

**The Unification Church Issue in Japan:
An Analysis by a Japanese Christian Theologian**

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ABSTRACT: This is the English translation of an article published on September 22, 2023, in the Christian web magazine *SALTY* (Nakagawa 2023) by a well-known Japanese theologian, who is the Executive Secretary of the Tokyo Institute of Christian Theology and the President of the Japan Christian Theological Institute. He is also a historical opponent of the Unification Church. He explains that fake news and exaggerations about former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s relationships with the Unification Church played a role in the path leading to his assassination. He also maintains that other fake news and “half-truths” are spread to support the request for a legal dissolution of the Unification Church (now called Family Federation for World Peace and Unification).

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

Introduction

The Japanese government is said to be submitting a request for the dissolution of the Unification Church as a religious corporation to the court as early as October. I have been observing this organization from a critical perspective for twenty-five years, and I have written several articles about it. However, what constantly strikes me in the midst of this is the gap between public perception and the actual situation. Initially, individuals like Yoshio Arita, Eight Suzuki, and Professor Kimiaki Nishida, who were close to [anti-Unification-Church] lawyer Masaki Kito, appeared on television and discussed this issue. To me, it seemed that only one of the groups fighting on the issue was presenting its own opinions, and I expected that positions from different angles would eventually emerge. However,

it appears that there has not been any sign of a brake being applied, and the conversation has swiftly moved in one direction before anybody could stop it.

I could understand the intention of the National Network of Lawyers against Spiritual Sales (NNLSS) to influence public opinion and push the government to file a dissolution request. However, usually, there should be debates involving both sides and opposing views, with room for direction adjustments and corrections. In this case, the information circulating in the media seems to excessively emphasize one perspective only. To me, it appears as if the opinion of one group is dominating the entire discourse.

To borrow the words of theologian Hans Küng (1928–2021), who participated as an expert in the Second Vatican Council, “A half-truth is also a half-lie.” Especially in matters of religion, we must not allow public discussions to result in the same kind of sensationalism as scandals involving celebrities or politicians that stir up public opinion. We should be more careful. This issue, in particular, has escalated since the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954–2022), and a significant amount of misinformation has accumulated. Therefore, the issue should be considered more in-depth than it currently happens.

False Information and Its Sources Led to the Death of Former Prime Minister Abe

There has been a narrative suggesting that former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had a “deep relation” with the Unification Church, which led an individual, who believed this was the case, to take extreme actions and ultimately resulted in the assassination of Abe.

In my opinion, the term “relation” itself is broad enough. It can include various types of relations such as “neighborly relationships,” “friendship,” “acquaintance,” and even “conflict,” “hostility,” and “a generic relationship with others.” Therefore, I deliberately wrote three articles with the strong title “Abe Had No Relation with the Unification Church.” Now, one year has passed since that tragic shooting incident, and I believe everyone can see that what I was writing was correct.

So, it is important to look at who was speaking the truth and who was spreading falsehoods in this issue and consider changing our sources of information. False information and unreliable sources led to irreversible consequences. The tragedy

that has already occurred cannot be undone, but we can change false information and information sources. If we don't even do that, it would indeed be a matter of acting "against humanity."

1. The video message by former Prime Minister Abe sent to UPF (Universal Peace Federation)

There are individuals who have propagated the idea that former Prime Minister Abe had a deep involvement with Unification-Church-related organizations based on the fact that he sent a video message to a UPF gathering. However, it is important to note that UPF stands for "Universal Peace Federation," an international NGO with consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

Prominent figures from around the world, including former President Donald Trump and other leaders of major countries, have sent messages to UPF events. Figures like Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary Mike Pompeo of the U.S. Republican Party have even attended UPF events in South Korea. In this context, we must recognize that this was considered acceptable on a global scale. Thinking of the situation, we can say that Abe's sending a video comparably indicates a relation that had nothing special. In other words, the attempt to sensationalize and present Abe's video message as a special relationship with the Unification Church was an exaggeration and should be corrected.

2. The full text of the video message sent to UPF

When you look at the full text of the video message (Abe 2021), it neither praises the Unification Church nor does it express a special veneration for its leader, President Hak Ja Han. Only a part of the polite expressions directed towards UPF—

in honoring Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon and all of you, I would like to express my profound thanks for your tireless efforts through UPF in resolving disputes in the world, especially in relation to the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula (Abe 2021)

—was isolated and became widely known. In fact, I have never seen a Japanese person who does not include polite words when giving greetings. It is perfectly

normal to use polite expressions, and it is a mistake to claim that “Abe had a relationship with the Unification Church” based solely on this video message.

3. The claim that former Prime Minister Abe received 50 million yen as payment from UPF

Journalist Eight Suzuki has claimed that former Prime Minister Abe received 50 million yen as appearance fee from UPF, but there is no evidence whatsoever to support this claim. Despite mentioning “inside information,” no substantiation for the appearance fee has emerged. UPF has also denied this allegation (Universal Peace Federation 2023). Nevertheless, false information continues to be disseminated by individuals influenced by Eight Suzuki’s statements, and this misinformation is still being believed by some.

4. Claims by Eight Suzuki regarding former Prime Minister Abe’s invitation of Chairman Tokuno from the Unification Church to the Prime Minister’s residence

Eight Suzuki, who claims to have inside information from the religious group, claimed that,

In early June 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe invited Eiji Tokuno, the President of the Unification Church and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, along with the wife of Chairman So Yon Chon, to the Prime Minister’s Residence (Suzuki 2017).

However, the Prime Minister’s daily schedule is meticulously recorded. When examining the Prime Minister’s schedule for early June 2016, it appears highly unlikely that the meeting happened on any day except the 3rd and the 8th of June. Even if Tokuno was invited to the Prime Minister’s Residence on either of those days, the meeting would have lasted only twenty minutes. It would be difficult to imagine that a close and deep relationship could develop in just twenty minutes. Furthermore, Tokuno himself has stated that he was not invited to the Prime Minister’s Residence.

Amidst the proliferation of such rumors, former Prime Minister Abe met his tragic end. However, the erroneous information and its sources have remained unchanged and uncorrected, frequently causing a sensation whenever these rumors are associated with the Unification Church. In reality, there should be a stern call for “Enough!”

However, there does not seem to be any such consideration concerning the Unification Church issue, and it appears that the campaign against it is continuing as it is.

Of course, as someone who upholds orthodox Christian doctrine, I have been observing the Unification Church from a critical position. However, the current situation is drastically different from what I know, and it has left me astonished.

There have been situations in the past where the public outcry led the government to take action, and this is not something new. However, this time, it involves a “religious” issue. In the cases of the Recruit scandal and the Moritomo Gakuen issue, when time passed and the public forgot, the only thing that remained was the media frenzy when the lid was finally lifted. However, this time, it is not permitted. In terms of the gravity of the matter, this should be completely different from the past issues where the government was involved and influenced by the sensation caused by media. The level of significance is distinct between the government initiating the dissolution of a religious corporation and requesting the dissolution of a private organization. This is the first religious persecution in the post-war history, and it could also greatly undermine Japanese constitutionalism.

Past and Present: “A Half-Truth Is Also a Half-Lie”

I regard it as a fact that in the past the Unification Church caused quite a few social problems. Among the visible aspects of its history, it is a fact that in the past the Unification Church has garnered significant social resentment by causing different problems. There were stories of parents claiming they were unable to meet their children no matter how they approached the group, which kept University students and others in “specific facilities and accommodations” under the guise of “training” by the religious movement, as well as stories of Unification Church members selling items through the so-called “spiritual sales.” Even within my own relatives, there is a person who was persuaded to purchase a personal seal for 100,000 yen about thirty years ago. She says she ended up making the purchase contract, thinking, “They were so persistent, so I gave in!” At that time, she was barely making ends meet. She threw away the personal seal in frustration when she moved.

Such memories leave a strong impression. Therefore, the past excesses of the Unification Church are likely to continue to haunt it in the future. Especially within the Christian community, which was in the position of easily receiving consultation requests or reports of sufferings in matters of heresy and “cults,” almost everybody is against the Unification Church. Some even harbor strong hatred towards it.

On the other hand, the Christian community itself also faces many issues. It cannot claim a superior moral ground in any way. Looking back, I myself have caused many people in the church of Christ to feel distrust against religion. Being an imperfect human being, I have made numerous mistakes, and as a result, I have caused hardships for others. This is why I want to evaluate efforts and hard work and to offer opportunities for those who have tried to improve and achieved positive outcomes.

And at that moment, the words of theologian Hans Küng come to mind and resonate in my heart: “A half-truth is also a half-lie.” How important these words are right now. Will we continue to proclaim a “half-truth” which is actually a “half-lie,” or will we come to a balanced evaluation by looking at the parts that were previously unseen? So, I would like to take a moment to focus on the unseen part as “the other half of the truth.”

The Other Half of the Truth 1: Improvement Since the Declaration of Compliance

Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama, who represents the Unification Church, reports as follows in his book *No Grounds for Dissolution Request Against the Family Federation* (published in Japan by Kogensha Company):

It cannot be said that the Family Federation is ‘continuously’ doing bad things. Since the 2009 Declaration of Compliance, the number of civil trials in which the Family Federation is the defendant has decreased sharply. In particular, it should be noted that not a single civil court has received a complaint about donations in the last seven years. Compared to before and after the 2009 Declaration of Compliance, the number of donation trials has plummeted to about one-fortieth of that. In terms of the lost amount of employee liability, 99.7% is for actions before the Declaration of Compliance. After the 2009 Declaration of Compliance, the number of lost cases plummeted to about 1/300 or 0.33%. In this way, no one should try to turn the brunt of ‘continuously doing malicious things’ onto the Family Federation. It established a new donation system after the 2009 Declaration of Compliance, drastically reduced the number of donation trials to 1/40 and the number of

lost cases to about 1/300 and has not been tried in civil or criminal cases in the past ten years or so (Nakayama, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

The Unification Church has been working on reforms since it announced the “Declaration of Compliance” in 2009. Even from my anti-Unification-Church standpoint, this is an undeniable and verifiable fact that is reflected in the numbers. I personally had some of my doubts resolved when I conducted an undercover investigation into the Unification Church in 2012, and since then, my concern for issues related to the Unification Church had diminished. However, it is no wonder that my concerns waned because, especially after the “Declaration of Compliance,” there were hardly any noticeable social issues associated with the church. In other words, the features that led the Unification Church to be classified as a “cult” were removed more than a decade ago. The Unification Church has already fit into the framework of a religion. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to classify it as a “cult” now and, considering the passage of time, it could even be seen as insulting.

Certainly, the religion can look perplexing for those who do not belong to it. Fears of curses or hexes and the ways people avoid them may seem particularly strange. However, religion in general tends to involve such aspects.

The Unification Church may still have many issues to address. Nevertheless, if improvements have been made and the results are evident in the numbers, even after more than a decade, it is reasonable to hold hope for further improvements.

I too have spoken ill of the Unification Church countless times. However, despite its limitations as an organization, the Unification Church has made efforts towards improvement and the results are clear in the statistics. Therefore, I must respond with sincerity to this.

Once again, I would like to use this opportunity to apologize and correct my previous mistake of designating the Unification Church as a “cult” over the past fourteen years since the 2009 “Declaration of Compliance.”

Even my vigilant eye, which was keen on the Unification Church issue, failed to notice this aspect, so it is likely that the majority of people were lacking in this awareness as well. We need to take a closer look at the progress made in the fourteen years since the “Declaration of Compliance.”

The Other Half of the Truth 2: The Peculiar Behavior of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales

According to Consumer Affairs Agency data from 2021, cases related to the Unification Church account for only about 1.9% of all nationwide cases of spiritual sales, with over 98% having no connection to the Unification Church.

However, Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama points out that on the website of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLSS), all 128 cases listed, 100%, are related to the Unification Church and its lawyers are 100% aimed at attacking the Unification Church. In other words, they are attacking 100% for less than 2% (Nakayama, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). For over 98%, they are doing nothing at all.

In response to my interview, Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama stated,

Almost all (98%) of the lawsuits over torts filed against the Family Federation (Unification Church) as defendant have had lawyers from the NNLSS serving as plaintiff representatives. If there are victims of the Family Federation (Unification Church) all over Japan, it would be strange that no other lawyers were serving as plaintiff representatives (Nakayama, personal interview).

To remain neutral in this issue, this is the most reasonable approach, and it should be clearly visible to everybody. It is not just me who might think that there may be other motives within the NNLSS. The movement driven by animosity towards the Unification Church should come to a halt for a moment, and the issue should be considered more carefully.

The Other Half of the Truth 3.1: Kidnapping, Confinement, and Forcible Deprogramming

Among the anti-Unification-Church militants, there are those who badly need to deal with the Unification Church as a “cult,” otherwise they may have to face not only moral responsibility but also criminal liability.

Such significant truths are being concealed, and many Christian pastors are involved in this matter. Therefore, I must address this issue, which also serves as self-reflection as I am part of Japan’s Christian community.

Many of those who are currently attempting to label the Unification Church as a “cult” may have been well aware of, or perhaps even deeply involved in, the reality of kidnapping and confinement. That is why this issue must be approached with great caution, as it is indeed a horrifying matter. For those who harbor animosity towards the Unification Church, there may be criticism directed at me such as, “Are you defending a heretical form of Christianity?” However, this is a more profound issue that transcends such dimensions.

The method used for this kidnapping and confinement is referred to as “protection and persuasion,” or “deprogramming.” This falls under the category of what some call “brainwashing,” which is often closely related to the term “mind control.” It is argued that the difference between “brainwashing” and “mind control” lies in whether there is physical coercion as a means. When the Chinese Communist Party is said to be conducting “re-education” in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, it would thus involve “brainwashing.” In other words, individuals are restrained, confined, and subjected to “educational” measures.

Now, when it comes to the people associated with the>NNLSS and their affiliates using “deprogramming,” there have been cases where they prominently involve parents, suddenly restrain adult members of a certain group, and force them into cars, keeping them in a state of captivity until they renounce their beliefs. They never release the believers until they give up their faith. In the longest case, this captivity lasted for as long as twelve years and five months (Tokyo High Court 2014). There are numerous outrageous instances of deprogramming. It is truly horrifying.

This issue must be addressed separately in another article. The dissolution request of the Unification Church will further obscure this reality. There is also this “half of the truth” to consider. If this “truth” is not discussed, and things progress, it would mean that this “half of the truth” is as well the “half of the lie.”

The Other Half of the Truth 3.2: Kidnapping, Confinement, and Deprogramming as Modern-Day Witch Trials

Article 38 of the Japanese Constitution explicitly prohibits illegal “detention” and “confinement,” and calls for them to be included as offenses in the Criminal Code, because unlawful physical restraint is globally regarded as an outrageous

violation of human rights. This is a consensus upheld worldwide, based on historical reflection.

Article 38 states that, “1. No person shall be compelled to testify against herself. 2. Confession made under compulsion, torture or threat, or after prolonged detention or confinement shall not be admitted in evidence. 3. No person shall be convicted or punished in cases where the only proof against her is her own confession.”

The early Christian Fathers of the Church, such as Origen (ca. 185–253), Irenaeus (ca. 130–202), and Augustine (354–430), engaged in “heresy refutation,” and never “forced apostasy through abduction and confinement.” Heresy refutation contributed to the development of orthodox Christian doctrine. However, forced apostasy through abduction and confinement, on the other hand, bears more resemblance to “witch hunts” in the late Middle Ages. In this context, the idea of being “possessed by demons” has been replaced with “mind control.” The orthodox Christian Fathers held a mentality of heresy exclusion to protect the correct teachings but did not engage in detention and abduction for the purpose of apostasy. Especially in Western countries, there is a historical reflection on the “witch trials,” and lessons have been learned from those failures.

What About Japan and the Japanese people?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 9, stipulates the following:

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. No one shall be deprived of his liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law.

Japan also ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1979. Christians must not repeat that mistake again.

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