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From Cults to *Cobayer*: New Religions as “Guinea Pigs” for Testing New Laws. The Case of the Buenos Aires Yoga School

Susan J. Palmer

McGill University, Montreal, Quebec

susan.palmer@mcgill.ca

ABSTRACT: A military-style police raid was launched on August 12, 2022, against the headquarters of a small metaphysical book club and spiritual school known as the Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS). BAYS members were arrested on charges of human trafficking, money laundering, and running a prostitute ring. Videos of the raid and photographs of members with identifying information soon appeared in the media. This study argues that this unwarranted police raid, planned by PROTEX (Procuraduría para el Combate de la Trata y Explotación de Personas) and Argentina’s leading anticult activist, Pablo Salum, fits the description of a “crime control theater,” and that the heavy-handed use of brainwashing theory to brand and stigmatize the BAYS women as both prostitutes and “cultists” resembles strategies found in France’s government-sponsored anticult movement to control “sectes” and their “gourous.” Since both Argentina and France have passed new laws based on unprovable notions of “vulnerability,” “control,” and “abuse of weakness,” imported from brainwashing theory, it is argued the application of these laws to members of NRMs is a subtle and facile step towards the erosion of democratic principles. This study, based on interviews with BAYS members and legal team, focuses on the negative results of the raid, which damaged the careers and livelihoods of the alleged “pimps” and putative “victims” alike.

KEYWORDS: Buenos Aires Yoga School, Government Raids Against “Cults,” Crime Control Theater, Brainwashing, Human Trafficking, Abuse of Weakness, Anti-cultism.

Introduction

Democracy is generally taken for granted in the Americas and Europe—but history and politics tell us that democracy is not a privilege fixed in stone. It is constantly being challenged, and tested by new laws that are seemingly benign. It has often been eroded by cultural trends that appear to support the downtrodden and defend human rights.

What happened to the members of a small metaphysical book club in Argentina is a striking example of how human rights and democratic principles can be effectively eroded in unexpected and surreptitious ways.

The Buenos Aires Yoga School (BAYS) emerged out of the philosophy teachings and discussion groups organized by Juan Percowicz in the early 1980s (Introvigne 2023a). Percowicz is a Jewish accountant (a widower now in his 80s and retired), who for decades has been cultivating his passion for books on mysticism and esoteric philosophy. His taste is eclectic, ranging from Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) to Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952); from George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866?–1949) to Dale Carnegie (1888–1955); and his concern is how to apply these philosophical principles to one’s daily life.

Percowicz had his own teacher of Raja Yoga (ancient Hindu philosophy, as opposed to the *asanas* or physical postures of Hatha Yoga), and became a teacher himself, attracting a circle of students that expanded to around 200 people. He founded BAYS, which has been meeting on a bi-weekly basis to discuss assigned readings. It is also a social club, because these meetings have featured shows—from comedy acts to amateur skits or poetry readings, to performances by professional musicians, actors and magicians—all members of BAYS (Interviews with Juan Percowicz and longterm members of BAYS, May 2023).

The Raid of August 12, 2022

This flourishing social club and artistic/spiritual movement was suddenly blighted by a sudden, violent, militarized raid.

On August 12, 2022 armored police with machine guns smashed in the front door of a cafe on Estado de Israel Avenue where a class on esoteric philosophy was in progress. Around fifty BAYS students were held at gunpoint—most of them nicely dressed elderly people in their 60s, 70s, and 80s.

The purpose of this raid was to find evidence of human trafficking, to arrest the perpetrators, and rescue the victims.

But despite the lack of any prior complaints from ex-members or self-described “victims” of BAYS—or any compelling “evidence” whatsoever—19 members were arrested and accused of criminal association, human trafficking, sexual exploitation and “money laundering connected with human trafficking.” They

had achieved this by allegedly using “coercive persuasion” techniques (i.e. brainwashing) to enslave nine female BAYS students and pimp them to “rich and powerful men” for “cultic” fundraising purposes.

As one of the lawyers on BAYS’ defense team noted:

The suspects were sent to prison *before* a trial, *before* any evidence was produced. And most of them remained incarcerated for almost three months as part of an ongoing pre-trial “investigation” on the basis of Law No 26.842 on Prevention and Punishment of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Victims of 19 December 2012.

There is a special prosecutorial office in Argentina called PROTEX (Procuraduría para el Combate de la Trata y Explotación de Personas [English: Office of the Procurator for Combating the Trafficking and Exploitation of Persons]). It was set up in the wake of the new Argentinian Law 26.842 of 2012 against human trafficking. The political and intellectual forces behind the passing of this law are analyzed in assistant prosecutor Marisa S. Tarantino’s 2021 book (Tarantino 2021). Recently, the Argentinian government has increased PROTEX’s powers and funding. PROTEX needs success stories for its annual reports.

In an unexpected coup, PROTEX, working in tandem with police SWAT teams and with Pablo Salum (Argentina’s one-man anticult movement), plus local television stations, launched a military-style police raid on the BAYS-owned building, starting with the cafe.

After smashing in the door of the cafe on the ground floor of the building, the SWAT teams systematically proceeded up ten flights to forcefully search the 25 private apartments and professional offices of BAYS members. When the residents trapped in the cafe offered the policewoman in charge their door keys, they were rejected. After all, this was an important photo opportunity. It was “crime-control theatre.”

The aim was clear: the filming of the police operation would produce videos used to justify the crackdown ordered by the prosecutor of PROTEX.

Simultaneous aggressive raids were carried out that night at a total of fifty locations around Buenos Aires.

On the street outside the cafe, reporters were stationed to take photos of the handcuffed people as they were dragged out of the building and placed in paddy wagons. It appears that a few journalists knew about the raid even before it took place.

A video showing the heavily-armed “heroic” door-smashing police and the one-sided statement of the prosecutor was uploaded on YouTube just in time for the morning news about the yoga school BAYS, “la secta del horror” or “the horror cult” that had allegedly been operating an international prostitution ring for thirty years.

The Research Method

It is one situation to read in a distant country about a “cult” that has been busted for trafficking women—and quite another thing to fly to Buenos Aires and interview members of the said “cult” and listen to their side of the story. Most readers coming across the BAYS story in the news would probably think, “They must be guilty. After all, isn’t that what cults do—exploit people?” Some readers might even quote the proverb, “Where there’s smoke, there’s a fire.”

This research was conducted in Buenos Aires in May 2023 by myself and my research partner, Professor Holly Folk from Western Washington University. Our colleague Dr. Massimo Introvigne, who had previously written about BAYS, encouraged us to undertake this research; we were not paid for it, but our travel expenses to Argentina and accommodation costs were covered.

After spending eight days interviewing BAYS students (both the “perps” and the “victims” of human trafficking), the founder of BAYS, Juan Percowicz, and their lawyer, we concurred that the presumption of innocence should definitely apply here. None of these people were pimps, brainwashers, or human traffickers. Certainly, none of them were “victims”—except they all had the misfortune to be trapped in a Kafkaesque, bureaucratic nightmare.

One of the functions of PROTEX is to protect the victims. But these BAYS women complained they had been falsely labeled as “victims” and then punished for their mythical victimhood.

Each woman we interviewed in her own apartment described vividly her experience of the 12 August 2022 raid and its aftermath. Their accounts were quite consistent.

First, the door of each woman’s apartment had been smashed on the eve of the police raid. Second, they found that the police had searched their apartments, seizing gold jewelry, watches, paintings, computers, and stashes of cash. Third,

over the next few days, their names, faces, addresses, and job information appeared in the media in salacious reports and videos on the *secta del horror*. The result was that most of these women lost their livelihoods. Or at least, their careers—in real estate, television production, acting, health clinics, sales motivational training, computer technology—were adversely affected.

Several women described post-raid symptoms of PTSD; of feeling insecure sleeping in their unlocked or doorless apartments; and a lack of confidence in dealing with their clients.

But mostly, these women were angry. As strong, independent feminists who worked hard all their lives to build their careers, they were insulted to be told they were “victims.” Most of them were involved in relationships of ten to twenty years with their boyfriend, partner, or husband, and were flabbergasted (or amused) at being told they were “prostitutes.”

When a report appears in the news about a “cult” that has just been “outed” as a criminal enterprise, whose leaders have been arrested, whose assets have been frozen—nobody cares. Nobody questions. But if someone bothers to view the situation up close, to listen to members describe the impact of “anticult” framing and media labeling on their professional and personal lives—one often confronts a very different reality.

Here are their stories; summaries of the interviews conducted in May 2023 by myself and Professor Folk. In these personal narratives, one might see how easy it is for democracy to be unraveled, and how frightening this process must be for the targeted individuals.

First, in Part One and Two of this article, we will examine the experiences of two extraordinary artists who were charged with human trafficking and sent to prison before a trial, and their accounts of the devastating impact of these false allegations on their professional careers. In Part Three, I will explore the narratives of the nine women “victims” who must remain anonymous, since they deserve a chance to reconstruct their careers after the negative exposure they have suffered in the media and on Pablo Salum’s website.

Part One: Carlos Barragán, Magician

Carlos Barragán is a professional stage magician. His father and father's father were famous magicians in Argentina, who taught him his first magic illusion at age 3. Carlos achieved international fame by inventing a new, poetic style of stage magic and won many awards, notably, the World Magic Championship in Great Illusions FISM in 1997. For over two decades, Barragán has toured Latin America, Mexico, Las Vegas, Europe, Russia, and China, performing his theatrical magic shows at festivals, corporate events, and selected private parties.

MagicPedia sums up Carlos Barragán's unique career as follows:

His inventive, philosophical, and emotional thriller-show production, combine illusion and theater, comedy and mystery in a sensual show... touching the emotions of the audience with his new emotional-philosophical magic concept. Carlos Barragán has been enchanting audiences around the world in theaters and on TV; he prepared a special show for Prince William and Máxima at the Royal Dutch Wedding in 2002 (MagicPedia 2023).

In between his world tours, Carlos Barragán would drop into the Buenos Aires Yoga School and attend its philosophy classes. Carlos felt at home in this warm community of intellectuals and creative artists who welcomed Jews, Muslims, and homosexuals to their gatherings. Carlos' parents and sisters never joined BAYS, but he maintained a close relationship with them. He worked closely with the fellow artists he met at BAYS to create innovative theatrical shows with music and comedy. One of them, a gifted young actress, became his regular stage assistant and traveled with him to Germany in 1997 to perform and receive the FISM prize.

On the fateful evening of 12 August 2022, Carlos Barragán was attending a study session at BAYS' café on the ground floor of the Estado de Israel Avenue building when the police raided the building and other locations linked to BAYS. Handcuffed and arrested at gun point, along with 18 other BAYS members, Carlos was accused of human trafficking through the operation of a prostitution ring.

While incarcerated in prison, Carlos Barragán learned that his large, elegant house had also been raided that night. His friends told him they found the front door smashed in. The police had invaded his Museum of Magic and seized two large boxes with an historic collection of magic props and paraphernalia. Carlos Barragán explained:

Pablo Salum had told PROTEX that I had in my house—in my “bunker” (as Salum calls it)—all the blackmail material for the extortion of rich men who were offered our women. He said videos of sex acts were taken so that we could extort money from them. So, the police smashed their way into my house and stole over 4,000 VHS, expecting to find blackmail material, but of course all they found were my historic collection of magic shows, and the VHS series on our philosophy classes in BAYS.

Carlos Barragán was released from prison on 4 November 2022, when the charges against him were suddenly dropped. To this day he has no idea why—or indeed, how he came to be arrested in the first place.

He returned home to find the police had ransacked his study and he found that his meticulously-crafted inventions which he used to make to sell to other magicians, had been torn apart and trodden underfoot. Windows had been broken and he found animal droppings on the floor. But for Carlos, the most devastating realization was that the police had discovered his secret hiding place where he kept his passport and his father’s gold and silver medals for his service to the community. There they had also found—and stolen—a large cache of money his mother had given him for safekeeping shortly after the death of his father on the 9th of June of 2022.

His mother, Señora Barragán, was fearful of burglars, for she now lived alone. Like many Argentinians, she did not trust the banks, ever since the famous *corralito* in 2001, when all the banks froze their clients’ money—both pesos and dollars—only to return it several months later exclusively in pesos, in installments and devaluated. Many people lost huge amounts of money and assets, and a wave of emigration to other countries followed. After his mother’s jewelry and his father’s life savings had been stolen by the police, Carlos realized his bank account had been frozen at the time of his arrest. Even after the charges against him were dropped, it has remained frozen.

“They have destroyed my life’s work,” Carlos said bitterly. But what he found unbearable was the assault on his reputation:

Men who look like [Adolf] Hitler [1889–1945] are saying I am a criminal in Argentina. Now that my name has been dragged through the tabloids I will never work again. I have been [falsely] “unmasked” as a member of the “cult of horror”—as a brainwashing pimp—as if I were not much too busy promoting an infinitely more exciting and more lucrative profession as a world class magician!

Carlos protested that the media portrayed him as a sleazy “cultist” who goes by the phony alias of “The Magician.”

But I *am* a magician. It is not my “alias”—it is my honorable profession, my family tradition into which I was raised since the age of three!

He spoke of Pablo Salum, the career apostate (Salum’s mother took him to BAYS meetings at age 10) who is Argentine’s fiercest anticult activist. Salum had told the media that BAYS was a “child abuser association.” [Pablo Salum has gone on record claiming the Dalai Lama is a “pederast,” and that the Mormon Church and the Carmelites are hiding “brainwashing” or “pedophile rings”: see Introvigne 2023b].

Carlos protested:

This is an evil slander! The allegations against us were human trafficking and money laundering—that’s it! Child abuse was never part of the case. In my profession, where we magicians perform for families and schools, the tiniest hint of scandal involving pedophilia rumors will be the death knell for your career. No one will work with you ever again.

Carlos’ health has declined rapidly since his release from prison. He is currently recovering from open heart surgery under the care of his old BAYS friends.

Carlos spoke of his most heartbreaking moment. While he was being held in prison, he was not allowed a leave to attend the award ceremony for his late father, a great Argentinian magician. The ceremony was a public recognition of all the community service and charity that Carlos’ father had performed throughout his life. Carlos had been emulating his father by performing magic shows for fundraising benefits.

Part Two: Mariano Krauz, Oboist and Composer

This is the story of Mariano Krauz, whose brilliant international career as a solo oboist and emerging composer was suddenly, unexpectedly derailed, due to the ludicrous fantasies of an anticult activist and career apostate, and the opportunistic machinations of PROTEX.

Born in 1964, Mariano Krauz is the grandson of Polish Jews who immigrated to Argentina. Mariano discovered music at age 5 when a music-loving aunt escorted him to recorder lessons. He switched to oboe and soon became a child

prodigy, winning prizes since age 13. He studied at the Conservatoire of Amsterdam and by the age of 24 Mariano Krauz became the first oboist in the Teatro Colón, the magnificent opera house in Buenos Aires.

So why did this highly disciplined, conspicuously successful musician join BAYS, a local metaphysical book club that has been catapulted into notoriety through recent media reports and TV shows on Buenos Aires’ *secta del horror*?

We were sitting in BAYS’ spacious, high-ceilinged café when I asked Mariano this question. It was hard to imagine that this serene space, which opened onto a charming garden courtyard, had, just last August, been the site of the dramatic militarized raid, when police smashed in the front door and held around fifty BAYS philosophy students at gunpoint.

Mariano spoke of how he met BAYS in 1991.

I was very successful as an oboist, I traveled a great deal, but my life was incomplete. I felt empty. I couldn’t find a role model in my parents who were secular Jews, both pharmacists. They were very supportive of my studies, and I loved them with all my heart, but they couldn’t show me my higher goal, or explain the meaning of life.

Mariano had a girlfriend whose mother was a BAYS student:

That summer I was preparing for an international competition in Yugoslavia. It was very hot in Buenos Aires, I had no air conditioner. My girlfriend’s mother rented a place in the cool mountains of Calafate, the south of Argentina, and offered me a cabin where I could stay and practice. I was very shy and lonely, but she gave me a book, [Maurice] Nicoll’s [1884–1953] *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky* [Nicoll 1952–56]. I did not understand it, but he compared human beings to “leaves in the wind”—I thought, “That’s me.” So I accepted her invitation, and the next time we went back to Buenos Aires I attended a BAYS meeting.

Mariano recalled his very first BAYS meeting:

A little boy of 5 spoke up: “I want to read a poem I wrote yesterday!” As the kid read it out, I started to cry. “This is my home,” I thought, “a place where people can express themselves.”

I asked Mariano about his first impressions of Dr. Juan Percowicz, BAYS’ founder.

When I first listened to him [Juan], he gave a long lecture, where he spoke, among other subjects, about the pain of being a musician; of how the music in one’s head is never the same as the music out there. This resonated with me, and I gradually got to know him. He is so wise, his way of being with people... He suggested I learn to play tango. This was

one of my first Tasks. [In BAYS the students have an Instructor who suggests “Tasks” that will help them apply philosophical ideas to their daily life.] I was surprised, because I had always played classical music, reading from notation, from a score. Now I had to learn to improvise, to play from memory. It forced me to loosen up, to feel the music in a different way. Playing tango led me to write my first compositions. Now I am more of a composer than an oboe player.

In the early days of the School, Juan organized many different branches to study the arts, medicine, business, etc.

We had a [Fyodor] Dostoevsky [1821–1881] group that read *The Gambler*. Together with Dr. Percowicz, we wrote a book called *Dostoevsky and the Poker Player’s Marked Cards* [Percowicz, Franca, and Pallotta 1993]. This inspired me to write an opera called *Cartas Marcadas* (“Marked Cards”) with my fellow student, Susana Mendelievich. Extracts from this opera were performed at the Salón Dorado of the Teatro Colón, and the overture was performed at the San José Arena in California.

Plácido Domingo performed a duet from *Marked Cards* at the Campo Argentino de Polo in 1996. Mariano notes,

Plácido Domingo and I were friends for more than twenty years and often worked together, but after the raid the media tried to frame him as a secret member of BAYS. In fact, he had showed no interest in philosophy, and never went to a single BAYS meeting. The scandal about the “horror cult” in the media tainted my public image. Plácido Domingo has now distanced himself from me. It turned out the police had been bugging our phone calls for at least a year before the raid. Now, no one will hire me, I have not put a foot in the Teatro Colón since the raid.

Then Mariano told a sad story:

Two days before the raid happened, I was meeting with the directors at the Teatro Colón about my ballet for children. We were planning to stage it in 2023. It took me years and years of creating this music written as a ballet. It had been performed in Japan by the Osaka Century Orchestra. People loved it. It was based on a story about Baron Munchausen. The choreographer had changed the plot about *Venus, the Baron and Love* to be more suitable for kids... but after the August 12, 2022 raid, no one would answer my phone calls. And a concert planned at Teatro Colón for November 25, 2022, with the Academic Orchestra playing part of my ballet was also cancelled. Of course, on the night of the raid I was put in handcuffs and taken away in a paddy wagon to prison where I lived in a basement cell for 84 days with other BAYS men—the supposed “human traffickers.”

But at least the police didn’t break Mariano’s door down.

I was lucky, because I decided not to attend the meeting in the cafe that evening. When I heard the loud noise below, I opened my door on the 10th floor, so when the police arrived, they didn’t bother to smash in my front door like the others. The worst part of it

is, they seized my computer. So now I don't have access to the new compositions I was working on, or to the orchestral scores of my previous compositions.

Mariano and Juan Percowicz had just spent 18 days in the same prison cell, during a pre-trial investigation into allegations of human trafficking and money laundering. Mariano spent 84 days in prison with his comrades from BAYS, but Dr. Percowicz was allowed to go home after 18 days, where he remained under house arrest.

During our trip to Buenos Aires, Holly Folk and I (Susan J. Palmer) visited Dr. Percowicz in Buenos Aires. He is a retired accountant, now 84, who welcomed us to his modest apartment where he described his lifelong interest in philosophy, particularly esoteric philosophy. As a young man, as I mentioned earlier, he had found a teacher of Raja Yoga and of Hindu philosophy, which focuses on divine knowledge, both intellectual and experiential (in contrast to the better known types of yoga: the devotional/ecstatic path of Bhakti Yoga, and the physical discipline of Hatha Yoga). Percowicz is a gifted teacher of philosophical ideas and their application in daily life, so he attracted a small circle of students who kept inviting their friends—until the reading/discussion circle expanded to around 200.

Media told the story differently. *Spectrum New BN 9* had claimed:

The Buenos Aires Yoga School, which operated for more than 30 years ... under the leadership of 84-year-old Juan Percowicz, did not actually offer yoga classes. Instead, it lured in people with promises of eternal happiness before it exploited them sexually and financially, prosecutors say (see Rivas Molina 2022).

Mariano described the filthy dark basement prison cell where he and his close friends from BAYS slept on pallets, sharing one latrine for a toilet. Once a week, they were permitted to escape to the courtyard to exercise in the fresh air and sunlight. But Juan stayed behind because he couldn't climb the stairs.

Mariano recalled the circumstances in prison that led him to work on his new composition, *The Power of God*:

Juan, my philosophy teacher, said to me: “Why don't you write a composition about all this happening to us? Now is the moment. All the emotions and events are fresh in our minds and blood. After sometime, we will start to forget, don't you think?”

I thought, “he is totally right.” But, I had no pencil or music paper. Then, as if by magic, the prisoners in the cell across from ours lent us a board game that came with some papers and a pen.

That got me started. The first song that appeared to me was “The Jail Bars Band,” a jazzy song with lyrics about the ten of us sleeping on the floor, with almost no light and no water, sometimes listening to Juan’s master philosophy classes, sometimes telling our stories, sometimes singing or telling jokes...

“The Jail Bars Band” became our anthem. We would sing it together several times a day. It helped bring some happiness and energy to that dark, dirty place.

After that song, it was like I had turned on a water tap. Inspiration was flowing and I couldn’t stop composing day and night. Later, I received a paper with music staves [“pentagrama” in Spanish] from friends and family, and I started to write a song about the raid we had all just gone through. As the lyrics and music took shape, I would sing the different parts to my cellmates, and two of them became my partners in song.

Carlos, the world champion magician, used to sing along with us sometimes, when his health would allow him.

So, when “The Raid” was finished, Juan proposed that I write a musical in three acts. Act One was “The Raid.” Our prison time could be the Act Two. And from the moment we get our freedom back, that will be Act Three that will end with the closure of the case.

What Juan suggested in prison really happened. Since we were released from prison and got our freedom back, so far I have composed 72 songs with a total duration of more than 4 hours. My dream is that *The Power of God* will be performed around the world, delivering a message of peace, togetherness and tolerance.

Part 3: The Nine Women “Victims”

When Holly Folk and I interviewed the women “victims” of BAYS, we found they were quite diverse, in terms of age and profession, but we noticed they shared features in common.

All but two owned their own condos in the BAYS building on Estado de Israel Avenue. We interviewed them in their small, compact, beautifully kept homes that—with two exceptions—were in the same 10-floor building of the ground floor cafe where BAYS held its classes until the raid disrupted their activities. The BAYS building functions as a coop, not as a religious commune. The apartment owners pay maintenance fees but they are financially independent.

Another common feature is they did not have children. One woman (67) who joined BAYS in 1990 and has owned her apartment for 32 years explained,

I don’t believe in marriage. Argentinian culture is very *machista*, so when you get married you belong to your husband. I belong to me.

Other women explained they had always put their careers first and valued their independence and freedom. However most of them maintain close relationships with their relatives outside BAYS. One woman said,

I have always put my career first, lived with boyfriends, never married and now I am very involved with my niece and her children.

Another woman told us about how she was planning to freeze her eggs so she could be a mother after she turned 40. Only one woman had wanted to have children but was unable to conceive due to a health problem.

These women all had long term boyfriends, partners, or husbands (except for one woman whose life partner had recently died). Two were with men they had known since childhood when their parents brought them to play together during the BAYS meetings. Only one woman was with a man who was not a BAYS member.

An interesting pattern we noted was that, with only two exceptions, these women preferred to live alone, so the couples owned separate apartments.

All these women were passionately engaged in their work and highly motivated in their chosen professions—as artist, actor, television producer, computer technician, salesperson, etc.

Their accounts of the August raid and the ensuing negative publicity that affected their personal lives and careers were quite consistent.

One woman (65), a professional artist who has owned her apartment for 7 years, said, “I feel more comfortable living with people I know.” She was in the cafe when some 100 Argentine Federal police officers with helmets, shield, and heavy guns broke the street doors and the doors to 22 apartments (out of 24):

When I returned to my apartment I saw the police had collected all my gold jewelry in a jacket. I screamed so they changed their minds and didn’t take it.

She spoke of the impact of the well-publicized raid on her career:

I have always made a living from my paintings and from teaching art. I have lost my teaching work and my clients, and now I make crafts to sell at artisan fairs.

All nine women reported the same “Catch-22” experience when they were interviewed at the Camara Gesell (Special Victims Unit); that when they denied being a victim, they were told their denial *proved* they were victims. The artist said,

It is a place where you sit and talk to a psychologist and there are mirrors, behind is the judge, the lawyers they don't interrogate you, you are alone with the psychologist. But the judge said, "The victims don't realize they are victims." For them, they say I was abused for 30 years and didn't realize it, so they treat me like an idiot. The Prosecution says I am a victim of "coercive persuasion." In my opinion, they create this bullshit, these liars. They call me a "victim"—and I still don't know of what.

My photo was on the media, my face was seen in a television show because there was a TV channel inside the cafe during the raid. The prosecution, the judge, they don't care about the people who belong to BAYS.

Another woman (45) from a Jewish family, graduated from university with a MBA, and has worked with her father, a TV producer, in various roles at his station, producing television shows. But after the raid, her life has changed dramatically:

I was in the cafe when I heard men screaming and banging. The police were breaking down doors, tearing up all the apartments. A policewoman told me they were having trouble getting in the door of my apartment. It was a Blindex door, so I went with her to open it with my key, but they had already broken it down, along with the wall attached to the door, and there were deep marks in the floor. They took all my pictures and the deed of sale of my apartment. For four nights I couldn't sleep because the door was broken and I was afraid to be alone, to be robbed again. The damage they did was terrible! It costs thousands of dollars to repair the door and the wall.

The police took my father and my sister to be questioned. Pablo Salum posted photographs of me and my dad and some of our employees at the TV station on Twitter. One woman resigned because she feared her image would be tainted working with us.

My boyfriend, he lost his job in the real estate company, and he is now trying to rebuild his career. He started a new realtor business, he has a degree in this field. The mother of my boyfriend was one of those accused of human trafficking. He is trying to be strong for his mother, sister, and me.

It would be nice to live as if we weren't back in the Inquisition. We want our voices heard. In Camara Gesell, our word is not valued. They asked me strange irrelevant questions like, "Are all your members Jewish?" They should have proof and taken the time to evaluate us before tagging us—labelling us as "prostitutes" and "brainwashed victims".

Tagging someone is easy, but getting rid of that tag is more difficult. I work in the media, in television, so I know how it works. When we are eventually found innocent, no journal will bother to report on us—or maybe there will be a tiny paragraph on the back page. Now our faces are all over television, Pablo Salum mentions our names and call us "cultists" on his anticult website. Tagging is so simple. I don't know if I will ever be able to "de-tag" myself.

One of the supposed “victims” (57) we interviewed is from a Catholic background and has always worked as an actress. Against her parents’ wishes, she studied theatre for six years, and in 1991 joined BAYS. There she met many creative actors and artists who helped her launch her career. Her instructor in BAYS was a well-known professor of theatre who “taught me to love my profession as an actress.” She worked in comedy and wrote for a magazine that offered political satire (“a relief from the oppression in which we were living”). Two of her cousins disappeared in the 1970s [she showed us their photos], leaving behind their 3-year-old daughter who was then raised by her aunt.

This actress described her experience of the raid:

In the cafe I see the first policeman enter and I see surprise on his face. All he saw were fifty old people sitting at tables, drinking tea and coffee, reading books. The police were evidently hoping to bust into a sex orgy. They started to break the other doors, I said, “No, these are our homes, let us give you the keys!” But they didn’t want our keys. They made us wait at gunpoint in the cafe. They had photojournalists with them and they wanted to appear on the news on TV as heroes ramming in the doors of the evil *secta*.

Finally, at midnight, they allowed me to go to my apartment. I was worried about my roommate, who is 64 and very small. When I saw what they had done, I became very angry. They broke my door in, everything was in a mess. They threw my roommate down on the floor and held a machine gun to her head. She told me they had found money in my bedside table. These were envelopes given to me of money with the names of my friends in BAYS, old people who live in the building. They had asked me to do their shopping for them during the pandemic, and I was still helping them. But I made friends with the police, so they gave me the money back.

I am suing Pablo Salum. On his website he uses my image and implies that I am a prostitute; that Juan gave me to rich and powerful men to raise money for the cult. He showed a video from one of the magic shows where I was Barragán’s assistant. He says I was “naked,” but I was not, I was wearing a dance leotard. Salum put my name on this video, so now I can open a lawsuit for harassment, for slander and insults. This is a misdemeanor, so I am filing a civil suit. The judge has summoned Pablo Salum to the court. So, next Thursday I will meet him in mediation and I will pursue him to the end!

The injustice these people were experiencing seemed all the more severe because they were citizens of Argentina. Thus, their anxiety was compounded by memories of the *corralito* (2001) and the *desaparecidos* of Argentina’s “Dirty War.” Several members we spoke to described how they were worried about their loved ones (who were arrested on the fateful night of the raid) would simply... disappear. Therefore, they described how they would jump in their cars and tail

the paddy wagons to find out where they were being detained. The BAYS members would take shifts, setting up a 24-hour guard to ensure that no detainees disappeared.

Conclusions

What do these interviews tell us?

First, it is highly unlikely these women are moonlighting (functioning in a “brainwashed zombie state”) as prostitutes. They didn’t strike us researchers as promising prostitute material. While neither Holly Folk nor myself, as middle-aged North American women academics, are in a position to predict what “rich and powerful men” in Argentina might consider as “sexy,” it appears unlikely that pimps would bother to groom women in their late 50s and 60s as prostitutes.

Moreover, the fact that these women are independent, high-performing professionals; and that the majority are in long term, stable relationships with men, makes it difficult to imagine them dabbling in the world’s oldest profession.

Massimo Introvigne lists the profiles of the nine women “victims”:

- a 66-year-old social psychologist and professional singer;
- a 62-year-old visual arts teacher and painter;
- a 57-year-old actress, member of the 1997 world champion stage magic team;
- a 55-year-old elementary school teacher and philosophical business coach;
- a 50-year-old woman who was already considered a “victim” and was subjected to an expert opinion in the previous case [that BAYS won in 2000], which proved that she was neither a victim nor exploited;
- a 45-year-old management graduate;
- a 43-year-old real estate agent;
- a 41-year-old digital marketing professional;
- a 35-year-old real estate agent, macromedia designer, and web designer (Introvigne 2023a, 27).

Introvigne comments:

To consider this group of women as a gang of prostitutes exploited by the BAYS would be laughable if it were not painful and insulting to them (Introvigne 2023a, 28).

1. Were the BAYS Women “Brainwashed”?

The 9 “victims” were all sent to the Cámara Gesell, a room equipped for interviews of victims and criminals, conducted by a psychologist.

All nine women were interviewed individually while the judge, lawyers, and prosecutors watched via a zoom link. They insisted vehemently that they were *not* prostitutes, nor brainwashed; that they were fully in charge of their own lives, and not forced to do anything by anyone.

But Judge Martín Irurzun and Judge Roberto José Boico both stated in the Chambers of Appeals decision of November 4, 2022 that, since the female victims had been involved in BAYS for so long, they had internalized the manipulation and were unaware they had been manipulated.

After their initial interview at the Camara Gesell, all nine women submitted to second, independent, psychological examinations.

In the psychologists’ reports they all passed with flying colors, as “normal.”

It is well-known in academic and legal circles that the theory of brainwashing has been consigned to the realm of “pseudoscience” (Richardson 1991; Anthony 2001; Introvigne 2022).

The arrested persons were accused of criminal association, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and money laundering on the basis of the already mentioned Law No 26.842 on Prevention and Punishment of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Victims, passed on 19 December 2012 (an amendment to the previous law, Law No 26.364). As Introvigne (2023a, 22) notes, Argentina does not criminalize prostitution but it criminalizes the behavior of those who economically benefit from the sexual activity of another person.

Law 26.842 categorizes prostitutes as “victims” even when they deny their “victimhood.” But if PROTEX identifies them and chooses to “protect” them, they are trapped in this category.

Introvigne explores the feminist critique of this law by Tarantino, who scrutinizes Argentina’s tool used to criminalize prostitution, which is “vulnerability as a tool of control” (Tarantino 2021, 200). Tarantino argues this tool creates a “paradigm of victimization” that denies to certain subjects their “political agency” (Tarantino 2021, 206). Introvigne concludes:

In other words, a prostitute is by definition “vulnerable” and “a victim.” If she says that she has freely decided to be a prostitute, this only proves that the “victimization” has been especially effective (Introvigne 2023a, 22).

2. Strange Parallels: Brainwashing and Vulnerability Concepts in Argentinian and French Law

Introvigne also points out that Argentina’s concept of “vulnerability as a tool of control” exhibits a striking

similarity ... [with] the “abus de faiblesse” (which translates precisely as “abuse of vulnerability”) that is the typical crime of which “cults” are accused of in France. It looks like just another incarnation of brainwashing (Introvigne 2023a, 22).

In both countries, this concept was the underpinning in new laws created to fight human trafficking and “cults”—by categorizing new religious movements members as “victims” of brainwashing (*manipulation mentale* in France and “coercive persuasion” in Argentina), thereby depriving them of their political agency.

It is interesting to recall that, in the very first application of France’s 2001 anti-cult About-Picard law, when Arnaud Mussy, a young prophet of a small new religious movement called Néo-Phare, was accused of causing the suicide of a fellow member, Mussy’s defense lawyer, Fabrice Petit, objected to his client being used as a “*cobaye*” (guinea pig) for this new law that had not yet been tested. He cautioned the court:

One is asking you to be psychiatric magistrates. Neither you nor I have the competence to judge *manipulation mentale* (Palmer 2011, 157).

When Mussy spoke in court, denying that he was a *gourou* or *manipulateur*, he reports the reaction he received:

When I speak and tell them my side of the story, even the prosecutor says, “He seems to be very straightforward.” “Aha!” says the directrice from ADFI [a French anti-cult movement]. “That proves he is a *manipulateur*. All *gourous* have this ability to seem sincere. That is how they manipulate!” (Palmer 2011, 158).

The same “Catch-22” tactic (Heller 1961) became part of the “strange spectacle” in court where an anticult lawyer represented the “complaints” of the Peraltas (two Néo-Phare members) without their consent (Palmer 2011, 168). In the case of the Peralta couple, they had written a deposition for the court insisting

they had no complaints about Arnaud Mussy. But, just like the BAYS “victims,” their deposition was rejected on the grounds that “victims of brainwashing do not realize they are brainwashed”; that their denials actually are “proof” they are brainwashed.

3. Is the Buenos Aires Yoga School a “Cult”?

Sociologists in the field of new religious studies would classify BAYS as an “NRM” (new religious movement). But BAYS does not conform to the type of NRM that tends to generate controversy—what sociologist Roy Wallis (1945–1990) in his tripartite typology called the “world-rejecting” NRM—the type whose founder is a messianic prophet who makes extravagant, charismatic “god-in-flesh” claims, and requires that his/her devotees surrender their time and assets to the movement and live communally, spending their days evangelizing and/or fundraising door to door and preparing for paradise on earth or imminent catastrophe (Wallis 1984).

Dr. Juan Percowicz does not fit the profile of a messianic god-in-flesh prophet. He was described by his students whom we interviewed as their respected master teacher, a wise philosopher, a kind counsellor, a friend. In this way, Dr. Percowicz corresponds to the type of leader who founds “world-affirming” NRMs (Wallis 1984). This type is a wise teacher of techniques who does not tell his disciples how to apply the sacred knowledge he/she imparts. In other words, the focus in BAYS was on applying esoteric philosophy to the individual’s daily life. Everyone made their own choices, but they found emotional, intellectual, and artistic support in BAYS.

4. The BAYS Raid as “Crime Control Theater”

I would argue that the BAYS members who were targeted in the raid were indeed “victims”—but not of human trafficking. Rather, they were victims of “crime control theatre” (CCT).

De Vault, Miller, and Griffin define CCT as follows:

Crime control theater describes legal actions (e.g., policies) that appear to address crimes but are sometimes ineffective and can potentially have unintended negative

consequences. Four key criteria of CCT include reactionary response to moral panic, unquestioned acceptance and promotion, appeal to mythic narratives, and empirical failure (De Vault, Miller, and Griffin 2019, 1).

Scholarly studies of the CCT phenomenon point to *lack of evidence* as a frequent feature of this kind of “theater.” De Vault, Miller, and Griffin note:

Crime control theater refers to intuitively appealing laws that appear to address crime while lacking any evidence that they actually exist (De Vault, Miller, and Griffin 2019, 1).

CCT is theatrical; its purpose is to *create the illusion* of controlling crime in order to reassure the public. However, Logan A. Yelderman and his colleagues have pointed out CCT’s ineffectual nature and poor results:

Policies such as America’s Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response Alerts, safe haven laws, Megan’s law, and three-strikes laws have provided the public with a feeling of safety and security. However, research has provided evidence that... these types of laws and policies... appear to be effective, serve the public’s best interests, and provide a crime control purpose, but [that they] are largely ineffective and have unintended negative consequences (Yelderman et al. 2018, 1).

The term “crime control theatre” was first applied to government raids on religious communities by contributing authors (Cragun, Nielsen, and Clingenpeel 2011; Lalasz and Gonzalez, 2011) in the volume on the 2008 FBI raid against a polygamous commune in Eldorado, Texas.

The flamboyant raid on BAYS fits the description of a CCT. It was clearly planned as a photo opportunity, with television camera crews trailing the SWAT teams as they moved up the ten floors of the building battering doors after refusing the keys. This dramatic footage was shown on television during the ensuing weeks in news reports of the “horror cult” that trafficked its women. The fact that no members or former members (aside from Pablo Salum) had filed complaints, or that no useful evidence was produced did not matter. Examples of “unintended negative consequences” (Yelderman et al 2018, 1) in this particular CCT were the harm to the “victims” in terms of door repair/replacement expenses, stolen cash and jewelry, and assaults on the targeted individuals’ privacy and reputations in defamatory media reports.

One of the nine women “victims” (45) gave an insightful interpretation of the raid and its fallout:

It takes just one toxic person who comes into a small religious community and brings the whole group down. We have Pablo Salum. No one in our group has ever complained or said they were a “victim.” There is just one person who tells lies. And PROTEX needs those lies. We are just a number for their annual report. PROTEX claims, “There are 200 victims in BAYS,” so that they can receive money from the government. If they were really concerned about us “victims”—then why treat us like animals? Why cancel our visas to the USA? Why destroy our livelihoods? They have zero proof of any crime, it is all speculation—and yet they have succeeded in ruining our lives.

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Fabricating Victims: The Fraudulent Attack Against the Unification Church in Japan

Masumi Fukuda

Investigative Journalist, Hanada magazine

edit@asukashinsha.co.jp

ABSTRACT: The article, published in the Japanese magazine *Hanada* by an award-winning journalist who has a degree in Sociology (Fukuda 2023), details the politically motivated actions carried out since 1987 by the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales to destroy the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, up to the pressure exerted on the government after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to persuade it to seek the liquidation of the Family Federation as a religious organization. The article evidences the fraudulent nature of the strategies used by the National Network, which include the fabrication of evidence and the alteration of documents. The parts between square brackets are explanatory and do not belong to Fukuda's original article.

KEYWORDS: Unification Church, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, Spiritual Sales, Assassination of Shinzo Abe, Anti-Cult Movement in Japan.

Unusual Obsessions

Last October, bowing to pressure from the media and public opinion, Prime Minister Kishida reversed his previous cautious stance and announced his intention to exercise the right to ask questions to the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification [a move that under Japanese law is preliminary to seeking the dissolution of a religious organization]. In response, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) exercised its first right to ask questions on November 22. And in December, approximately 200,000 online signatures were submitted to the Division of Religious Affairs of the Agency for Cultural Affairs in the MEXT, demanding that an order to dissolve

the Family Federation should be sought and obtained as soon as possible. Hiroaki Ishizaki, who was the head of the Division of Religious Affairs at that time, made the following promise to [apostate ex-member of the Family Federation] Sayuri Ogawa and [anti-cult journalist] Eight Suzuki, who were visiting the Division: “We will collect enough evidence to avoid that it may be overturned in court.”

But what about the results? Although the MEXT has now exercised its right to ask questions for five times, it has not “collected enough evidence.” In fact, it has not found a single piece of evidence. This is the best proof that the religious organization is innocent.

Not unexpectedly, an increasing number of citizens are beginning to wonder why attorney Masaki Kito, Yoshio Arita, Eight Suzuki, and others are so insistent on the dissolution of the Family Federation, and why they are so obsessed with this issue. Some have argued that “If the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales wants to dissolve the Family Federation, why don’t they just request an order to dissolve it themselves?” Lawyer Kito and others did not respond to such objections.

In fact, however, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales had petitioned MEXT multiple times in the past, asking it to exercise its right to ask questions to the Family Federation. However, the Agency for Cultural Affairs rejected the petitions. The reasons were that in 2003, “There are no data providing the grounds for invoking this right,” and in 2008, that “Even though there are many cases in which the religious corporation has lost civil lawsuits, these are only cases of vicarious liability. We do not think that these cases justify a report or an investigation.”

Unhappy with these responses, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales filed a lawsuit for state compensation with the Tokyo District Court in 2012, claiming that the MEXT’s failure to exercise its right to ask questions and to request a dissolution order against the Family Federation was illegal. In 2017, however, the Tokyo District Court dismissed the claim, on the grounds that the Agency for Cultural Affairs had interviewed the Family Federation nine times in the past, and that the non-exercise of the right to ask questions was not unreasonable.

The readers should consider that this happened in the years 2003 and 2008, i.e., before the Family Federation’s 2009 Declaration of Compliance [with the

laws prohibiting the so-called “spiritual sales”], and the number of claims for damages was higher than it is today. Even under such circumstances, the MEXT decided that the non-exercise of the right to ask questions was reasonable. It should also be noted that for the seven years from 2016 to 2023, i.e., from the last year before 2017, when the Tokyo District Court rejected the Network’s state compensation claim, to the present, not a single lawsuit has been filed over new donations from believers, and the number of “victims” of the spiritual sales has also drastically decreased.

Significantly Unfair Measures

In other words, the MEXT suddenly exercised its right to ask question at the will of Prime Minister Kishida last year, after having rejected all the repeated requests of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales up until then, although the claims of damages allegedly caused by the Family Federation had been decreasing rather than increasing. Both the Network and the MEXT should have realized how logically and objectively unreasonable their acts were.

Furthermore, according to an investigation by lawyer Tatsuki Nakayama, who represents the Family Federation’s international headquarters, in three cases orders to dissolve religious corporations were sought in court. In one case, the founder had raped and indecently assaulted a number of female believers. In another case, the founder assaulted and killed a believer. In the third case, a leader of the organization administered “spiritual therapy” to a believer who died as a consequence. However, in none of these cases was an order issued to dissolve the organizations. In fact, they continue to exist today as religious corporations.

On the contrary, in another five cases no request for a dissolution order was filed nor was the right to ask questions exercised. These included a case where a group of devotees lynched another believer to death, and one where a number of criminal cases had been filed and the leader was convicted of fraud. Except for one, all these organizations continue to operate as religious corporations today.

In contrast, while the Family Federation has certainly been involved in several civil lawsuits in the past, it has not had any criminal cases against it or involving its executives, which is normally the ground for requesting a dissolution order. In other words, the exercise of the right to ask questions in this case is remarkably

unfair, as it emerges from a comparison with the cases of these other religious organizations.

Deprogramming and Exploitation of the Deprogrammed Ex-Believers

Nevertheless, the desperate and extraordinary persistence of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales in trying to force the government to dissolve the Family Federation at any cost looks like a form of fanaticism. They pride themselves on being an anti-cult organization that fights “cults,” but their brand of anti-cultism looks “cultic” enough itself.

The largest problem, in my opinion, is the fact that they would literally do anything to destroy the Family Federation. As a result, they have fabricated several “pseudo-victims.”

In the December 2022 issue of this magazine [*Hanada*], I contributed an article with the title “Crimes of ‘Deprogrammers’: Not Reported by Newspapers and Television.” In the article, I described how, in the past, more than 4,300 believers were literally abducted and confined by their relatives, who were instigated by professional deprogrammers and Christian pastors, and were forced to abandon their faith. The majority of these believers left the church under extreme circumstances. They understood they could not be freed from confinement unless they agreed to leave the church and abandon their faith. The anti-Unification-Church camp “used” the deprogrammed believers for various purposes and exploited them in a vicious way.

First, they received lavish honoraria from the believers’ relatives for their successful deprogramming. It was also an excellent opportunity for the numerous Christian pastors who had been actively involved in deprogramming to bring the deprogrammed believers, who were experiencing a religious void, into their own denominations. In fact, many deprogrammed believers converted to these pastors’ brands of Christianity.

As a final step, the deprogrammers urged the former believers to sue the organizations to which they once belonged. If they refused to do so, they were suspected of having faked their defection, so they had no choice but to agree to sue.

In other words, former believers were forced to abandon their faith and presented as victims of the former Unification Church. They had to claim that they had been brainwashed by the church and forced to join. They also had to claim that they had been forced to purchase pots and pagodas [as objects with a spiritual significance, sold at a price considerably higher than their material value], and to make large donations.

When the trials began, they were represented by attorneys from the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, including Masaki Kito and Hiroshi Yamaguchi. For the Network, the deprogramming business was of great benefit because its lawyers were able to greatly increase the requests for damages allegedly caused by the “spiritual sales” and pocket the corresponding attorney’s fees.

The Culmination of a Series of Fabricated Lawsuits

The so-called “Youth Return” lawsuits took place in Sapporo, Niigata, Tokyo, Nagoya, Okayama, Kobe, and other cities throughout Japan from 1987 to 2001, and represented the culmination of the fabricated lawsuits.

The plaintiffs, 180 former believers, claimed that the missionary work of the former Unification Church was an illegal act carried out by concealing the church’s true identity. They demanded compensation for the damage they claimed the church had caused to them during the years of their youth, when they were believers. This was an unprecedented case. Normally, believers who have voluntarily left a church would never sue their former organization, unless something unusual happened.

In fact, all but a few of the 180 plaintiffs were former believers who had been forced to abandon their faith by deprogramming through abduction and confinement. They had been persuaded to join the lawsuits by the deprogrammers.

During their confinement, the former believers were told by deprogrammers such as Takashi Miyamura, and Christian pastors that, “The Unification Church lies!” “You have been brainwashed!” and “The Unification Church believers are less than human!” As a result, almost 70% of the believers finally came to believe that they had been deceived by the Unification Church and abandoned their faith.

At the same time, they developed resentment and hostility toward the organization that, they were now led to believe, had deprived them of precious years in their lives. They fell into a psychological state in which they thought that they could do anything to destroy the Family Federation. They could tell any lie, and it would be justifiable. This was “brainwashing” in the opposite sense. These former believers stood up in court and testified in the “Youth Return” trials.

As for the results of these trials, the plaintiffs won in Sapporo, but lost in Nagoya, Okayama, and Kobe. In some cases, they settled. However, the anti-Unification Church side widely broadcasted that “The former Unification Church has now been recognized as an anti-social organization,” based on the fact that the plaintiffs had won some of their cases.

However, these unusual lawsuits were part of a plot orchestrated by the anti-Unification-Church side to use deprogrammed former believers who had been forced to abandon their faith to destroy the church’s social reputation and to force its dissolution.

The media coverage of these incidents made the relatives of believers feel anxious. They were encouraged by professional deprogrammers, who scared them by saying, “If this continues, your children will become criminals.” Their aim was to kidnap and confine their family members, too. This vicious cycle has been repeated for many years.

In the first place, is the testimony of those who have been abducted and confined credible in a court of law? Article 38, paragraph 2 of the Constitution states, “Confession made under compulsion, torture or threat, or after an unreasonably long detention or confinement, shall not be admitted as evidence.” In other words, any legal statement or signature by a person who is detained, threatened, and in an abnormal mental state should be invalid—but surprisingly, this hardly became an issue in these trials.

The reason for this, as I have pointed out time and again, is largely due to the fact that “In civil lawsuits, there is a kind of unwritten rule, that ‘If you are a cult, you lose,’” and “Claims that would not be accepted in other cases would be easily accepted if the opponent is a religion labeled a ‘cult’” (testimony of lawyer Yoshiro Ito, who was a member of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales).

Incidentally, the Family Federation cannot be called a “cult.” It is impossible to make a clear distinction between so-called “cults” and other religions. In the West, many religious scholars have already abandoned to use of the term “cult” as it is a discriminatory term used to denigrate the religions those who use this word do not like.

A Lawyer “Rescue” Group Launched with “One Victim”

Going back to its origins, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales has intentionally produced “victims” since its foundation in 1987. In the January 2023 issue of this magazine [*Hanada*], I wrote an article titled “The Mastermind Behind the Unification Church Issue.” It is fair to say that the true purpose of the Network, founded in 1987, was not to help victims of “spiritual sales,” but to prevent the enactment of the Anti-Espionage Law, which was being promoted at the time by the International Federation for Victory over Communism (VOC), an organization affiliated with the former Unification Church. Lawyer Hiroshi Yamaguchi, a core member of the Network and one of its founders, stated that “Money made through the spiritual sales is being used by the Unification Church and the VOC to finance the efforts to enact the Anti-Espionage Law.” In other words, they believed the money made from the “spiritual sales” was used to promote the enacting of the Anti-Espionage Law. The Network thus tried to cut off the flow of money by stopping the “spiritual sales.”

The church as such is not involved in the “spiritual sales” now, nor has it been responsible for them in the past. At that time, it was a company run by believers that had engaged in these sales activities.

In August 1986, lawyer Takeshi Ono of the Yokohama Bar Association, who pioneered the initial lawyers’ group that acted against the fortune pot sales, stated at a symposium:

“Many ordinary lawyers did not join us because they thought that cases where consumers voluntarily bought the items were difficult, and they wanted to avoid complicated matters. We launched the team with the idea of helping the victims (...) At the time of its founding, there was only one victim, but we decided to

launch a lawyers' group at any rate and have the media covering it, hoping to discover more victims."

They decided to organize a group of lawyers to "rescue the victims" when there was only one victim. It was a classic case of confusing the means with the end.

Filing a Lawsuit Without the Clients' Permission

Almost all the lawyers in the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales are affiliated with the former Socialist Party and the Communist Party, maintain relationships with extremist groups and North Korea, and are leftists and atheists. In contrast, the former Unification Church is an anti-communist and conservative organization that believes in God. It is clear that this was an ideological struggle between the two groups. Lawyer Hiroshi Yamaguchi had clearly stated, "I would like to establish a lawyers' organization to deter right-wing activities, especially to prevent the enactment of the Anti-Espionage Law."

Furthermore, from the very beginning, the lawyer commented, "I would like to pursue the Unification Church's anti-social activities and demand that MEXT withdraw its approval as a religious corporation" (*Shakai Shimpō* [the official newspaper of the former Socialist Party], February 20, 1987). There was clearly a political agenda in making such a statement when the actual extent of the alleged damage caused by the Unification Church was still unknown.

At any rate, the extensive use of television, newspapers, and magazines to report on the "spiritual sales" was indeed a powerful tool to find "victims." This was because people who were originally happy with their purchase of marble pots and pagodas became so anxious that they rushed to the consumer affairs centers. However, Masataka Ito, then editor-in-chief of the *Asahi Shimbun*, which was one of the first newspapers to launch a campaign against the "spiritual sales," revealed an "inconvenient truth" about the "victims" at a gathering of his colleagues on October 23, 1987. "The newspapers and TV stations call them victims, he said, but nine out of every ten purchasers of these items report they are happy. Actually, 99% say they are happy. So why do they only report on the 1% or so who are against these sales? I have received many protests [from the sellers]."

They do have a point. Less than 5% of the buyers reported being victims of ‘spiritual sales.’ We took a sort of a poll, and the majority still believes in the effectiveness of the vases.”

They did blow the whistle, but the “victims” did not show up as expected. So, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales tried to lure purchasers of the artifacts who visited Consumer Affairs Centers into filing lawsuits through aggressive strategies. The book *The Truth About Spiritual Sales*, published by *Sekai Nippo* in 1996, describes in detail the reality of the situation.

In September 1987, an unprecedented case occurred in Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture, where lawyers filed a lawsuit without the clients’ permission. The “victims” were three people, including Mrs. T, a 60-year-old housewife at the time. The lawyers who filed the lawsuit without their clients’ consent were fifteen attorneys including Hideo Mizutani, who belonged to the “Lawyers’ Association for Freedom,” an organization of attorneys affiliated with the Communist Party of Japan.

They filed a lawsuit in the Sendai District Court against import and trading companies run by former Unification Church believers and their employees, demanding 43.4 million yen in compensation for damages, claiming that they “took advantage of Mrs. T’s simple faith and forced her to buy seals, pagodas, pots, and other items totaling 36 million yen.”

They Went to Her Home with an Asahi Journalist

It all started when Mrs. T, who had purchased marble pots and pagodas, visited the Consumer Affairs Center in Miyagi Prefecture at the suggestion of her son, who had become concerned by reading the media coverage of “spiritual sales.” There, she was introduced to lawyer Mizutani, who asked her to pay 250,000 yen in legal fees to get the full amount back, which she did.

However, there was no mention of filing a lawsuit, and the plaintiffs, Mrs. T and her son, were not contacted at all when the suit was filed in September. When Mrs. T realized that she had become a plaintiff without even knowing it, she was surprised to see her own complaint for the first time. What is more, the content differed significantly from what she had told lawyer Mizutani. In October, she and others withdrew their complaint and sent a notice of dismissal to Mizutani.

It seems that the employees of public institutions such as Consumer Affairs Centers and certain lawyers had a “deep relationship” with each other.

In August 1987, Mr. S, then 75 years old, of Mizuguchi Town, Koka County, Shiga Prefecture, had purchased a miniature pagoda for her ancestor’s memorial service. She became concerned because of the media frenzy and visited the Shiga Prefectural Government’s sub-office.

She was immediately taken to a Consumer Affairs Center in Kusatsu, and from there she was directed to the “Shiga No. 1 Law Firm” in front of JR West Japan’s Otsu Station.

This law firm was affiliated with the Communist Party, and at the time, it handled all consultations on “spiritual sales” in the prefecture. Mrs. S noticed a stack of *Shimbun Akahata* [“Red Flag,” the newspaper of the Communist Party of Japan] in the office, which made her uncomfortable. However, at the recommendation of lawyer Kyoko Ogawa, who introduced himself as “the lawyer in charge,” and a prefectural official, she signed a contract entrusting Ogawa with negotiations on the return of the money she had paid for the pagoda, without fully understanding what they were all about.

Later, however, the lawyer came to her house with Tetsuro Tatsuno, then a journalist of the *Asahi Shimbun*, without any notice. Mrs. S realized that the contract was structured so that the lawyer would be paid a fee even if Mrs. S negotiated personally and received a refund. She decided to revoke the power of attorney she had given to lawyer Ogawa.

Mrs. S told a journalist from *Sekai Nippo*, “Those people say they are on the side of the victims, but I think their real purpose is to spread bad news about the ‘spiritual sales’ and destroy the Family Federation, and to increase the lawyers’ own income.”

The National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales claims that the damage caused by “spiritual sales” has been enormous. It is true that some aggressive sales techniques may have been used. However, if there really were so many victims, there would be no need to use such a devious technique to make up victims in the first place. Incidentally, the Network’s lawyers may still be using this technique today.

The Reality of the “Large Donations Lawsuits”

Since the mother of Tetsuya Yamagami, who killed former Prime Minister Abe, donated more than 100 million yen to the former Unification Church, critics are accusing the church of soliciting extravagant donations. Those who are not familiar with religions may think that a donation of 100 million yen must come from a fraud, or a financial exploitation by the former Unification Church based on “brainwashing.” However, this is not true.

For almost all religions, including the former Unification Church, donations, endowments, and charitable gifts are expressions of piety and are offered willingly to God. For example, not a few overseas Christians donated vast tracts of land or even their entire wealth before the end of their lives and died penniless. Will their relatives sue the religious corporations for depriving them of the inheritance they expected to inherit?

It is not unusual for other religious corporations to receive donations of hundreds of millions of yen. It is problematic to unilaterally criticize only large donations made for the altruistic reason of “promoting world peace” or “the good of humanity.”

Unfortunately, however, even if the donors are convinced at the time of the donation that they are donating freely, as time goes by, their faith may wane. Their relatives may rush to the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales to recover the donation. The donors may be persuaded by lawyers from the Communist Party of Japan or the former Socialist Party that they have been “deceived,” and a lawsuit against the religious organization for the return of the donation may follow. In fact, there are many cases in which relatives consulted with the Network on how to force the donors-believers to sue.

In the past, the Family Federation has faced 169 donation lawsuits. According to lawyer Tatsuki Nakayama, the MEXT considered 22 of these cases where the church had been regarded as responsible for vicarious liability and examined where they could be used as a basis for the dissolution case. However, when Nakayama analyzed the cases one by one, he found that the Family Federation had won 50% of them. Considering all the 169 cases, the rate of victory was 30%.

When reading the plaintiffs’ court statements from the early years of the cases, we constantly find the same claims, such as “The plaintiffs were persuaded to

donate money by stirring up anxiety and fear that their deceased husbands should be rescued from hell,” “The plaintiffs were told that their children’s and grandchildren’s illness and misfortune were caused by their ancestors’ karma,” “The donations were made under threat of baseless stories about karma,” and so on.

In other words, in almost every lawsuit, the lawyers, as if they copied the same sentences from one case to the other, kept claiming that the plaintiffs were intimidated into donating by creating “awe and misunderstanding” through an emphasis on ancestral karma and fear of hell.

At first, no matter how much evidence and arguments were submitted by the church to refute them, the plaintiffs’ claims were accepted at face value.

Clearly Unjust Judgments

Here are some examples of court decisions that were clearly unjust.

In 1996, the former Unification Church lost a donation lawsuit for the first time at Fukuoka District Court. According to the church, one of the plaintiffs, N, learned about its doctrines after she lost her husband. She was impressed by the teachings, and after joining the church, she made donations to contribute to the development of the Unification movement. However, N’s relatives and others urged her to give up her faith or they would take her only daughter and raise her themselves. Pressured by them, she filed a lawsuit against the church.

At the trial, plaintiff N claimed that she donated because the believers told her that her late husband in the spirit world would suffer in hell if she did not make a donation. This was in total contradiction to the testimony of the believers. The Fukuoka District Court awarded the plaintiff 35 million yen in damages. In addition to the lack of any objective evidence, the court ignored the religious nature of the case, and found for the plaintiff based on a very secular rule of thumb: “It is impossible for a believer to make such a large donation within a short period of joining the church.” [The original text of the judgment states, “It is extremely difficult to imagine that anyone would respond to a sudden request for an extremely large donation of 30 million yen.” The statement “within a short period of joining the church” in this article is an expression of the rule of thumb adopted by the court, and does not literally correspond to the original text of the

judgment, which is based on the idea that only in the case of a person who was part of a religion for many years it would not be unnatural for her to make a large donation when suddenly told to do so].

On August 21, 2002, the Tokyo District Court ordered the church to pay 3.7 million yen in damages to the plaintiff, a former believer called T, who had claimed that she had donated 1 million yen based on an illegal solicitation. In her written statement, T asserted that in the past, when Japan ruled Korea as a colony, T's uncle worked for the Japanese police there. When she told this story to O, a believer of the Family Federation, O accused T, explaining that her family had committed an irreparable sin and that the illness of a child of a relative was caused by her uncle's torture of the Korean people. O urged T to donate money, saying that if she did not donate all her money, her ancestors would accuse her when she would go to the spirit world.

However, other evidence revealed that T had discovered that her uncle had worked for the Japanese police in Korea only after she had made the donation. In other words, her statement was a complete fiction referring to facts she could not have known at the time of the donation.

Surprisingly, however, the Tokyo District Court found that believer O had cursed and threatened her, saying that "T's family had committed tremendous crimes" and "sins. [The judgment found that believer O persistently told plaintiff T to "Donate money to compensate for his ancestor's sins," "The ancestor wants you to make amends for his sins," "Your ancestor will be saved by your donation," "Your attachment to money and material things is evidence on an evil mind," "You cannot make amends for his sins unless you cut off such evil mind," "If you don't do so, you will go to hell when you go to the spirit world and be blamed by the ancestor," etc. The article offers a short summary of these statements for the sake of conciseness].

The court accepted T's statement even though it was clear that there were no threatening remarks. This was clearly an unfair judgment.

Perjury and Falsification of Evidence

On January 13, 2016, the Tokyo District Court found that K, a member of the Family Federation, had donated her husband's bank deposits without his

permission and ordered the church to pay approximately 34.3 million yen. K's ex-husband filed a lawsuit against the church after he and K divorced. His ex-wife K denied the fact that she had donated money to the church. However, the judge found that all the money listed in her ex-husband's bank passbook, for which the purpose of the use cannot be proved, was a donation to the church by the wife. The judge then held the organization liable, on the grounds that it must have known that the donations were the ex-husband's property, and that K was donating against his will.

Surprisingly, however, while aware of how the church was organized, the court did not clarify the facts, such as which executives or members of the church received the donations. It can be said that the judges made their decision based on mere speculation.

On the other hand, there have been cases in which the court found clear perjury and falsification of evidence by the plaintiffs, and the church won.

In a lawsuit, former believer A sought compensation for damages at the Nagoya District Court. She claimed that she had donated 10 million yen to the church due to baseless karma stories and other threats by fellow believers. However, the claim was dismissed on February 28, 2003. Subsequently, the High Court and the Supreme Court upheld the District Court's decision, and the church completely won the case.

In the plaintiff A's written statement, she stated that she had donated a large amount of money to the organization because the believers told her stories about the karma of her love affairs, the karma of killing and wounding others, the karma of an unborn baby, and so on, so she was instilled with fear. However, during the dispute, plaintiff A visited a facility related to the church, where a believer showed her the statement allegedly written by A and verified its contents one by one.

According to the believer, "Mrs. A's statement said that the church had repeatedly threatened her, starting with the study in a video center. However, when I asked her about her remarks in the written statement, she denied almost all of them. So, I recorded what she said and submitted it to the court as evidence."

The believer reported that the examination of Mrs. A at trial was as follows. "She was asked, 'Your statement says you were threatened to make donations. Is it correct?' Then she clearly answered, 'No, it is not correct.' 'Then this statement

was not written by you?’ ‘No, I didn’t write it.’ ‘Then there is no point of asking any more questions.’ ‘Yes.’ At that moment, the presiding judge’s face turned very pale. He was disappointed that he had no choice but to let the church win the case.”

On March 1, 2022, the Tokyo District Court dismissed the plaintiff’s claim for damages in a lawsuit filed by S, a former believer of the Family Federation, against the church and some of its members. She claimed that she was told about an ancestral karma, a karma pushing her towards sexual relations, a karma to kill and wound. She became worried that illnesses, accidents, and other misfortunes might occur if she did not donate money to exorcise her karma, and she was thus forced to donate 21 million yen. However, it was discovered that when S was still a devotee, she had sent a letter to the believer who was mentoring her expressing her joy and gratitude for her faith.

The plaintiff also submitted as evidence several notebooks and passbooks in which she had noted each time she made a donation or other contribution. However, when the defendants analyzed these notes, they found that some of them had not been written at the time of the donations, but later, in order to fabricate favorable evidence for the trial.

Making Up False Stories, a Recurring Technique

Another major deciding factor in the church’s victory of that case was a written document S had signed at a notary public’s office indicating that she had voluntarily made a donation when she was a believer.

However, to deny the validity of this written document, S made a series of false claims at the trial. For example, she claimed that she was pressured by the church’s believers to write the statement, citing the fact that her husband’s cancer surgery was successful, and he recovered. However, it was revealed that, in fact, both the discovery of her husband’s cancer and the surgery took place after S had signed the statement.

As in the previously mentioned case decided by the Tokyo District Court on August 21, 2002, where the defendant falsely claimed that she was pressured to make a donation because her uncle had worked for the Japanese police in Korea, the same technique of falsely confusing the timeline was used here as well. In both

cases, it is reasonable to assume that the lawyers, not the plaintiffs who were unfamiliar with the rules of the trial process, took the lead in preparing false statements. It is worth noting that in both cases, the attorneys for the plaintiffs were leading lawyers of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, such as Hiroshi Yamaguchi and Hiroshi Watanabe.

The lawyers from the Network are also suspected of fabricating evidence by combining images from two different videos and falsely submitting them as if they were from a single recording. In an extremely vicious case, a plaintiff, represented by a Network lawyer, sued for the return of 600 million yen in donations but was found to have spent nearly 400 million yen of that money for other uses, and lied systematically at trial. Therefore, we must question the ethics of these lawyers. The claims of the Network can no longer be trusted at all.

Lies About “Internal Documents of the Family Federation”

As we can see from lawyer Masaki Kito’s numerous statements, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales has also repeatedly made baseless, slanderous, and false allegations against the Family Federation. Here is a typical example.

On September 16, 2022, a Tokyo meeting of the Network was held in Ichigaya, Tokyo. Attorney Hiroshi Watanabe, who has been mentioned earlier, gave the keynote speech. At that time, he distributed a list to the participants. He said it was an internal document of the church.

Under the title “Feedback on Emergency Counter Measures for Persons in Situation of High Danger, August 18,” there was a color table with the following explanation: “We will provide feedback on the implementation of ‘emergency measures’ for believers who were found to be in a situation of high danger in the risk assessment survey.” The table showed the number of people classified as AA or AAA, in each of the 12 districts, and the total number of people was 911. Although the meaning of the numbers was not immediately clear, lawyer Hiroshi Watanabe proudly explained: “I think this document was probably produced by the Unification Church in 2012... The Unification Church lists donors who donated more than 100 million yen, such as the mother of the suspect Yamagami, as ‘highly dangerous.’ And it states that there are 911 such people throughout

Japan. They are divided into AA and AAA. AAA probably means those who donate a billion yen or more. If the church would not take counter measures about them, they would be dangerous. They state that they must take measures.”

He continued: “These 911 people were recruited by believers who hid their true identities. The believers did not tell that they were from a religious organization or the Unification Church, and those people were lured in. They were then threatened, deceived, and had all their property taken away, leaving their families in a collapsed state. If these people sued, the church would be in serious trouble. So, they thought they needed to take measures to prevent this. I think the material shows the anti-social nature of the Unification Church.”

I would like to thank him for his detailed explanation, but in fact, this document is not a list of top donors. AAA refers to believers who were at an extremely high risk of being abducted, confined, and deprogrammed, not to those who donated more than 1 billion yen.

I do not know whether lawyer Watanabe misunderstood the document and explained it in this way by mistake, or deliberately fabricated a false story. However, it is an episode that shows the maliciousness of the Network, which uses any material for its propaganda to discredit the Family Federation.

This press conference was spread by the media. Therefore, the Family Federation was again accused of being greedy and trying to squeeze money out of its top donors.

In 2012, the number of abduction, confinement, and deprogramming cases had decreased considerably, but the danger still remained serious enough that such a list had to be made and measures taken.

Since the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales was deeply involved in the criminal abduction and confinement of believers, I urge them to sincerely face the truth of what this list meant. However, considering their true colors, this is highly unlikely and probably impossible. The question remains: who is more “anti-social,” the Family Federation or the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales?

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Anti-Jehovah's-Witnesses Campaigns in Japan After the Assassination of Shinzo Abe

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

ABSTRACT: In 2022, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was killed by a man who wanted to punish him for his participation in events associated with the Unification Church, of which the assassin's mother was a member. The man alleged that his mother had gone bankrupt in 2002 because of her excessive donations to the Unification Church. Anti-cultists managed to transform the case into a prosecution that extended from the Unification Church to other groups stigmatized as “cults,” primarily the Jehovah's Witnesses. It was alleged that children raised by parents who were members of “cults” (as happened to Abe's assassin) were victims of “religious abuse” and might have been mentally destabilized. Laws and regulations targeting “controversial” religious organizations were passed. A primary target of these campaigns, in addition to the Unification Church, were the Jehovah's Witnesses, accused of endangering the children's physical and mental health by separating them from the larger society, submitting them to harsh discipline, and refusing blood transfusions. The Jehovah's Witnesses reacted by opening a dialogue with the Japanese authorities. However, anti-cultists continue to attack both the Unification Church (now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan, Jehovah's Witnesses and Blood Transfusion, Anti-Cult Movement in Japan, Shinzo Abe Assassination.

The Assassination of Shinzo Abe

Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954–2022) was killed in Nara, Japan, on July 8, 2022, by a man called Tetsuya Yamagami. He told the police he wanted to punish Abe for being friendly to the Unification Church (now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification). In fact, Abe had participated through a video to a 2021 event, and sent a message to another event in 2022, of the Universal Peace Federation, an NGO founded by the leaders of the

Unification Church. Volunteers of the Unification Church had offered electoral support to Abe's party. Yamagami said he hated the Unification Church because his mother had joined it in 1998 (she is still a member) and had gone bankrupt in 2002, allegedly because of her excessive donations to the church (see Introvigne 2022a).

A question almost nobody asked in Japanese and international media is why Yamagami's mother went bankrupt in 2002 and he killed Abe in 2022, twenty years later. In fact, in the months before the crime Yamagami had become an active participant in anti-cult online forums, which might have excited him to action. Before killing Abe, he mailed to a leading anti-cultist (who received it only after the assassination) what Canadian scholar Adam Lyons has called a "manifesto," announcing the crime and evidencing he had been deeply socialized into the anti-cult ideology (Lyons 2023).

"Calling a Stag a Horse" is a proverbial Chinese expression referring to an incident in the life of the ancient Imperial prime minister Zhao Gao (?–207 BCE). A tyrannical man, he declared that a stag was a horse and had those who objected it was a stag beheaded (Sima Qian 1993, 70; Zhang 2005, 112–15). "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 (Chen 2022). 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 certain lawyers who defend rapists. They invariably blame the raped woman, who perhaps did not dress modestly enough.

After the Abe assassination, rather than focusing on the assassin and investigating how he might have been excited by his association with the anti-cult network, anti-cultists successfully diverted the attention of the media and even of the government to the Unification Church/Family Federation. While the church was a victim, and Yamagami had planned to also assassinate its leader Mrs. Hak Ja Han Moon, it was presented as the real responsible of the crime because of the donations it had received from the killer's mother. Anti-cultists proclaimed in a press conference that "Yamagami and his mother are 100% the victims, and the Unification Church cult is 100% the perpetrator" (Fukuda 2023b, 51).

The Campaign Against the Unification Church and the "Cults"

As usual, anti-cultists mobilized "apostates," a term used by David Bromley and other scholars not as synonym of "ex-members" of a religious movement but as indicating the minority of ex-members who turn into militant opponents of the group they have left (Bromley 1998; Introvigne 2022b). One "Sayuri Ogawa" (a pseudonym) was introduced to the media and even met the Prime Minister, telling the sad story of how second-generation members of "cults" are indoctrinated and "spiritually abused" since early childhood.

An award-winning Japanese journalist (with a degree in Sociology), and one who was not particularly sympathetic to religion in general or the Unification Church, called Masumi Fukuda investigated the story of "Sayuri Ogawa," collected dozens of documents, and demonstrated that its main features were false (Fukuda 2023a). By then, however, the damage had been done.

Persuaded by the anti-cultists and the media campaign, the government had started a procedure of submitting questions to the Family Federation, which under Japanese law is preliminary to seeking its dissolution as a religious corporation, had passed a law allowing those who had donated to a "controversial" religious organization to recover their money, and had issued through the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, guidelines in the form of Q&A against the "religious abuse of children" (Introvigne 2023, which includes a translation of the directives about both donations and children).

The measures on donations evidence how the government had been influenced by the discredited idea of brainwashing (Introvigne 2022c). They allow donors to recover money donated in a state of "confusion" determined by "mind control." If donors are still in this state, their relatives can act on behalf of them. Obviously, these measures potentially affect all religions, although the government claims they only apply to groups whose practices are "generally regarded by our society as socially inappropriate." But what is "inappropriate," and who interprets (and who creates) the opinion of "our society"?

The measures explicitly targeted "spiritual sales." This expression was coined in 1987 by anti-cultists accusing the Unification Church to finance itself by selling religious items for exorbitant prices. These sales did happen, although it was not "the Unification Church" but some of its members who engaged in them as their own private businesses. As the same journalist Masumi Fukuda noted,

these objectionable practices had been stopped by the leadership of the Unification Church in 2009, and the authorities received only two complaints about possible Family-Federation-connected “spiritual sales” in 2021 (Fukuda 2023b).

As for the children protection directives, Leo Lewis, the authoritative Asia business editor of the *Financial Times* commented that “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” (Lewis 2023). In fact, the measures, which appear to be influenced by Sayuri Ogawa’s and other more or less apocryphal apostate stories, go beyond the alleged wrongdoings of the Unification Church.

For example, the Q&A defines as neglect, punishable with the loss of custody, the parents’ refusal to give their consent to an abortion in the cases where Japanese laws allow it for underage girls. The Catholic Church and several conservative Protestant denominations forbid their members from approving of or cooperating with an abortion in all cases.

The Q&A characterize as “sexual abuse” situations where minors (of 18) are requested to “disclose their own sexual experiences” to the “staff” of any religion. Stated in these terms, the provision forbids the Catholic confession of minors and similar practices in other religions. Confession in the Catholic Church starts at age seven. Many Catholic confessors would agree that the sins most frequently confessed by Catholic teenagers have to do with their “sexual experiences.” Perhaps teenagers do not confess often sins of tax evasion or corruption of politicians...

Targeting the Jehovah’s Witnesses

Jehovah’s Witnesses are a primary target of the international anti-cult network. At least since 1997, when they conducted a tour of Western Europe, Japanese anti-cultists have been in touch with the European anti-cult movement and imported its ideology and methods (Okayama Branch of the National Rescue Association 1997).

It is thus not surprising that Japanese anti-cultists took advantage of the “cult scare” created by the Abe assassination to attack the Jehovah’s Witnesses as well. On November 7, 2022, opposition parties hold a meeting in the Diet (Parliament) where a Sayuri-Ogawa-type apostate testified, claiming that she was a third-generation Jehovah’s Witness and that as a child she had been beaten with belts and whips for punishment and brainwashed. She also reminded the audience that Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse blood transfusions and do not celebrate Christmas or birthdays, and that even minors can be disfellowshipped for moral transgression and consequently “shunned” (*The Mainichi* 2022).

On January 15, 2023, a new association of lawyers opposing the Jehovah’s Witnesses was launched. It is headed by attorney Kotaro Tanaka, himself an apostate ex-member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (*The Japan Times* 2023). It clearly mimics the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, the leading Japanese anti-cult organization established in 1987 to fight the Unification Church, and the two groups regularly cooperate.

The Q&A on religious abuse of children include provisions specifically targeting the Jehovah’s Witnesses. For instance, it is regarded as “neglect” or “psychological abuse” to “prevent children from socializing with friends in a way that our society generally accepts,” including restraining them from “participating in social events such as birthday parties” (Q&A 3.2; see translation in Introvigne 2023, 95–6). It is also considered “neglect” if parents “do not allow their children to receive blood transfusions” or ask their children “to carry a card to express that they refuse blood transfusions” (Q&A 4.5; see translation in Introvigne 2023, 101–2).

The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Reaction

I have analyzed the Q&A and share the opinion of other scholars, journalists, and human rights activists that they are a dangerous document threatening the fundamental right of parents to transmit their faith to their children (Introvigne 2023).

An important part of the Family Federation’s strategy has been to attract the attention of the United Nations and other bodies outside of the country on the fact that Japan is violating its constitutional and international commitment to

freedom of religion or belief (see e.g. Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience [CAP-LC] 2022). The Jehovah's Witnesses, who believe in Paul's admonishment to "be obedient to governments and authorities" (Titus 3:1), met with representatives of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare on March 31, 2023, and with the Children and Family Agency on May 10, and started a dialogue (Public Information Department Jehovah's Witnesses Japan 2023).

– Corporal Punishments

With respect to corporal punishments, the Jehovah's Witness told the authorities that they "do not tolerate child abuse," that children should never be treated "harshly," and that "abuse or cruelty" are forbidden by their organization (Public Information Department Jehovah's Witnesses Japan 2023, 1).

Interestingly, to the best of my knowledge, even in the massive official propaganda campaigns against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and France the argument that they routinely "whip" their children has never been used.

Of course, it is impossible to say whether apostate ex-members were really whipped as children, and how prevalent was the practice in Jehovah's Witnesses families. However, it seems that Jehovah's Witnesses are maliciously singled out for what is a problem of Japanese society in general. A 2017 survey revealed that 70.6% of Japanese parents believed corporal punishment of children was necessary, and 49.8% admitted they had used it (Rogers 2020). Only in 2020 was all corporal punishment of children prohibited by the law in Japan (End Violence Against Children End Corporal Punishment 2020).

– Disfellowshipping and Shunning

The Jehovah's Witnesses informed the Japanese authorities (which may have been misinformed by anti-cultists and apostates) that minors can commit serious offenses, not repent, and be disfellowshipped. However, in this case minors are only excluded from family prayers (but not necessarily from Bible study [*The Watchtower* 1988, 20]) while they will "remain part of the normal, day-to-day household dealing and activities" (*The Watchtower* 1991, 22).

And of course, parents should still provide them with “with food, clothing, and shelter” and maintain a “loving” attitude (*The Watchtower* 1988, 20).

– Birthdays and Socialization

The statement following the May 10 dialogue does not mention the issue of celebrating birthdays (which the Jehovah's Witnesses regard as a pagan and anti-Biblical practice) or participating in forms of entertainment considered as morally objectionable.

However, this is implicitly covered by the polite reminder by the Jehovah's Witnesses that, while they want to cooperate with the authorities, they regard as their duty to educate their children “based on Bible principles” (Public Information Department Jehovah's Witnesses Japan 2023, 1).

– Blood Transfusions

The most debated matter appears to have been blood transfusions. Anti-cultists are claiming, with much fanfare, that even after the publication of the Q&A and their meetings with the authorities, Jehovah's Witnesses continue to refuse blood transfusions for themselves and their children (*The Japan Times* 2023). This is true, and as it happened in other countries, it is unlikely that they will change their attitude under pressure from the authorities, as they believe that “we obey Jehovah's law regarding blood by refusing to accept a blood transfusion, even during a medical emergency” (*The Watchtower* 2023, 23).

However, anti-cultists have failed to mention that in most democratic and medically advanced countries the problem is becoming moot as hospitals can “provide high-quality care that does not involve a blood transfusion” (*The Watchtower* 2023, 23). When a Jehovah's Witness wishes to receive assistance in finding doctors who can provide bloodless treatment, he or she can seek the help of Hospital Liaison Committees, which have been established for this very purpose.

Anti-cultists have also failed to mention that, in the rare event that a doctor believes a blood transfusion might be medically essential for a child of one of Jehovah's Witnesses, that dispute can be resolved by a court. In such a case, a

parent who is one of Jehovah's Witnesses will respect the decision made by the court.

The Jehovah's Witnesses told the Japanese authorities that the same recent *Watchtower* article mentioned above specified that Elders "will not make medical decisions for you. That is your responsibility" (*The Watchtower* 2023, 23). Surely, the Elders recommend that Jehovah's Witnesses of all ages carry a document specifying that in case of emergency medical treatment they do not want to receive blood transfusions.

Anti-cultists and some media reacted to the press release about the May 10 meeting by objecting that Jehovah's Witnesses can make individual choices to accept a blood transfusion for themselves or their children but in this case, they will surely be disfellowshipped. This information is not accurate. Although the teaching about blood is regarded by the Jehovah's Witnesses as firmly based on the Bible, each case is examined by considering its context and circumstances. The Jehovah's Witnesses also emphasize that those joining them should have an understanding of their doctrines (including on blood) before being baptized.

In most democratic countries, courts—including the European Court of Human Rights in 2010 and the Italian Supreme Court of Cassation in 2020 (European Court of Human Rights 2010, 131–42; Corte di Cassazione 2020)—have ruled that adult patients have a right to refuse any medical treatment, and protected the Jehovah's Witnesses' right to refuse blood transfusions. Even the Supreme Court of Japan, in 2000, has clearly established the right of an adult patient to decide whether to refuse blood transfusions (Supreme Court of Japan 2000). In several jurisdictions, this also applies to "mature minors," while in the case of decisions taken by guardians on behalf of younger children, courts have sometime ordered transfusions to be performed even against the parents' wish.

Why Japan?

Japan has a tradition of antipathy towards religions that operate independently of the political power, and before (and during) World War II movements such as Oomoto and Soka Gakkai were severely persecuted. After the war, religious liberty was imposed by American General Douglas McArthur (1880–1964) and never easily accepted by the mainstream Japanese culture. The sarin gas terrorist

attack perpetrated by the new religious movement Aum Shinrikyo in 1995 confirmed to Japanese media and politicians that an unregulated religious market allowed for the proliferation of “cults” that disrupted social harmony. It also terrorized scholars, some of whom had attended Aum Shinrikyo events, which explains why most of them supported the post-2022 anti-cult measures or remained silent.

In the Japanese controversy, there is also an important political element. Most of the founders of the anti-cult National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales were members of the Communist or Socialist parties, disturbed by the effectiveness of the Unification Church's electoral mobilization for anti-Communist candidates in the elections (Fukuda 2023b, 52–3). Jehovah's Witnesses do not participate in political activities and do not even vote. However, left-wing anti-cultists in Japan regard them as part of “conservative religion,” which needs to be eradicated to modernize the country.

The Jehovah's Witnesses laudably pursue a dialogue with the Japanese authorities and assume they are operating in good faith with an aim of protecting children. However, the anti-cult organizations have a different agenda. They make no mystery that their aim is to seek the liquidation of the Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious organization in Japan after, as they hope, the Family Federation will also be liquidated.

My personal opinion is that, confronted with this aggression, targeted religious movements in Japan, while maintaining a dialogue with the local authorities, should also internationalize the issue. They should ask that international organizations remind Japan that it has signed and ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects freedom of religion or belief and the parents' freedom to educate their children according to their values.

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The War in Ukraine and Russian Conspiracy Theories About the Jehovah's Witnesses

Rosita Šorytė

FOB (European Federation for Freedom of Belief)

rosita_soryte@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT: After the war in Ukraine, sensational revelations were spread by Russian anti-cultists presenting the Jehovah's Witnesses as American or Ukrainian agents preparing riots and even a coup against the Putin regime in Russia. These theories may look like the ramblings of lunatics. However, the lunatics are not isolated. They are supported by mainline Russian media and by an international anti-cult network abroad. While obviously false and inherently ridiculous, such conspiracy theories should be understood within the larger framework of Russian campaigns to justify the war in Ukraine and international anti-cult efforts targeting the Jehovah's Witnesses.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, Conspiracy Theories About the War in Ukraine, Alexander Korelov, FECRIS, Anti-Cult Movements in Russia.

The Sensational Revelations of Alexander Korelov

In 2022, Alexander Korelov, the official lawyer for the Russian national anti-cult organization RATsIRS, which at that time was affiliated with the European anti-cult federation FECRIS (“Информационно-консультационный центр по вопросам сектантства” 2023), launched a sensational revelation on Russian media. He claimed that, after it was “liquidated” and banned in Russia in 2017,

the extremist cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses did not cease to operate. As we expected, they went underground, holding their meetings in safe houses, receiving instructions from the American center through instant messengers, blogs, and so on. But lately the picture has changed. From the leading centers located in the United States, instructions are sent to the illegal divisions of the cult in our country through “closed” channels, which indicate an attempt by the cult to organize a coup d'état in Russia like the Maidan

in the now former Ukraine (“Свидетели Иеговы готовят государственный переворот” 2022).

A coup against Putin, Korelov said,

is precisely what is being intensively prepared in the milieu of cults. Now we have absolutely certain data that Jehovah's Witnesses are turning from an extremist organization into a terrorist one. We warned about this already several years ago (“Свидетели Иеговы готовят государственный переворот” 2022).

Perhaps overlooking the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses moved their headquarters from Brooklyn to Warwick in 2016–2017, Korelov insists that

the leaders from the Brooklyn center are turning Russian adherents into cannon fodder to achieve their goals. Just like in Ukraine, the United States is fighting with the hands of Ukrainians and mercenaries, so in Russia they are ready to waste biomaterial they do not need in the form of adherents of this cult. The American leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses is made of people unencumbered by moral standards. They are ready for anything. At the same time, ideological support is being launched among American-sponsored religious scholars, who have already started talking about the need for a “rehabilitation” of the Jehovah's Witnesses (“Свидетели Иеговы готовят государственный переворот” 2022).

The Jehovah's Witnesses were accused of operating in Russia

“sleeping” extremist cells under the leadership of their center in the United States. And the fact that the Brooklyn [again] center of this cult is under the complete control of the American secret services is no longer a secret (“Свидетели Иеговы готовят государственный переворот” 2022).

After he was ridiculed internationally and received some criticism even domestically, Korelov granted an interview to the national magazine *Izvestia* claiming that he had now found the smoking gun. He stated that in the remote Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug on the Arctic Circle (the same place where FECRIS dignitaries gathered for a conference with Russian anti-cultists in 2017: European Federation for Freedom of Belief 2017), mysterious men were knocking at the doors of the residents and asking, “Where can I find the answer to the question about happiness?” (Petrov 2022a).

According to Korelov the mysterious “philosophers” were Jehovah's Witnesses, who had “received instructions from the center through closed communication channels” (Petrov 2022a).

The men did not identify themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses. However, Korelov said,

Simply put, Jehovah's Witnesses are required to resume walking around the entrances without directly naming their organization. Why is this being done? First, in order to resume their activities. And secondly, they are given operative instructions on organizing protests, including against the conduct of the Special Military Operation. That is, our fears about the danger of this organization are confirmed. The structure was essentially in a dormant mode, and today it is starting to show activity. According to my information, members of Jehovah's Witnesses are asked whether they are ready for active protests, including physical resistance to representatives of law enforcement agencies (Petrov 2022a).

Even the *Izvestia* journalist objected that there are not enough Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to organize mass protests and overthrow the government. They are more than many believe, answered Korelov, and they will not act alone:

If we add to this [the number of the Jehovah's Witnesses] that other cults, including the neo-Pentecostals and the Scientologists, will be involved in the protests, then we get a fairly significant number of people (Petrov 2022a).

enough to create serious trouble.

Korelov's theory may identify him as a madman, but he is not an isolated madman. Several media and the main anti-cult websites in Russia reprinted his interviews (see e.g. Petrov 2022b). Korelov had even been invited in 2017 to speak at a main FECRIS event in the Belgian Parliament, although recently he became such an embarrassment that FECRIS manipulated the program of the conference as it appears in its website by retroactively eliminating Korelov's name from the list of speakers (Introvigne 2023).

An International Anti-Cult Network

The theory that the Jehovah's Witnesses are preparing an anti-Putin coup is somewhat extreme. However, other items of Russian propaganda about the Jehovah's Witnesses are taken seriously internationally and spread through the anti-cult network. This emphasizes the growing and dangerous influence of an international anti-cult movement. Their subtle collusion with media and politics allows not only an unstoppable spread of lies, hatred, and intolerance against those they label as members of "cults" but also incites mentally unstable people to act.

On March 9, 2023, a man entered a Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Hamburg, Germany, and opened fire with a semi-automatic gun, killing seven members of the congregation and an unborn child. When the police arrived and were about to arrest him, he shot himself. While the real political problem was why a man who had exhibited obvious symptoms of mental disease had been legally allowed to buy and carry a deadly weapon, anti-cultists focused on the fact that the assassin was an ex-member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. They speculated that his mind has probably been destabilized either by his permanence in a "cult" or by the fact that those who leave the Jehovah's Witnesses are ostracized or "shunned" by their former co-religionists, who are counseled not to associate with ex-members. Several German and international media took the anti-cultists seriously, and started suggesting that the Jehovah's Witnesses of Hamburg were somewhat responsible for what had happened to them (see e.g. Dahlinger 2023; Schaaf 2023; Zanni 2023).

What was, in fact, missing in the media coverage of the Hamburg shooting was the possibility that the criminal had been excited by the anti-cult propaganda. The Hamburg shooter, just by being German, was obviously exposed to the media slander against "cults" and the Jehovah's Witnesses prevailing in his country, and he lived in a city, Hamburg, where some of these campaigns have been officially sponsored by the local government (Respinti 2020). Yet, the negative role of media is so strong that they were able to turn the blame from perpetrator to victims.

Anti-cult movements in various countries, which widely differ politically, ideologically, and economically, are collaborating so closely and crafting together their poisonous messages against non-majority religions. What do you think today may unite Russia, China, France, Germany and Japan? The right answer is, their joint fight against the so-called "cults." They combat them for very different reasons, but at the end of the day they craft the messages against the so-called "cults" in a similar manner. Consequently, through compliant media, these messages are effortlessly crossing all borders (Berzano et al. 2022a, 2022b). It is amazing to see, for instance, how once a negative message against the Jehovah's Witnesses started being spread in Russia, it was exported to democratic countries such as Germany, Japan, and even the United Kingdom.

When Russia in 2017 named the Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist group, liquidated their organization, and confiscated their properties, it seemed

something so illogical that I believed it will stop at the borders of Russia and perhaps some satellite states. On the contrary, more and more governments and media around the world are accepting unfounded accusations against the Jehovah's Witnesses. This propaganda may even excite feeble minds and result in deadly attacks.

I could easily understand why a state-sponsored campaign was created and struck the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. Why the same arguments used in Russia against the Jehovah's Witnesses are gaining momentum in Europe and beyond, was totally eluding me. What does this connection mean?

As I have argued elsewhere, Russia is and was so much against religious organizations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses because it wants to protect the monopoly of the Russian Orthodox Church in a country where there is a very close connection between the state and the church. Since the time of Czar Peter the Great (1672–1725), the Russian Orthodox Church was part and parcel of the state apparatus. Its role was twofold. It was supposed to spread a message favorable to the state's policies to the Russian masses, and at the same time to collect information about the people's mood and report it to the powers that be. This role never changed (Šorytė 2020, 2023).

When President Putin introduced the notion of “spiritual security,” he confirmed once again that only the Russian Orthodox Church is and can be the religious guardian of the Russian soul. In addition to the Russian Orthodox Church, ethnic religions are tolerated if they cater to ethnic minorities such as Muslims in Chechnya or Buddhists in the East, teach them to support the regime and obediently fight and die in its wars, and do not try to convert Orthodox believers. Any other religion or spiritual movement is a deviation from the Russian identity and should be contained and fought. The first in the row targeted by this fight, much before the war in Ukraine started, have been the Jehovah's Witnesses, because their headquarters are in the United States, which is perceived as the largest enemy of Russia. Many others followed suit.

Changes After the War in Ukraine

In other lectures and articles, I repeatedly discussed these aspects, trying to explain the Russian mentality and fears (Šorytė 2020, 2023). But after the

aggression against Ukraine started, many things inside Russia changed. This took Western and international anti-cultists by surprise, as evidenced by the crisis in the FECRIS, the European umbrella organization of anti-cult movements. Russian organizations and activists had a prominent role in the FECRIS, but they became an embarrassment after they started supporting Putin's war in Ukraine. FECRIS took some cosmetic measures to hide its Russian connections but waited until March 2023 to exclude the Russian branches from its affiliated organizations ("Информационно-консультационный центр по вопросам сектантства" 2023). However FECRIS did not change its ideological attitude, which remains like Russia's and sometimes relies on propaganda created in Russia.

The real reason of the Russian aggression against Ukraine is cynically simple. Russia wants to bring back Ukraine under the Russian control, thus putting in place one piece of its big puzzle of the reconstruction of the former Soviet Union. It is as simple as that. This truth, however, is hidden by propaganda under arguments that are continuously changing and try to supply an ethical and moral justification for what is in fact just brutal aggression.

Different arguments target different audiences. The world is full of anti-Americans, and they are told that Ukrainians are just fighting a proxy war on behalf of the United States, whose aim is to contain and destroy Russia. When addressing right-wing audiences, the Russian propaganda would insist that it is fighting the corrupt West and defending family values against a LGBT "invasion" that has reached Ukraine and may enter Russia itself. But when talking to left-wing interlocutors, the same propaganda would downplay the LGBT argument and argue that a good number of Ukrainians, including their leading politicians, are "Nazis," and Russia is really fighting a resurgence of Nazism in Europe. When reaching pious Christian churchgoers, Russia would say that it is fighting "Satanism" and that there are many "Satanists" in Ukraine, although the word "Satanism" should be decoded and sometimes is just a metaphor for LGBT rights. And when talking to anti-cultists, they would say that the U.S. and Ukraine use "cults" as a weapon against Russia.

The Russian anti-cult movement, which in the last thirty years has been alternatively dismissed as marginal or unleashed by the authorities, depending on what was more convenient in a particular political situation, contributes the argument that "cults," since the Maidan revolution of 2014 and perhaps even

earlier, dominate the Ukrainian political life, are the American tool of choice to excite anti-Russian feelings in Ukraine (Berzano et al. 2022b), and are infiltrated into the Russian territory to create riots and commit acts of sabotage. As usual, the Jehovah's Witnesses are presented as the main culprits.

The question remains, though, whether these stories are created for domestic Russian consumption or for international propaganda. My answer is that they serve both purposes. Domestically, they reinforce an old Russian narrative that has constantly been mobilized in times of war, that Russian is under siege by enemies who use as tools the Western idea of democracy, immorality, and “bad” religion, meaning religions perceived as being in competition with the Russian Orthodox Church.

At the same time, Russia desperately needs friends in the West that would put pressure on their governments and ask them to stop supporting Ukraine. For this purpose, anti-cultists and opponents of the Jehovah's Witnesses are as good as anybody else.

Russian anti-cultists are less important in Russia than they believe themselves to be. However, they are supported and financed by the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church because they create sympathy for Russia, and antipathy for the allegedly “cult-friendly” Ukraine. They spread these theories in the international anti-cult network, which has close ties with the government in France, with important politicians in Germany, Japan, and other countries, and with media everywhere.

The Russian Orthodox Church itself is part of this propaganda machine both domestically and internationally. For instance, it tries to sell the Russian version of what is happening in Ukraine, through its ecumenical connections, to the World Council of Churches and even to the Vatican and the Pope, with some success.

Originally, the Jehovah's Witnesses were targeted and finally “liquidated” in Russia because the Russian Orthodox Church perceived them as successful competitors and perhaps because somebody had an interest in acquiring their valuable real estate properties. After the war started, they became part of a propaganda narrative that claims that Russia is not the aggressor but is defending itself against the aggression of forces that threaten its “spiritual security” and

want to overthrow its government, including LGBT activists, Nazis, Satanists—and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

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Research Notes

Conscience, Religious Liberty, and the Tai Ji Men Case

Marco Respinti

Director-in-charge, Bitter Winter magazine

marco.respinti@bitterwinter.org

ABSTRACT: In April 2023, the author visited Taipei, and presented papers both at the First FOWPAL International Forum on Peace and Human Rights at National Taiwan University, on April 9, 2023, and at the conference “2023 Global and Local Perspectives: Dilemmas and Prospects of Religious Human Rights” at Aletheia University, on April 8, 2023. The two papers are on different but connected subjects. The first discusses how classical Western philosophy distinguishes between two concepts of “will” as part of human liberty: free will and operative will. Reflecting on human will is essential for defining human conscience as a source of moral judgments and the first and the ultimate tribunal of human choice. But human conscience can make mistakes and should be trained to avoid destruction, violence, and evil. Tai Ji Men, a spiritual movement led by Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, puts conscience at the core of its worldview. The second paper examines how the United States adopted the *Bill of Rights* in 1791 to temper and balance central government in favor of local powers and the citizens. The core of the *Bill of Rights* is religious liberty, and its message is relevant for the problems Tai Ji Men is currently encountering in Taiwan.

KEYWORDS: Tai Ji Men, Conscience, FOWPAL, Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, United States Bill of Rights and Religious Liberty, Freedom of Religion or Belief Issues in Taiwan.

I. Conscience, Peace, and Tai Ji Men

Introduction

There is a certain debate on what human conscience is (Reale 2005, 2019a; Plato 2013; Augustine of Hippo 2014, 2016). When this debate is not rigorous

enough, it may easily cause intellectual misunderstandings, also resulting in obnoxious ethical shortcomings.

A common approach to conscience is that of basically translating this old word into “instrument of the human will.” It is indeed legitimate to engage in this translation—and later I will do it myself to some extent—but the rules of this engagement should be carefully investigated.

A too cavalier approach can in fact make conscience a synonym of a “do-what-you-will” philosophy. This may easily degenerate into subjectivism of the worst kind, or even into voluntaristic egocentrism. This reductionism may have a primitive version, practiced by those who reduce moral choices to their materialistic dimension, and a more elegant one. The latter is the attitude of those schools of thought that try to find a justification for every human wish or every attitude by those in power, by using a pretentious yet fallacious reasoning, claiming that whatever we do may always be justified by the claim, “But I followed my conscience.”

A more penetrating understanding of the matter would need some deeper reflections on both conscience and will. I begin with the latter.

Will and Reason

Classical Western philosophy distinguishes between two concepts of “will”: free will (Augustine of Hippo 2010; see Reale 2005) and operative will (Thomas Aquinas 1271). Those who started this discussion spoke Latin; and in Latin the distinction is in fact clearer. In Latin, “will” may be translated either as “*arbitrium liberum*” or “*voluntas*.” “*Arbitrium liberum*” is the free will, the capacity of a person to choose between different or even opposite possible choices. “*Voluntas*,” or the operative will, is the deliberation to pursue our choices once they have been made and stick to them.

“*Arbitrium liberum*,” or free will, is the chronological initial power and the logical first step in the path of human will. “*Voluntas*,” or operative will, comes chronologically and logically after free will. First, we make a choice and take a decision. Second, we implement it. “*Arbitrium liberum*” is the capacity to recognize different options and choose among them. “*Voluntas*” is the liberty to continue on the road dictated by the option we have chosen, and to remain consistent with it.

These two moments reveal human will as part of human liberty. To understand this, we need to introduce a third element: the goal. There is in fact no “*arbitrium liberum*” if there are no different goals between which we can choose. And there is no “*voluntas*” without a goal to pursue. Choosing without an aim is not choosing at all.

Enter conscience. We can now define it as the faculty that enable humans to exert both “*arbitrium liberum*” and “*voluntas*.” Conscience is, first, a moral judgment made by reason through which humans recognize the quality of an act they are free to perform or not to perform (“*arbitrium liberum*”). Second, it is the moral consent that reason gives to the decision of acting, or not acting, in consequence of that choice (“*voluntas*”). Conscience is thus the discriminating human faculty that evaluates a goal, decides to pursue it, and organizes the actions needed for this pursuit.

In defining conscience as a moral judgment by reason, I refer to a particular concept of human reason. This is the “right reason” as defined by Roman philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) in his treaty *De legibus*, “On the laws.” According to this text, “*ratio est recta summi Iovis*” (Cicero 1928, II, 10), or “right is the reason of the Supreme God.” What Cicero meant was that a divine intellect inserted a universal and eternal law of good and evil in all creation since the beginning of time. This “right reason” in human beings is the analogous capacity to recognize and follow that universal divine law. I will use “reason” here in this particular meaning.

If conscience is the faculty that enables humans to exert both “*arbitrium liberum*” and “*voluntas*,” then human conscience is the necessary condition and prerequisite of human liberty. Deny conscience and you deny human liberty, forbid liberty and you neglect human conscience. This is so true that in fact humans cannot really do it. Liberty of conscience can never be cancelled. Obviously, material liberty can be denied. Persecutors can put their victims in jail or even kill them. Killing their conscience is much more difficult. Persecutors always try to annihilate consciences, but they rarely succeed.

Conscience is thus the first and ultimate tribunal of human choice. It works by judging all options on the basis of concepts of good and evil, just and unjust. Since it is an act of judgment by human reason, it presumes that human reason is able to detect and distinguish right from wrong.

Some disagree and would doubt that human reason has this ability. However, in fact even those who deny the possibility of distinguishing between right and wrong have their own concept of right and wrong. For example, those who affirm that human reason can distinguish right from wrong would clearly say that stealing is wrong. However, even those who deny that reason can distinguish between right and wrong would normally react if their wallet is stolen, thus implicitly affirming that stealing wallets is wrong. In fact, it is the ability to distinguish right from wrong through reason that makes human beings different from animals. This is a universal truth independent from ideologies or philosophies.

The Form of Reality

Right reason, conscience, will, and liberty are strictly intertwined in determining human actions. And while conscience may make mistakes in its judgment on possible choices, following its mandates and precepts remains a moral duty.

Conscience in itself can make mistakes. Humans trying to follow their conscience can add even more mistakes. To avoid these mistakes, conscience can and should be trained. The training of conscience is called “formation,” which is a beautiful word. It comes from the Latin word “forma,” in English “shape.” “Forma” has been a key concept in the Western philosophical tradition (Gilson 1991, 2019). It indicates the inner side of things, a side normally ignored by those who only look at the external aspect of reality.

For the Greek philosopher Plato (428/427–348/347 BC), “form” (εἶδος in Greek) is the true nature, or inner being, of an object of our knowledge (Plato 1917a, 1917b, 1917c, 2013; Reale 1996, 2019b; Natorp 1999, 2004). It is its intimate essence, perceived by reason, transcending the exterior aspects perceived by senses. For the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) (Aristotle 1933; Reale 1974, 1980, 1997, 2004) and the bulk of Medieval Christian thought, “form” is the identifying principle of a portion of reality, from which all its properties spring. Aristotle taught that the form of humans is their rational soul (Aristotle 1957).

In common language, we call “form” the exterior aspect of things. We can say, for example, that a vase has a beautiful form. Classical philosophers, on the other

hand, called “form” the interior aspect of reality. In our example, “form” in this second meaning is the invisible essence that makes a vase to be a vase. Opposing these two meanings of the word “form” would be a mistake. In fact, they are connected. It is because of its inner form, perceived by reason, that a certain object has an external form that we may appreciate, perceived by senses.

In both these meanings, form is a noun. It is also a verb. A teacher may “form” a pupil and we can all “form” our conscience so that it avoids mistakes. Again, “form” as a verb is connected with “form” as a noun, in both its meanings. When we “form” our conscience (verb), we train it to appreciate the inner form of the objects of our knowledge, revealed by reason (noun, second meaning) as the root of the external form perceived by senses (noun, first meaning).

Human conscience is able to perceive and recognize the law of good and evil, which exists before conscience itself. It is what Cicero called natural or divine law. For this reason, there is nothing in human beings that is superior to conscience. Conscience is both self-perception and soul. It is God who speaks in human conscience, Cicero said.

In his *De vera religione*, or “True religion,” Augustine of Hippo (354–430: 1991, 2005, XXXIX, 72) the 5th-century Christian philosopher, writes: “Noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas,” or “Do not go outside, come back into yourself. It is in the inner self that truth dwells.” It is inside their consciences that human beings discover Cicero’s natural or divine law. It is not a law they have created. It is a law they discover inside themselves, without the need of “going out.”

The Desire of Peace

We cannot have a correct moral judgment leading us to the right choices without conscience. We cannot have genuine peace either without returning to a properly formed conscience.

Peace is a much desirable goal. It is not only the absence of enmity, conflict, or war. It is the harmony among different nations and different human beings who respect and appreciate one another for their inner form, their human soul, their humanity. Even in the most peaceful society, individuals and nations cannot fully understand each other. However, they acknowledge the dignity of others and their right and freedom to pursue their goals in peace.

Peace is the goal that human right reason perceives as preferable. Free will, “*arbitrium liberum*,” chooses it. Operative will, “*voluntas*,” pursues, promotes, and defends the goal that free will has chosen. In other words, world peace is the product of human conscience. It can be reached only if humans return to their conscience.

Returning to conscience enables human beings to detect the intimate essence of reality. They would then know that destruction, violence, and evil are bad. They would know that goodness, the opposite of evil, is good. Peace is the supreme philosophical act of human conscience and its most spiritual social dimension. It is a public acknowledgment of the universal law of good and evil, the law that differentiates humans from animals.

Horror, human-made catastrophes, and war happen where and when conscience has been erased and persecuted. When the light of conscience is extinguished, women and men are treated like animals or unanimated things, mere material objects disposable and dischargeable at will. Every act of enmity, conflict, or war in history is a moment of denial of the human conscience. Italian novelist Elio Vittorini (1908–1966), with whom I happen to disagree on other matters, offered a formidable formula of this twilight of conscience in the title of his 1945 novel, *Uomini e no*, or “Men and Not Men” (Vittorini 1985). What the title wants to convey is the idea that for some, other fellow human beings are just “not,” meaning not-human-beings, non-human beings, or human trash.

We live in times and places when people look outside of themselves for guidance, convinced that truth lies in some external solution, yet finding none. Perhaps this is why humanity is plagued by enmity, conflicts, and wars.

Who, in fact, proclaims today that conscience is not just one’s own tantrum, whim, or passing fancy? Who teaches the new generations that good is not the same as evil, and that not all our dreams are to be pursued? Who tells them that rights are God-given because they are the other side of moral duties?

Who, at the international level, reminds governments and nations that might is never right, no matter how much politicians and diplomats hide it under legal sophistry?

The single most decisive source of all enmities, conflicts, and wars is the denial of conscience, which is the court where lies and disguises are unmasked and judged.

I am not a utopian. I know that perfect peace on earth is unattainable. However, the absence of a definitive solution to the human problems on this side of heaven is neither a sufficient reason nor a legitimate excuse to refrain from promoting good and denouncing evil.

Tai Ji Men's Struggle for Conscience and Peace

I am not a Tai Ji Men *dizi* (*disciple*). I have known Tai Ji Men for a few years only. I met *dizi* on their long walk of more than a quarter of a century through absurd suffering and unjust persecution (TaiJiMenCase.org 2023). I am still, step by step, learning much about their philosophy, perspective, and approach. For this reason, I do not feel authorized to interpret Tai Ji Men's vision.

But as far as I can grasp some elements of Tai Ji Men's worldview, conscience is the core of its attitude towards the human problem.

Drawing from a long tradition of spiritual thought in East Asia, Tai Ji Men does not “go out.” It “comes back in” to the inside core of the human being and remains there, where truth dwells. Conscience is the engine that makes the whole Tai Ji Men project work. When we say that as a *menpai*, Tai Ji Men is “similar to a school,” it is a school that forms and educates consciences.

Tai Ji Men has worked for many years for peace among human beings and universal harmony among nations through FOWPAL, the Federation of World Peace and Love (FOWPAL), which was founded by its leader, Dr. Hong Tao-Tze. This work stems from a simple, basic, and easy reason. Peace and love are pursued because this is just and good. As we have seen, in the Western philosophical tradition what is just is also good and vice versa.

We have also seen that “just” and “good” are not labels we put on our feelings, emotions, or desires. They are objective notions. Tai Ji Men does not act publicly for peace because it “perceives” it to be just and good, but because it “is” just and good. In other words, Tai Ji Men *dizi* perceive in their aptly formed conscience through a moral judgment formulated by their right reason that peace is just and good.

In fact, goodness needs no explication. It is self-explanatory. This is why we define it as good. Goodness is good—and it is the best option for each and all of us as human beings. Tai Ji Men is consumed by its zeal to do good on earth—

because good is good. It seems to me that this is what Dr. Hong's own conscience dictates to him and inspires every single moment of his life.

It remains a mystery to me why such a movement of conscience, which is potentially so useful in calling all humanity to go back where truth dwells, is instead obstructed by an absurd and illogical persecution based on blatant falsities. That reminds me that evil is the mystery of iniquity, and denial of religious liberty is part of evil. In the second part of this paper, I explore some further ideas about freedom of religion.

II. Religious Liberty as Polity: The American Example and the Tai Ji Men Case

The Bill of Right

In the middle of a war, on July 4, 1776, the second Continental Congress (1775–1781), or the legislative body of the thirteen colonies that Great Britain had established in North America, declared their independence (*Declaration of Independence of the United States of America* 1776), giving birth to the new nation: the United States of America.

Fiscal and political reasons of under-representation, or even misrepresentation, in the Parliament of London had ignited a revolt that had then developed into an armed conflict, which in turn eventually led to independence—even if independence was not the primary goal of most rebels. They in fact chiefly aimed to redress what they perceived to be a fiscal and political injustice done to them by the rulers of the British empire (McDonald 1958, 1985; Bradford 1994, Kirk 1997c).

Once the thirteen North American colonies had become thirteen new states, they organized themselves into a league, ruled by principles set in what they called “Articles of Confederation,” (*Articles of Confederation* 1777), adopted by the second Continental Congress on November 15, 1777. Later, the new nation felt the necessity of a new institutional framework and adopted the federal Constitution (*Constitution of the United States* 1787), effective March 4, 1789. But Americans felt yet another institutional necessity and on December 15, 1791, adopted a “Bill of Rights” (*Bill of Rights* 1791).

The *Bill of Rights* is the collective name of ten amendments to the Constitution. They are the first basic amendments (more eventually came: today, they are 27) and contain provisions of capital importance. For this reason, James Madison Jr. (1751–1836), one of the American Founding Fathers and later the fourth president of the United States (1809–1817), who is credited to be the mastermind and one of the main authors of the text, proposed to incorporate those original amendments into the very text of the federal Constitution. It did not happen, and the *Bill of Rights* became a supplementary and different document. Nonetheless, it is inseparable from the federal Constitution since it functions as the authentic interpreter of articles and sections of the Constitution that may be perceived as ambiguous.

In fact, the *Bill of Rights* tempers and balances the prerogatives of the government in favor of a whole pyramid of local powers and finally the citizens. It focuses on the proper role of the state. Of course, it discusses the same basic questions that animated the debate-turned-conflict between the former British colonies in North America and the imperial British government, but it also centers on one of the fundamental topics of political philosophy. This is the limit of a government and the measure of liberty that a country's citizens enjoy, both as singles and as a society. Ultimately, it is about the nature of power itself. Social and political philosophy address the question as subsidiarity, implying that central political authority is only auxiliary to local authorities.

As a whole, this matter expresses the centuries-old tension between order and freedom, and the lucidity with which the question was renewed, put forth, and highlighted by North Americans makes the American Founding a landmark and paradigmatic event.

The Concept of “Politeia”

A concept peculiar to Ancient Greek political philosophy is contained in the term “politeia,” πολιτεία. It comes from the word “polis,” πόλις, the specific form of Greek social organization that we translate as “city-state.” It is the idea of a self-sustaining community able, at least ideally, to perform true and even, in some way, direct democracy and to defend itself. From the Greek “polis” come key words like “politics,” “policy” or “police,” indicating different tasks and features of the “politeia” (Aristotle 1932; Kirk 2003a).

In the English language “politeia” is translated as “polity” and it conveys a rich concept. It in fact expresses the ideal of a just government, its form and limitations, as well as the principle of that participation in public life that we call democracy. As a concept of a constitution and a civilizational principle, “politeia” is politics both as a material social organization and a moral philosophy. For this reason, the regime produced by the American Founding in 1776 and subsequent years is a “polity.”

In turn, the discussion of the fundamental political questions that the American polity opens for modern times, and not only for the United States, raises a philosophical point about the human being. In fact, the reflection on the nature, limits, and prerogatives of power cannot be developed without first reflecting on the nature, limits, and prerogatives of the human being, of which politics is both the subject and the object. In other words, doing true politics means to engage in human rights and duties.

It is therefore notable that the core of the American polity, established by the true interpretation of the American Constitution contained in the 1791 *Bill of Rights*, frames the nature of the state, the limits of power and the authentic sense of democracy centering all on the human being and beginning with religious liberty.

Religious Liberty

The first article of the *Bill of Rights*, or the First Amendment to the US Constitution, is the assertion that the state should never mingle with religion, whose exercise is a sovereign feature of human beings. It reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The meaning is quite clear. Religious liberty is not only the right to believe per se, but also the right to live accordingly to one’s beliefs. It is morals and politics. Moreover, this first freedom is indicated as the source and origin of all democratic liberties and values that people cherish.

In short, religious liberty is the quintessential protection of human beings, who are, as the 1776 US *Declaration of Independence* reads, “all [...] created equal,”

and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

It is noteworthy that the basic provision of the *Bill of Rights* contained in the First Amendment to the US Constitution comes directly from Section 16 of the Virginia’s “Declaration of Rights” (*The Virginia Declaration of Rights* 1776), ratified on June 12, 1776:

religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practise Christian forbearance, love, and charity toward each other.

Behind the Virginia’s “Declaration of Rights” stands George Mason (1725–1792), one of the Founding Fathers of the American polity, on whom American man of letters Russell Kirk (1918–2004) wrote one of his most admirable short essays. Entitled “The Marriage of Rights and Duties” (Kirk 1992), it was first published in 1992 and then collected in the 1997 enlarged edition of Kirk’s study of the American polity (Kirk 1997a), which originally had come out in 1990 as *The Conservative Constitution* without that short essay (Kirk 1990). The title of the new 1997 version, *Rights and Duties: Reflections on Our Conservative Constitution*, was reshaped in Mason’s style.

In his seminal 1960 tract *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray (1904–1967), commented that “the American ‘Bill of Rights’ is not a piece of eighteenth-century rationalist theory; it is far more the product of Christian history” (Murray 1960, 13). In fact, Father Murray reasoned,

the ‘man’ whose rights are guaranteed in the face of law and government is, whether he knows it or not, the Christian man, who had learned to know his own personal dignity in the school of Christian faith (Murray 1960, 53).

Here, Murray clearly takes his stand on whether the United States was born a Christian country, a matter that many consider controversial. I would leave the point aside and underline the universal dimension of his judgement: religion is central and pivotal to the American polity, and religious liberty is the first political right of the American citizen.

What is at stake here is in fact that the American Founding set a precedent and an example both in and for the modern times, the precedent and the example of a

polity based on religion and liberty (Respinti 2023). Religion and religious liberty shape and limit government, not the other way round (Kirk 2003b; Kirk 1997b).

Well, I am of course far from saying that we should all play the Americans. But with equal strength I am saying that the American Founding sets an example in which religious liberty is polity, or both the true constitution of the state and the rights of its citizens, and that all modern societies should find their own cultural way to it.

In fact, human rights activists should be educated to the ideal of religious liberty as polity embodied in the American Founding, if they want to be seriously effective. They will then also be able to properly understand Tai Ji Men and the Tai Ji Men case. Perhaps they will not always obtain material freedom for the people they advocate for, but they will always help them to be truly free in their spirits. And this would be no mean achievement.

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Research Notes

Peace Education and Spirituality at the United Nations: Tai Ji Men and the Road to the International Day of Conscience

Rosita Šorytė

FOB (European Federation for Freedom of Belief)

rosita_soryte@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT: Days of observance included in the United Nations official calendar may be proposed by NGOs but need the support of member states to be approved. The article explores Tai Ji Men's narrative about education, peace, and conscience, how the movement was able to gather international support for its discourse, and how some states, including Bahrain, saw a political advantage in embracing and endorsing the proposal of the International Day of Conscience. It further describes the road to the 2019 UN resolution on the International Day of Conscience and tries to answer the question how a comparatively little-known Asian spiritual movement was able to persuade most of the United Nations member states that the link between education, peace, and conscience should be symbolically reaffirmed at the global level, and to endorse a proposal that was in fact rooted in a specific spiritual worldview.

KEYWORDS: United Nations Days of Observance, International Day of Conscience, Tai Ji Men, Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, FOWPAL.

The United Nations Days of Observance

The United Nations has more than two hundred days of observance in its calendar (United Nations 2023a). From time to time, voices are heard that they are too many. However, each day has its defenders. One often mentioned example that the calendar is too crowded is that there is a World Toilet Day, celebrated on November 19. However, if one looks at the process that led to introducing this day of observance in 2013, it emerges that it calls the attention to a real problem,

i.e., that, as of 2022, 3.6 billion people in the world live without safely managed sanitation, which put their health and even their lives at risk. The day, the United Nations says, aims at “making an invisible problem visible” (United Nations 2022a). Toilets are rarely mentioned in polite company, but living without a toilet can kill.

Other days of observance clearly correspond to political games played by member states. For example, there are days of observances for each official language of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish), but later Portuguese, which has two hundred million native speakers was added. In 2021, UNESCO insisted that at least one African language should be celebrated by a United Nations observance day, and the World Kiswahili Language Day was included (UNESCO 2022).

The introduction in the calendar of a new day of observance normally requires sponsorship of at least one member state and a vote by the General Assembly (in other cases, the request comes from UNESCO or other UN agencies). In a field connected with spirituality, there is an International Day of Yoga, June 21. A look at how it was introduced evidences a large campaign by India, which gathered the support of another 175 member states. India would never claim that yoga is a simple gymnastic. This is a Western view of yoga Indians reject, as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told in clear terms to the UN General Assembly when the day of observance was introduced in 2014. However, Modi was careful in consistently using the word “spiritual” rather than “religious” (United Nations 2022b).

It is not the only case where a day of observance has a connection with religion or spirituality. The United Nations cannot promote a particular religion but would honor religious figures or events. March 24, the International Day for the Right to the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims, honors El Salvador’s Archbishop Óscar Romero (1917–1980), who was murdered on 24 March 1980 for his public denunciations of human rights abuses in his country (United Nations 2023b). Romero has been canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church. His defense of human rights of all Salvadoreans went beyond his confessional identity but was at the same time rooted in Catholic social teaching.

February 4 is the International Day of Human Fraternity (United Nations 2023c). It was first celebrated in 2021, and remembers the date when, on

February 4, 2019, Pope Francis and Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, and the highest scholarly authority in Sunni Islam, signed in Abu Dhabi “A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.” Fraternity and peace are not necessarily religious values, but the approach of the Abu Dhabi document was openly theological (Francis and al-Tayyeb 2021).

On the other hand, attempts to have the United Nations recognize as a day of observance the World Day of Prayer, started by Christian women in 1887 in the United States, have never gathered sufficient support. Although the day is now celebrated by believers of several religions, its origins are too clearly Christian and confessional. Tai Ji Men is now proposing October 16 as World Prayer Day (Hong 2022a), using a slightly different name with respect to the already existing, but not recognized by the UN, World Day of Prayer.

The proposal was launched through a spectacular event in Taiwan on October 16, 2022, with performances, songs, dances, and speeches and representatives of several religions in attendance. It remains to be seen whether once again “prayer” will be regarded as a religious concept incompatible with the secular character of the United Nations. However, Tai Ji Men may counter this objection by quoting academic literature on how the concept of “prayer” is now being increasingly secularized and may indicate a connection with universe or nature experienced also by those who do not believe in God.

In fact, the first initiative for introducing new days of observance often comes from NGOs. Italian scholar Raffaella Baritono has noted that this model corresponds to how Eleanor Roosevelt, the American First Lady who had a profound influence on shaping the United Nations, saw the future of the organization (Baritono 2017). For her, the traditional American idea of “public diplomacy,” where states mobilize NGOs for their own purposes, should have been replaced or at least supplemented by a “diplomacy from below,” where NGOs propose their own initiatives and states may decide to support them (Baritono 2017, 5). Roosevelt’s idea was that “even ordinary citizens” may advance proposals that may eventually be accepted by the United Nations (Baritono 2017, 2). However, the system only allows this to happen with the decisive support of member states.

Dr. Hong Tao-Tze and the Movement of an Era of Conscience

The problems in Taiwan (Chao, Chang, Yu, and Chen 2021) did not prevent Tai Ji Men and its leader, Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, from promoting high profile initiatives for world peace, an activity he had already started in 1968, while organizing international events and bringing traditional Chinese culture abroad through thousands of musical and martial arts performances.

In 1999, Hong started his cooperation with the Association of World Citizens (AWC), which had been founded in 1975 by Douglas Mattern (1933–2011), a well-known American peace and disarmament activist, and had been granted consultative status at the United Nations' ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council). Mattern believed that, by joining forces in an international association, common citizens may effectively assist the United Nations institutions and cooperate in the work of conflict resolution and promotion of peace.

In 2000, Mattern appointed Hong as a member of the AWC's Advisory Board and Honorary Vice-President. After Mattern died, in 2011, the new AWC President, René Wadlow, a US-born French academic specialized in Development Studies, appointed Hong as Vice-President of the organization (Introigne et al. 2020).

In 2014, Tai Ji Men was at the core of a coalition, including the Association of World Citizens and FOWPAL, the Foundation for World Peace and Love that Dr. Hong had founded in 2000, which launched the Movement of An Era of Conscience. Hong believes that positive change may really be achieved, if only more humans would learn, in the words of Lourdes Gisela Victoria-Kruse, Ambassador of Dominican Republic to the UN in Vienna, who spoke at a FOWPAL event in 2019, to

follow their conscience, speak conscientious words, do conscientious deeds, and spread the positive impacts of conscience to change the world for the better (FOWPAL 2019).

Traditional Chinese culture, according to Dr. Hong, focuses on ethics, propriety, and conscience. These are universal values that, if properly understood and applied, would guarantee world peace and a civilization based on universal brotherhood and love. Promoting love and peace throughout the world is regarded by Tai Ji Men as an essential part of its *dizi* (disciples)'s effort at self-cultivation.

Dizi are first taught love and peace for themselves, but gradually the scope of peace and love extends to the whole universe. The practice of martial arts is not outside this field since, according to Hong, appropriate physical exercises always also have effects on the mental and spiritual dimensions, both individually and collectively.

On February 16, 2014, the Movement of an Era of Conscience was launched through simultaneous events in twenty-five venues in the United States, Canada, England, the Netherlands, Italy, and Australia. An endorsement campaign was launched in August 2014 and presented by Dr. Hong at the 65th Annual UN DPI/NGO Conference in New York. On October 5, 2014, a “Forum on the Awakening of Conscience” was organized in Los Angeles and attended, among others, by Congressman Ed Royce, the chairperson of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The “Declaration for the Movement of an Era of Conscience” defined conscience as “the ultimate judge of a person’s doing” (Association of World Citizens, FOWPAL, and Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2014). This definition tried to encompass both the religious idea, which pre-dates Christianity and is already found in early Hindu and Buddhist texts, that conscience is the voice of a divine ultimate power resonating inside every human being, and the secular notion of conscience as a deep layer of our psychological personality that was shaped during human history by the collective process we call civilization. Dr. Hong believed that his definition could be embraced by both believers and non-believers. He also called conscience “the positive energy that stabilizes the world” and balances technological development with “spiritual enlightenment.” It was easy to see that Dr. Hong was speaking from his own spiritual experience. However, the Declaration insisted more on the fruits of a return to conscience than on what conscience is according to various religious or non-religious traditions. Dr. Hong maintained that “conscience is the wellspring of love and peace,” “breeds sustainability,” “is the fundamental pillar of a harmonious society,” and “leads to good governance” (Association of World Citizens, FOWPAL, and Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2014).

Many could agree with such statements, which were further presented by Tai Ji Men at various conferences in 2015 and 2016, including the 66th UN DPI/NGO Conference in Gyeongju, South Korea. Participation in international events led to a momentous invitation to Dr. Hong to visit Bahrain in May 2017, where he

met with cabinet ministers and religious leaders and promoted the Era of Conscience document (FOWPAL 2020, 30).

The Road to the International Day of Conscience

Dr. Hong was in New York in September 2017 during the 72nd Session of the UN General Assembly. He organized a World Leader Summit of Love and Peace, and continued his cooperation with Bahrain, which was joined by Kiribati as another staunch supporter. Next year, on April 5, 2018, the Permanent Mission of Kiribati to the UN co-organized with FOWPAL and the Association of World Citizens a World Peace and Love Conference at the UN in New York. Teburoro Tito, Kiribati's Ambassador to the UN, called Dr. Hong "a modern Confucius" (FOWPAL 2020, 34).

Based on the idea expressed at the April 5 conference, from July 2 to 6 members of the Permanent Mission of Kiribati to the UN and of FOWPAL gathered at the Joint Commonwealth Office in New York to draft a resolution designating April 5 as the International Day of Conscience. The draft resolution was presented at an event hosted by the Permanent Mission of Kiribati at the same Joint Commonwealth Office on July 31, where eighteen other Permanent Missions were represented, including Bahrain's (FOWPAL 2020, 43–9).

From then on, Bahrain took the lead in sponsoring the resolution making April 5 a UN day of observance as the International Day of Conscience. From September 28 to October 1, 2018, another World Leader Summit of Love and Peace was co-organized at the United Nations headquarters in New York by the Permanent Mission of Bahrain and FOWPAL. The President of Kiribati, Taneti Maamau, also attended. This happened during the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, and Bahrain took the opportunity to gather other states that would sponsor the resolution. Another member state that emerged as a staunch supporter was Equatorial Guinea.

In November 2018, Dr. Hong and a Tai Ji Men-FOWPAL delegation visited Bahrain again. On February 5, 2019, it was the Permanent Mission of Equatorial Guinea that co-organized with FOWPAL yet another World Leader Summit of Love and Peace at the United Nations in New York. At that time, Equatorial Guinea was a non-permanent member of the Security Council, and the President

of the African country, Teodoro Oblang Nguema Mbasogo, personally participated in the Summit. The knot of the religious or secular nature of conscience was not really cut. The African country's President stated that "Our country, in spite of being secular, eminently believes in God" (FOWPAL 2020, 80).

Next year, 2019, it was again the Permanent Mission of Bahrain that co-sponsored with FOWPAL the World Leader Summit of Love and Peace, which took place on February 6 at the ECOSOC chamber of the UN headquarters in New York. The day before, February 5, Dr. Hong launched a global endorsement campaign for a "Declaration of International Day of Conscience" (Hong 2019). Conscience was defined as the "wellspring of love," but again rather than discussing the meaning of the word the Declaration insisted on conscience's positive fruits.

On April 5, 2019, the Permanent Mission of Bahrain to the UN launched the International Day of Conscience at an event in Vienna, to which I was also invited. My impression was that the event, attended by diplomats, religious leaders, and businesspersons from several countries avoided specific political content and was mostly aimed at eliciting sympathy for Tai Ji Men and their proposal.

In June 2019, Bahrain asked Dr. Hong and FOWPAL to prepare a concept note about a final version of a draft resolution to be adopted by the UN General Assembly proclaiming April 5 the International Day of Conscience. In July, Dr. Hong traveled to Kiribati and other small Oceanian countries to secure support for the resolution.

On July 19, Bahrain submitted the draft resolution to the 73rd General Assembly of the United Nations, to include April 5 in the UN calendar of days of observance as the International Day of Conscience. The resolution presented the Day of Conscience as

a means of regularly mobilizing the efforts of the international community to promote peace, tolerance, inclusion, understanding and solidarity, in order to build a sustainable world of peace, solidarity and harmony (Permanent Mission of Bahrain to the United Nations 2019).

The meaning of "conscience" was not defined. Another twenty-seven countries co-sponsored the resolution, and it was adopted by the General Assembly on July 25 (United Nations General Assembly 2019). Unfortunately, the large events

planned for the first International Day of Conscience officially part of the UN calendar, April 5, 2020, had to be moved online due to the COVID pandemic.

The Meaning and Consequences of the United Nations Proclamation

The International Day of Conscience is now here to stay. Tai Ji Men is proposing three other days of observance: the World Prayer Day (Hong 2022a), the World Day of the Power of Hope (Hong 2022b), and the International Day Against Judicial and Tax Persecution by State Power, which has an obvious reference to the movement's own problems in Taiwan (Wadlow and Hong 2023), whose date would be December 19, the day the persecution of Tai Ji Men started in Taiwan in 1996 (Chao, Chang, Yu, and Chen 2021, 26–8). The promotion of these three new days of observance has just started, and it may be too early to speculate on their chances of being adopted by the United Nations.

As for the International Day of Conscience, I would propose a final comment on the two main actors of the process that led to its adoption as a day of observance. Tai Ji Men, as a private spiritual movement, demonstrated considerable skills in mobilizing resources, entering the mechanisms of the United Nations, obtaining the cooperation of states, and downplaying references to conscience that might have looked as too much connected with spirituality, at the same time without denying them.

This was, in Eleanor Roosevelt's terms, "diplomacy from below." However, "diplomacy from below" can only achieve results at the United Nations when it is supported by the "diplomacy from above" of the member states. The result was achieved thanks to the efforts of Bahrain, seconded by Kiribati and Equatorial Guinea.

Why did these states support Tai Ji Men in its effort to promote the International Day of Conscience? Some of their leaders probably genuinely liked the idea of conscience, which resonates both with Islam and Christianity, the amiable personality of Dr. Hong, and the contagious enthusiasm of the *dizi*. On the other hand, the United Nations is about politics. Bahrain has been increasingly active in recent years in promoting itself as a world leader in interreligious dialogue and peace conferences, which might also have been a way to balance accusations of human rights violations at home, a problem it shares

with Equatorial Guinea. For small states, sponsoring a noble cause and a value few would disagree with such as conscience is also a way to gain visibility. Tai Ji Men skillfully maneuvered through these different interests, proving it has a good understanding of how the United Nations work, and achieved what was for it a significant cultural and spiritual success.

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