

Research Notes

The Assassination of Shinzo Abe and the Unification Church

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ABSTRACT: The assassination in Nara, Japan, of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022, was explained by the criminal with the fact that the politician had attended initiatives sponsored by the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation of World Peace and Unification. The killer hated the Unification Church, he said, because his mother had gone bankrupt in 2002 after extravagant donations to the religious movement. In fact, he had originally planned to assassinate the leader of the Family Federation, and test-fired his gun by shooting at a building which was once a place of worship for the group. While the weak mind of the assassin had clearly been excited by anti-Unification-Church campaigns by militant lawyers and anti-cultists, the latter succeeded in persuading most media, both in Japan and internationally, that rather than being a victim the Unification Church was somewhat responsible for the homicide, in a spectacular reversal of both logic and fairness.

KEYWORDS: Unification Church, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, Assassination of Shinzo Abe, Tetsuya Yamagami, National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales.

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 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).

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.

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 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.

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 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 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. 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.

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 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 oversimplified 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]).

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 these organizations, and even asked cabinet ministers to resign (one, economy minister Daishiro Yamagiwa, did resign on October 24).

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 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 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 lead to death threats against some of its members.

Articles by Japanese media reporting these incidents offered 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. 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. Governmental committees have been organized to investigate “spiritual sales” and the possibility of dissolving the Unification Church/Family Federation, even if it is admitted that neither the church as such nor its legal representatives have been found guilty of any crime. 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, while a new law should indemnify the “victims.”

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,” tax the donations to the latter by declaring they are not real donations, and legally dissolve groups that have not committed any crime, 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 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.

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 has 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 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 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).

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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