at the 2022 ministerial Q&A would show that in fact what is denounced is confession if minors confess sexual sins. Any Catholic priest with experience in hearing confessions of teenagers would agree that they "mostly" confess sins related to sex. It is difficult to imagine a 16-year-old confessing tax evasion or paying bribes to a public officer. The pamphlets thus directly attack the confession as practiced in the Catholic Church, where it starts at age seven, and in several other Christian churches. Confession of sexual sins even goes under the category of "sexual abuse."

Without naming them, the reference in the pamphlets to inducing children to "avoid blood transfusions" when prescribed by doctors directly targets the Jehovah's Witnesses. They believe blood transfusions are against the Bible and recommend alternative therapies, which are easily available in medically advanced countries, including Japan. They, together with conservative Christian groups, may also be targeted by the pamphlets when the latter tell minors that "restricting going to higher education" is another form of abuse or neglect. Conservative groups are often critical of certain trends in modern universities, although in the cases of the Jehovah's Witnesses international scholarly studies have demonstrated that a sizeable percentage of them do go to college. The question is debatable, but again having different opinions on modern universities is not "child abuse or neglect."





"Not being given blood transfusions" prescribed by doctors is explicitly mentioned as a case of "neglect."

The most bizarre and alarming references in the pamphlets are those regarding as "abuse" telling children that if they "do or don't do" certain things they "will go to hell." This is a very common teaching in conservative Christian churches and in other religions as well. Although perhaps less fashionable now, Christians of my generation remember how parents, as well as priests and pastors at Catholic Catechism or Protestant Sunday School did tell children that those who commit serious sins go to hell.

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The pamphlets stretch the notion of "abuse" in an almost caricatural way to assault the right of conservative Christian parents to transmit their religion to their children. Article 18 no. 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Japan has signed and ratified, states that "the States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions." Japan has signed and ratified the ICCPR. Distributing such pamphlets to schoolchildren is a blatant violation of Article 18 no. 4. It should not be allowed.

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