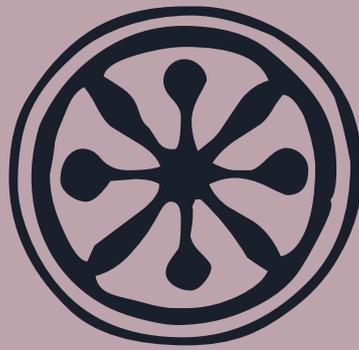

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Nuclear Disarmament After Ukraine: The Future of Soka Gakkai's Anti-Nuclear-Weapons Movement

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ABSTRACT: Soka Gakkai developed in Japan in the aftermath of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and few causes are dearer to its members than the campaign for the total elimination of nuclear weapons. However, the war in Ukraine made disarmament unpopular and the public opinion in several countries became more interested in rearmament and deterrence. The paper analyzes several documents produced in 2022 by Soka Gakkai and its related organizations, and is also based on interviews with Italian volunteers of Senzatmica, the anti-nuclear-weapon branch of the movement. They believe that, rather than creating a crisis in their campaign for nuclear disarmament, the war in Ukraine in fact confirms that its aims are timely and reasonable.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, Toda Peace Institute, Daisaku Ikeda, Senzatmica, TPNW, Nuclear Disarmament, Soka Gakkai's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Ikeda Peace Proposal 2022.

Introduction

In 2019, I published a paper on Soka Gakkai's campaign for nuclear disarmament (Šorytė 2019). Soka Gakkai was founded in Japan and, after the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, its second President, Josei Toda (1900–1958) denounced atomic weapons as the embodiment of absolute evil. In a famous speech of September 8, 1957, in front of 50,000 Soka Gakkai youth in Yokohama's Mitsuzawa Stadium, Toda called the movement to action with particularly strong words.

Today I would like to state clearly my feelings and attitude regarding the testing of nuclear weapons, a topic that is currently being debated heatedly throughout society. I hope that, as my disciples, you will inherit the declaration I am about to make today and, to the best of your ability, spread its intent throughout the world.

Although a movement calling for a ban on the testing of atomic or nuclear weapons has arisen around the world, it is my wish to go further, to attack the problem at its root. I want to expose and rip out the claws that lie hidden in the very depths of such weapons. I wish to declare that anyone who ventures to use nuclear weapons, irrespective of their nationality or whether their country is victorious or defeated, should be sentenced to death without exception.

Why do I say this? Because we, the citizens of the world, have an inviolable right to live. Anyone who jeopardizes that right is a devil incarnate, a fiend, a monster. I propose that humankind applies, in every case, the death penalty to anyone responsible for using nuclear weapons, even if that person is on the winning side.

Even if a country should conquer the world through the use of nuclear weapons, the conquerors must be viewed as devils, as evil incarnate. I believe that it is the mission of every member of the youth division in Japan to disseminate this idea throughout the globe (Toda 1957).

An interesting feature of this speech is that there is no doubt that Toda was firmly opposed to the death penalty (Ikeda 2009, 12–3). His call to execute the leaders responsible for the use of atomic weapons should thus be intended as a paradox. What Toda implied was that the death penalty is evil, but the use of nuclear weapons is an even worse evil, in fact a manifestation of the “devil incarnate.”

Based on Toda’s appeal, Soka Gakkai became a key international player in the fight for nuclear disarmament. In 2009, Toda’s successor Daisaku Ikeda published a five-point plan for nuclear abolition (Ikeda 2009). In Italy, in 2009, ten Soka Gakkai youth members met to study the five-point plan. This was the origin of *Senzatomica* (Without Atomic), a project that matured in a first exhibition organized in Florence in 2011, which gathered 60,000 visitors. Since then, *Senzatomica* has become a household name in Italy. More than eighty exhibitions attracted some 365,000 visitors. There are similar initiatives in several other countries.

The Toda Peace Institute (originally called the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research) was established by Ikeda in 1996 to deal with a wide range of international peace issues, including nuclear disarmament. *Senzatomica* and the Toda Peace Institute, as well as other Soka Gakkai organizations, became partners of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017. Understandably, Soka Gakkai was proud of this recognition, which in a way also acknowledged the efforts of the Buddhist movement (Soka Gakkai 2017).

The coming into force on January 22, 2021, of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), when the 50th state ratified it, was also celebrated by the Soka Gakkai organizations, which had campaigned in favor of it throughout the world.

In my interviews with Soka Gakkai members in Italy and elsewhere, I perceived a great sense of excitement about the TPNW and the achievements of Senzatomica and other similar campaigns in countries other than Italy, notwithstanding the fact that COVID-19 had temporarily put a halt to exhibitions and public rallies.

Thirteen months after the TPNW came into force, on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Almost overnight, the situation changed completely. Rather than disarmament, politicians in several countries started discussing the need for rearmament in front of the aggressive attitude of non-democratic regimes such as Russia and China. Even Germany vowed to substantially increase its military spending and even Finland and Sweden, two traditionally peace-loving and neutral countries, asked to join NATO.

Worse still, as it became clear that Russia would not defeat Ukraine in a few days as President Putin had expected, Russian leaders started warning that, if the West would not stop helping Ukraine with weapons, a nuclear war was a possibility. For example, on April 25, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in an interview published on the official website of Russian Foreign Ministry, stated that, while Russia does not want a nuclear war,

The risks are quite high today. I would not like to see them blown out of proportion, but many would love to do it. This threat is serious and real. It must not be underestimated (Lavrov 2022).

It seems that 2022 is becoming the worst year of the century for those who promote campaigns for nuclear disarmament. Yet, this is not how Soka Gakkai and its volunteers see the situation. I will first examine President Ikeda's annual Peace Proposal for 2022, which was published a few weeks before the war started, then two documents of the Toda Peace Institute about the war itself, and conclude with a look at what Senzatomica is doing in Italy since the war in Ukraine started.

President Ikeda's 2022 Peace Proposal

From 1983, President Ikeda publishes every year a Peace Proposal to the United Nations. These texts are, as I have noted elsewhere, written in a very professional style and language, and reveal an in-depth understanding, unusual for religious leaders, of how the United Nations work (Šorytė 2019, 27; 2021).

Ikeda's Peace Proposal for 2022 was published on January 26. From the point of view of nuclear disarmament, the year 2022 had started with what looked like a positive development, one Ikeda emphasized in his Peace Proposal. The leaders of the five states that admit being in possession of nuclear weapons, i.e., the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom, signed a "Joint Statement on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arm Races." President Putin signed for Russia.

This was somewhat ironic, considering that in the statement the five leaders promised "to avoid military confrontations" and to resolve international problems through "diplomacy" and "dialogue" ("Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races" 2022). As we now know, Putin signed the statement when his invasion of Ukraine was already in its final stages of preparation.

The leaders stated that their ultimate goal was "a world without nuclear weapons." Meanwhile, they said they regarded

the avoidance of war between Nuclear-Weapon States and the reduction of strategic risks as our foremost responsibilities.

We affirm that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. As nuclear use would have far-reaching consequences, we also affirm that nuclear weapons—for as long as they continue to exist—should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war. We believe strongly that the further spread of such weapons must be prevented.

We reaffirm the importance of addressing nuclear threats and emphasize the importance of preserving and complying with our bilateral and multilateral non-proliferation, disarmament, and arms control agreements and commitments. We remain committed to our Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations, including our Article VI obligation "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

We each intend to maintain and further strengthen our national measures to prevent unauthorized or unintended use of nuclear weapons. We reiterate the validity of our previous statements on de-targeting, reaffirming that none of our nuclear weapons are targeted at each other or at any other State (“Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races” 2022).

Ikeda commented that he

hoped that this [statement] will lead to positive action toward those ends.

Here, I call on the UN Security Council to use this joint statement, with its recognition of the importance of self-restraint, as the basis for a resolution urging the five nuclear-weapon states to take concrete measures to fulfill their obligations to nuclear disarmament stipulated by Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

I further urge that language calling for a high-level meeting on the reduction of the role of nuclear weapons be agreed to and included in the final statement of the NPT Review Conference scheduled to be held this year. This high-level meeting should invite the participation of states that possess nuclear weapons but are outside the NPT framework, thus materially advancing progress on nuclear disarmament (Ikeda 2022, 23).

At the same time Ikeda, who is certainly not naïve and has spent his life observing United Nations politics, noted that the Joint Statement was “subject to various interpretation” (Ikeda 2022, 23). In the same April 2022 interview I mentioned, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov gave an example of this different “interpretations” when he stated that deploying the Iskander missile systems in Kaliningrad, which can carry nuclear warheads, does not in his opinion violate Russia’s commitment to de-targeting, i.e., not aiming nuclear weapons at other states. He acknowledged that on the issue of missiles in Kaliningrad the United States and the NATO countries do not share his opinion (Lavrov 2022).

The war in Ukraine also proved that Russia interprets differently from the West what it means that, as long as they are not abolished, nuclear weapons “should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war.” For Russia, threatening the use of nuclear weapons to prevent other countries from helping Ukraine is a “defensive” use aimed at “preventing war,” while others see it as a form of nuclear blackmail justifying and protecting a war of aggression.

Ikeda noted that COVID-19 actually increased the nuclear danger because it brought to light new risks surrounding nuclear weapons by creating situations that could disrupt the chain of command: political leaders of nuclear-weapon states have had to temporarily transfer power to their deputies due to COVID-19 infection. There were

also major [COVID-19] outbreaks aboard a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and a guided missile destroyer (Ikeda 2022, 23).

More generally, COVID-19 taught us, in the words of Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu, the Japanese UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, that “seemingly low-probability events can actually occur with little warning but with catastrophic global effect” (Ikeda 2022, 24).

Ikeda noted that the Biden administration accepted to renew the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in February 2021, while Donald Trump had previously expressed doubts about it.

Ikeda believes much more is needed:

The UN Security Council should create an opportunity to discuss the steps needed to bring the era of nuclear weapons to an end, adopting the outcome of those deliberations in a resolution, thereby initiating a process of fundamental transformation... Nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-dependent states need to face the stark reality that they are condemning themselves and the world to conditions of extreme and unending precariousness so long as they rely on nuclear deterrence rooted in mutual threat (Ikeda 2022, 24–5).

Ultimately, Ikeda believes that the root of the problem lies in “toxic” nuclear-dependent security doctrines, and proposes a “process of detoxification.” With words that the Ukraine war proved prophetic, Ikeda warned that a “toxic” political mentality is based on “continuously demonstrating readiness to use them [nuclear weapons.]”

This is actually made worse by the “distrust and suspicion” Ikeda sees prevailing among rival world leaders (Ikeda 2022, 25). One of the causes is a resurgent nationalism, which Ikeda suggests to counters with a notion embodied in a Japanese expression his predecessor Toda first used at a Soka Gakkai Youth Division meeting in 1952. The term Toda introduced there is *chikyu minzokushugi*, which can be translated as “global nationalism” (Ikeda 2022, 8). Today, we would say that we are “citizens of the world.” Toda’s speech was pronounced during the Korean war and, rather than eliminating nationalism, he proposed to make it global. We should be proud to be Japanese, Koreans, or Americans, but we should learn to go beyond this and become proud of being humans, all citizens of the same God-given world, which is of course a deep religious and Buddhist concept.

The alternative is tragedy. Ikeda also mentions another document signed a few days before his 2022 Peace Proposal, a joint statement by the United States and Japan on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) dated January 21, 2022. The two countries stated that,

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forever ingrained in the world's memory, serve as stark reminders that the 76-year record of non-use of nuclear weapons must be maintained ("Japan-U.S. Joint Statement on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons [NPT]" 2022).

The U.S. and Japan applauded the previous declaration of the leaders of the five nuclear countries, and reiterated that the total abolition of nuclear weapons should be the ultimate goal.

The declaration called on world political leaders to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is also a cause dear to President Ikeda. He has long stressed that those visiting the sites of the atomic bombings and the museums there, even if they are politicians and have seen many horrors during their lives, never leave Hiroshima and Nagasaki unimpressed. Ikeda suggested that a future summit on non-proliferation be held there, "generating irreversible momentum toward the abolition of nuclear weapons" (Ikeda 2022, 26).

The Toda Peace Institute and the War in Ukraine

The Toda Peace Institute has published different documents about the war in Ukraine, including articles presenting different points of view. I will analyze here two texts I believe are of special significance: the statement Toda's director, Kevin P. Clements, published on February 28, a few days after the war had started, and a later policy brief on escalation and de-escalation published in April 2022.

Clements' reaction to the outbreak of the war was one of outrage.

As a peace researcher for over 40 years, it appalls me that in 2022 we are trying to make sense of an outmoded 20th century invasion aimed at changing borders and seizing sovereignty. This war is the most blatant act of cross border aggression that I have seen since the Second World War and a major contravention of the UN Charter.

The war is an assault on the principle of non-interference and a clear act of international aggression. Its initiator, President Putin, keeps changing his mind about why he initiated it and is keeping the Russian public in the dark about its purpose. He has instructed his

media that it not be called an invasion and is clamping down on Russian peace protesters and public intellectuals opposing the war. The war is the irrational act of a man desperate for global attention and a desire to re-acquire the lost territories of imperial Russia (Clements 2022).

Dismissing the pretexts presented by Russian propaganda, that the war was an answer to the possibility that Ukraine joins NATO, Clements stated that, “War is never the answer to anything.” Nor will the invasion protect Russia’s security, Clements said. “On the contrary Putin’s aggression and attempt to restore Imperial Russia, will generate pain, grief, trauma and long-term insecurity.”

Noting that

the Russian invasion of Ukraine reactivated painful memories of the German invasion of Sudetenland and Poland at the beginning of World War Two and for those living in Kiev, the German Invasion of the Ukraine in 1942 (Clements 2022),

the director of the Toda Institute joined “the international community in condemning the illegal actions taken by the Russian Leaders.” “There is never any excuse for blatant aggression,” he declared.

On the other hand, as a peace institute, Clements’ organization remained committed to support any effort for a diplomatic solution.

If there is no desire on the part of Russia to enter good faith negotiations, we must look for some riper moment. We mustn’t lose sight of our commitment to nonviolent solutions even in the chaos of violence (Clements 2022).

Clements reminded his readers that Josei Toda’s message was one of seeking “nonviolent alternatives to war” and never lose sight of the human suffering. While supporting the suffering Ukrainians, Clements insisted that we “must not fall into the trap of demonizing the Russian people” (Clements 2022).

In April 2022, the Toda Peace Institute published a comprehensive analysis of the situation in Ukraine signed by German scholar Herbert Wulf. This paper addresses the question how it may be possible to pursue nuclear disarmament campaigns after (and even during) the war in Ukraine.

Wulf starts with a quote from German psychologist Harald Welzer, dated March 16, 2022, which gives the flavor of how Germany suddenly and surprisingly changed after the Russian invasion.

Four weeks ago, would anyone in Germany, except notorious right-wingers, have applauded if someone wanted to “fight to the end”? Would have anyone paid serious

admiration to elected representatives of a modern state, appearing in front of the camera in combat green T-shirts, unshaven and overnights, so that they can also believe their continuous commitment to their country and their struggle? Who would have thought that terms like “bravery,” “fatherland,” “hero,” etc. etc. could suddenly not only be said, but positively understood? (Wulf 2022, 2).

Having noted how much Germany changed in a few weeks, the document warns against considering the Ukrainian crisis simply as a return to the Cold War. It lists six main differences between the current situation and the Cold War period. First, no matter how Putin calls it, what is happening in Ukraine is typical, traditional hot war. There was no hot war in Europe during the Cold War, although there had been hot wars outside of Europe, in Korea and Vietnam.

Second, the boundaries between war and peace are less clear than during the Cold War, as evidenced not only by theories of hybrid war fought mostly through cyberattacks but also by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine between 2014 and 2022.

Third, Wulf believes that unlike in the Cold War there is no grand ideological competition between two rival ideologies. During the Cold War, there were Communists in the West attracted by the ideology of the Soviet Union. Wulf states that today the Russian system “is in no way attractive” to Westerners (Wulf 2022, 8). He lives in Germany. The Italian situation may suggest some nuances. In Italy, there is a misguided but sizable minority of the population, including some intellectuals, who find the ideology of Putin and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church attractive enough, and see in them the alleged defenders of traditional Christian and family values against American and European secular humanism. Also, the impact and pervasiveness of Russian propaganda should not be under-evaluated (Ottaviani 2022).

Fourth, paradoxically, the documents noted, during the Cold War the Soviets behaved more predictably, more arm controls treaties were in force, and there was more confidential but effective communication between Moscow and Washington aimed at preventing a nuclear war. That this still works today is something we cannot be sure of.

Fifth, the architecture of the world order has changed. The world is not bipolar as it was during the Cold War. The Chinese believe it is, and the only confrontation that matters is theirs with the United States, but Russia disagrees

and, according to Wulf, others such as India, Turkey, Brazil, and the Arab world are also developing ambitions.

Sixth, the document notes that economy has changed. Europe is much more dependent on Russian gas and oil than it ever was during the Cold War. As a German, Wulf acknowledges that this was not an accident but a strategy by German leaders persuaded that a strict mutual dependency between Europe needing the gas and Russia needing the corresponding money would have guaranteed stability and peace. The strategy, Wulf admits, “boomeranged,” and the Ukrainian war demonstrates it created a huge opportunity for blackmail (Wulf 2022, 9).

The document reminds us that German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (1918–2015) defined a strategy of dealing with the Soviet Union consisting in walking on “two legs,” defense and détente. The two, Schmidt believed, were not mutually exclusive. The Western world should provide itself with nuclear weapons as deterrent and at the same time persuade the Kremlin to sign treaties making sure nobody would use them (Wulf 2022, 6).

The strategy continued with Putin’s Russia, generating some debate. The Toda Peace Institute was on the side of those advocating more détente and less defense. However, as Wulf noted, if this side had been already put on the defensive by the 2014 events, with the 2022 war it has “disappeared” altogether (Wulf 2022, 11: again, he refers to Germany and I would not be so sure about Italy).

The document is realistic enough to acknowledge that “it takes two to tango” (Wulf 2022, 6).

The Kremlin’s current strategies suggest that there can hardly be peace in Europe in future without regime change in Moscow. With a criminal regime, a policy of détente is not possible (Wulf 2022, 10).

This, however, cannot be the last word for those like the Soka Gakkai volunteers who pursue a world without nuclear weapons. With patience, they should look for any opportunity to return at least to a world order where the superpowers talk to each other to avoid a nuclear war, and continue to work to promote and keep in force reasonable international treaties. To make this aim achievable in the future, Wulf’s report concludes, just like the statement by Toda’s director Clements, by inviting to keep alive a dialogue with Russia, which is different from a dialogue

with Putin. The last words of the texts are a quote by a Lithuanian poet who writes also in German and is known in Germany, Laurynas Katkus:

After the liberation of Ukraine, it will be our duty to help this nation [Russia] regain the sense of reality and free itself from destructive phantasmagoria and phantom pains. If we just watch and put our hands in our laps, another leader will take Putin's place and the cycle of revenge will repeat itself (Wulf 2022, 12).

Senzatomica Volunteers Continue Their Work

The documents published by the Toda Peace Institute are scholarly analyses. Their literary genre naturally includes sobriety, and warns against any unjustified optimism. On the other hand, Soka Gakkai's efforts for nuclear disarmament do not include only, nor even mostly scholars. Soka Gakkai's strength and effectiveness depends on its army of enthusiastic volunteers.

Accordingly, in conclusion, I turn to the Italian Senzatomica activists. I met some of them, and tried to listen to their voices. How do they react to the war in Ukraine? How do they answer the objection that now, in times of war, governments should focus on defense rather than disarmament?

The answer is that they turn the objections on their head. For them, the war in Ukraine precisely proves them right, and is a great opportunity to restart their campaign with a new enthusiasm after COVID-19 made events and exhibitions impossible.

As one volunteer put it

The conflict in Ukraine has shown the failure of the policy of nuclear deterrence. Far from preventing the outbreak of a war that is dramatically affecting the lives of millions of people, it has contributed to the dangerous resurgence of nuclear conflict.

Another insisted that

The statements of Russian leaders regarding the war in Ukraine have unequivocally shown the true face of nuclear deterrence as an instrument of blackmail that places humanity on the brink of catastrophe. The only way to prevent the use of atomic weapons is their total elimination. Never before has it been more necessary to pursue a policy that aims at nuclear disarmament.

Senzatomica plans to continue with its campaign in favor of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). No NATO country has signed it. However, Germany and Norway, which are members of the NATO, announced

their participation as observers in the First Conference of the TPNW State Parties, scheduled in Vienna on June 21 to 23, 2022. Sweden and Finland, NATO candidate states, had also announced their participation as observers, as did Switzerland, which is not part of the NATO but had not signed the TPNW either.

Soka Gakkai volunteers regard participation as observers as important, and insisted that Italy should join these countries. On May 18, their work bore some fruit, as the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives passed a resolution that asked the government to “come closer to the content of TPNW.” The Committee specified that this should happen “consistently with Italy’s obligations as a NATO member and the positions of our allies” (Senzatomica 2022).

Senzatomica is now planning a brand-new exhibition, which will tour different Italian cities in 2023, and will focus on the TPNW, whose very existence is ignored by many Italians. This will be part of the campaign “Italy, Think Again!” whose aim is asking the Italian government to reconsider its position on the TPNW. Together with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), Senzatomica promotes the “ICAN Cities Appeal,” which asks local mayors and city councils to support nuclear disarmament and the TPNW.

Indeed, this is part of a broader international Soka Gakkai project, the Second People’s Decade for Nuclear Abolition, which started in 2018. As Ikeda explained,

Through the People’s Decade for Nuclear Abolition campaign, first launched by the SGI in 2007, we have worked with ICAN and other groups to advocate for the adoption of a nuclear weapons ban treaty. The second People’s Decade for Nuclear Abolition began in 2018, the year after the TPNW came into being. The second decade focuses on universalizing the ideals of the TPNW through the work of civil society actors. This year [2022] we are committed to furthering momentum in this direction because we are convinced that the support of the world’s people is an essential foundation for strengthening the treaty’s efficacy (Ikeda 2022, 28).

Conclusion: Jivaka and Vimalakirti, or It All Starts in the Heart

Ikeda always includes stories from the Buddhist classics in his Peace Proposals, emphasizing that, while a non-religious audience can appreciate them as well, his arguments are not purely secular but are rooted in his spiritual experience.

In the 2022 Peace Proposal, he mentions Jivaka and Vimalakirti. Jivaka lived in the kingdom of Magadha in ancient India during Shakyamuni's lifetime. Trained by excellent masters, he became a great doctor. Invariably, kings asked Jivaka to stay with them, promising to him fabulous rewards. But Jivaka preferred to travel and go where he was needed, understanding his mission was universal (Ikeda 2022, 9).

The *Vimalakirti Sutra* takes his name from a disciple of the Buddha, famous for his compassion, who fell ill. When he heard of Vimalakirti's illness, the Buddha sent his disciple Manjushri with many others to visit him. Manjushri asked Vimalakirti what his illness was. He answered that, "Because all living beings are sick, therefore I am sick," and then offered the following analogy to fully communicate what he meant:

It is like the case of a rich man who has only one child. If the child falls ill, then the father and mother too will be ill, but if the child's illness is cured, the father and mother too will be cured (Ikeda 2022, 4).

Outside of the specific Buddhist context, the enigmatic answer is not easy to understand. What Vimalakirti meant is that sometimes parents who have a sick child also become sick themselves, for no other reason than that they are attuned to their children and the children's pain become their pain. Vimalakirti "was not actually suffering from any specific illness" (Ikeda 2022, 4) but his empathy with the sickness of all living beings was so great that he physically shared their condition of being sick.

Ikeda derives from this story a lesson about security. We are all interconnected. We cannot pursue our security ignoring the security and the suffering of others. It is a valuable lesson in time of war. It is only when the nations and their leaders realize that the only acceptable nationalism is *chikyu minzokushugi*, the "nationalism" we all share as citizens of the world, that they can decide that a global elimination of the nuclear weapons is not a naïve dream but something reasonable and convenient for all countries.

Soka Gakkai members engaged in the nuclear disarmament campaign analyze international politics, and discuss treaties and statements. They do it with competence. However, they know that ultimately only compassion and a work at the level of the heart may one day enable them to achieve their noble aims.

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Exorcizing the Atomic Bomb Through the Arts in Italy: From Eaismo to Senzatomica

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ABSTRACT: The success of anti-nuclear-weapon campaigns such as those promoted by Senzatomica in Italy may owe something to a post-Hiroshima artistic tradition translating into works of art both the new principles of atomic physics and the horror of the bombs. Salvador Dalí's painting *Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll*, which he started in 1945 as soon as he learned of the bombings in Japan, had an important role in this process. However, two Italian artistic groups, the Nuclear Art Movement around Enrico Baj in Milan, and Eaismo around Voltolino Fontani in Livorno, asserted a priority against Dalí's claim of having invented "atomic painting," and legal cases followed. While questions of copyright were mostly a distraction, the atomic art movements remained a significant feature of Italy's artistic scene, and a precedent for the contemporary aesthetics of Senzatomica.

KEYWORDS: Atomic Art, Eaismo, Nuclear Painting, Nuclear Art Movement, Enrico Baj, Dalí's Mystical Manifesto, Voltolino Fontani, Senzatomica, Luca Barcellona.

Introduction

The Italian Soka Gakkai campaign Senzatomica has always used art, performances, and innovative graphics to spread its message. It is an important component of its success. The hypothesis of this article is that, among the different reasons of Senzatomica's achievements, is the fact that Italy has a specific tradition of artists reflecting on nuclear weapons. Also because of a sensational court case, this tradition became known to the non-specialized public as well.

A possible objection is that the court case happened some seventy years ago, and that only a cultivated fraction of the Italian population attends art exhibitions

and is familiar with artistic avant-gardes. However, based also on my personal observation of its events, I would suggest that Senzatonica caters mostly (although not exclusively) to a cultivated and culturally savvy segment of Italian citizens.

The article discusses the importance and influence in Italy of a specific painting by Salvador Dalí (1904–1989). It then examines two Italian artistic movements that reacted both to the atomic bombings in Japan and to the new scientific discoveries on atomic energy, the Nuclear Art Movement in Milan and the Eaismo in Livorno.

It concludes with some comments on the aesthetics of Senzatonica.

Dalí's Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll

The 2022 exhibition “Surrealism and Magic: An Enchanted Modernity” at Venice’s Peggy Guggenheim Collection (Subelytè and Zamani 2022) presented in Italy a work that is crucial for our story: Dalí’s *Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll*, from Madrid’s Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.



Figure 1. Salvador Dalí, *Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll* (1945).

Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll may well be the first painting by a leading artist following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 6–9, 1945). Dalí wrote that

The atomic explosion of August 6, 1945 shook me seismically. Thenceforth, the atom was my favorite food for thought. Many of the landscapes painted in this period express the great fear inspired in me by the announcement of that explosion (Dalí 1976, 216).

When he learned about the bombing, Dalí immediately started the painting. A first feature of the work the audience may note are the elephants on the upper right. Those who have been close to an elephant know that they drop excrements almost non-stop. Their action here is a metaphor of dropping atomic bombs, an act that is as “dirty” as it is tragic.

Dalí also included obelisks, which allude to the bloody wars between the Romans and the Carthaginians, and the terror created among the inhabitants of Italy in 218 BCE when Hannibal (247–182 BCE) crossed the Alps with his elephants and invaded the peninsula. Dalí had an interest in Hannibal as evidenced by his late watercolor *Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, now at The Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida (Taylor 2016, 11). The meaning of the allusion in *Uranium and Atomica* is that the horrors of war always repeat themselves.

In *Uranium and Atomica*, we immediately see the consequences: the nuclear explosion directly invading the human body, and a victim reminiscent of classical depiction of slaves but also deformed by the radiations. The painting could not omit to mention that it had been the United States that had dropped the bombs in Japan. Dalí disseminated in *Uranium and Atomica* images of quintessentially American Little League baseball players. He was also aware that “Little Boy” was the codename for the Hiroshima bomb.

After *Uranium and Atomica*, Dalí’s career went through two dramatic changes. First, he broke with Surrealism, claiming that atomic physics required an entirely new way of painting (Nigro 2010). Second, Dalí, a former anticlerical, reconciled with religion, claiming that the new physics proved a divine design in the universe (Roncalli 2019; Introvigne 2022) and called for a “nuclear mysticism.” He was received by Pope Pius XII (1876–1958) on November 23, 1949, and showed the Pontiff a first version of his *Madonna of Port Lligat* (Tapié 1950; Schemel 1952).

One main source for Dalí's idea that the new atomic physics supported a "nuclear mysticism" was the book *God and the Atom*, published in 1945 by English Catholic priest and theologian Ronald Knox (1888–1957: Knox 1945). Dalí decorated the copy of the 1948 Spanish translation he owned (Knox 1948) with drawings of explosions and atoms (Taylor 2016, 6). This religious enthusiasm, however, should not be misunderstood. Both Knox and Dalí described nuclear weapons as terrifying and sinister, while supporting peaceful research on the atom.

In *Leda Atomica* (1949) Dalí revisited the myth, often portrayed in the Renaissance and beyond, of Zeus mutating into a swan to seduce the Queen of Sparta, Leda (the painter's wife Gala, 1894–1982: Maurell 2000). Leda is "atomic" in the sense that, in accordance with the new atomic physics, there is no gravity. The figures are dematerialized and float in the air.

In 1950, Pope Pius XII proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, i.e., that the Mother of Jesus was taken up to Heaven with her physical body. Dalí wrote in the Catholic journal *Études Carmélitaines* that this definition was "the most important historical theme of our epoch," and can only be explained scientifically and represented artistically by his own "nuclear mysticism" through atomic de-materialization and recomposition (Dalí 1952, 71–2), as he tried to do with his painting *Assumpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulina* (1952).

In 1951, Dalí had published a *Mystical Manifesto* on his new religious approach to atomic physics and the arts (Dalí 1951). The "conversion" (although the religious turn of Dalí was more complicated: see Roncalli 2019; Introvigne 2022) of a famous former anticlerical artist, his enthusiasm for Pope Pius XII, and his announcement that a new "nuclear art" was coming as the only true modern art were largely covered by media in Italy. Not the Catholic media only: on April 28, 1952, the influential *Corriere Lombardo* of Milan published a long article on Dalí, atomic issues, and the Pope (Schemeil 1952).

This upset some Italian artists, who believed Dalí had stolen the expression "nuclear art" from them, and the matter ended up in Italian and French courts of law (making in the process all the artists involved even more famous). A main character in this controversy was Milan painter Enrico Baj (1924–2003).

“Nuclear Painting” in Milan

In 1951, Baj exhibited his own “nuclear paintings” at the Galleria San Fedele in Milan. He claimed he had already written at that time a “Manifesto of Nuclear Painting” and created with fellow painter Sergio Dangelo (1932–2022) a Nuclear Art Movement, although they were officially launched in Brussels only in February 1952 (Anzani 1980, 7–8; see Appendix A).

The Nuclear Art Movement was not born in a vacuum. Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), Roberto Crippa (1921–1972), and Cesare Peverelli (1922–2000) never became members of the movement but their dialogue with Baj and Dangelo was crucial for its development (Anzani 1980; Corgnati 1998). Dangelo’s outbursts of forms and colors were clearly indebted to Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), who had indeed alluded to atomic explosions (Sauvage 1962, 55–6).

With Baj and Dangelo, the third musketeer of the Nuclear Art Movement was designer Cesare “Joe” Colombo (1930–1971), better known for his visionary “atomic era” furniture. The movement was genuinely successful in the decade of the 1950s and attracted to his exhibitions organized throughout Europe luminaries such as Asgern Jorn (1914–1973), Piero Manzoni (1933–1863), and Yves Klein (1928–1962).

Jorn saw in the Nuclear Art Movement a continuation of sort of COBRA (the Copenhagen–Brussels–Amsterdam avant-garde), in which he had been involved. In 1953, he wrote to Baj:

It is with great pleasure that I have received documentation as to your artistic work, which appears to me to correspond with that of “COBRA,” whose activity has ceased (Sauvage 1962, 226).

Eventually, Jorn moved to Italy to be closer to his friends Baj and Dangelo, and in 1957 settled in the seaside resort town of Albissola Marina, famous for its production of ceramics (Sala and Debord 1974).

But what was the relationship of the Nuclear Art Movements with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Just like Dalí, the Milan Nuclearists were both fascinated by new physics and terrorized by the bomb. As Baj later reminisced,

We wanted to represent, and even give an artistic embodiment, to the [atomic] energy; but also to its destructive effects, or on the contrary its creative effects—the former as horrific as the plague, the others beneficial for the human beings, their lifestyles, their world. Our interests were never far away from humans (Corgnati 1998, 11).

When it came to the effects of the atomic bombs, Baj was more than an amateur. Although he eventually graduated in Law, he attended the course and passed the exam on Nuclear Physics at the University of Milan with the famous Italian scientist Giovanni Polvani (1892–1970: see Corgnati 1998, 11, where Polvani is mistakenly called “Luigi”). The ambivalence towards the atomic energy was expressed in the Manifesto of 1952 (Appendix 1), and even more in Baj’s painting of the same year *Manifesto bum*:

The forms disintegrate. The new forms of humans are those of the atomic universe. The heads of humans are charged with explosives; every atom is about to burst. The blind, that is, the non-nuclear, ignore this situation. Boom: thoughts=forces. Forces are electric charges; everything is electric charge (Baj 1952).

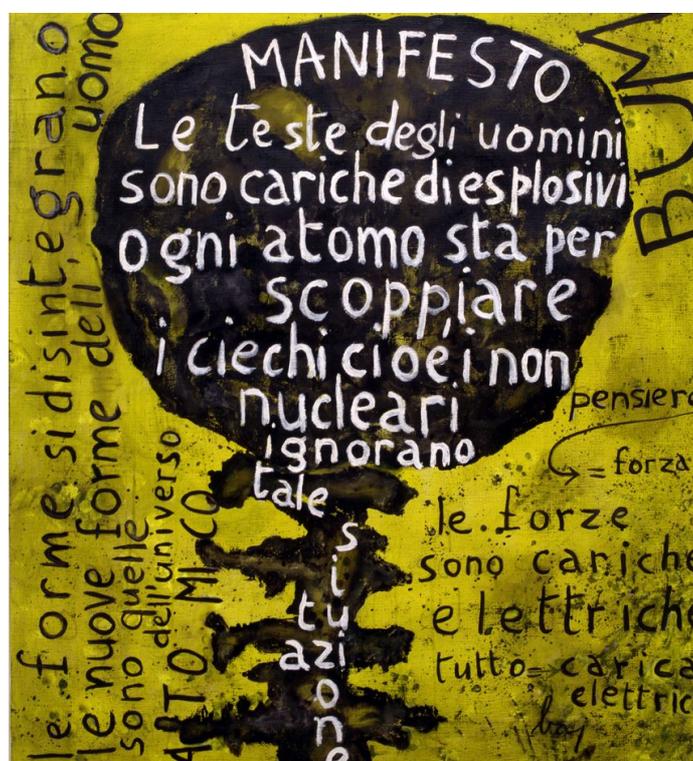


Figure 2. Enrico Baj, *Manifesto bum* (1952).

Baj was indeed the key figure of the movement, and one important for creating in Italy a long-lasting culture scared and suspicious of nuclear weapons. He produced dozens of paintings warning that the proliferation of nuclear weapons could only create a planetary annihilation. *Two Children in the Nuclear Night* (1956) is one of Baj’s most terrifying paintings, and a good example of his anti-nuclear-weapons position.



Figure 3. Enrico Baj, *Two Children in the Nuclear Night* (1956).

Several paintings by Baj represent crazy generals. They anticipate the 1983 hit song by the German singer Nena *99 Luftballons*, where a crazy general mistakes balloons for spacecrafts and orders what looks like a nuclear attack. Indeed, Baj paintings have been often exhibited in Germany and might have inspired the lyricist of the song, Carlo Karges (1951–2002).

But who had invented the terms “nuclear painting” and “nuclear arts”? When he sued Dalí, Baj obtained a preliminary ruling in his favor from the Justice Court of Milan in 1954, mostly because the Spanish artist had not cared to appear. A Paris court refused to enforce the decision against Dalí, and in 1957 the Justice Court of Rome, where the case had been transferred, finally found in favor of the Spanish painter. By that time, however, he had already agreed that he would humor Baj and not refer to himself as “the inventor of nuclear painting” any longer (Taylor 2016, 8–9).

Both parties were also more inclined to settle after their lawyers became aware that the term “nuclear painting” had also been used in manifestos published in 1950 by Germaine Joumard (1898–1950: Taylor 2016, 9) and Italian Futurist Fortunato Depero (1892–1960: Depero 1950).

Baj was also hearing from the lawyers of somebody who had an even earlier priority, Livorno painter Voltolino Fontani (1920–1876), the leader of an artistic movement called Eaismo (Era-Atomica-ismo, or Atomic-Era-ism). Although lawyers exchanged letters and promised to fight (Cagianelli 2002, 37; Fontani 2005–6, 23), it seems that in the end there was no court case (Fontani 2005–6, 24).

“Eaismo” in Livorno

Two painters, Angiolo (Angelo) Siro Pellegrini (1908–1997) and Aldo Neri (1911–2003), and two poets, Marcello Landi (1916–1993) and Guido Favati (1920–1973), joined Fontani from Livorno and nearby Cecina when he founded Eaismo on September 3, 1948, and organized a first exhibition in Florence, at the House of Dante, in May 1949.

Fontani was an interesting character. In 1937, at age 17 and already a painter, Fontani wrote “On Theosophy,” which remained unpublished and showed his familiarity with the works of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) on perception and the arts (Fontani 2005–6, 37). Fontani was continuing a tradition inaugurated in the city of Livorno with the presence there between 1908 and 1923 of Belgian symbolist painting Charles Doudelet (1861–1938), who was in contact with the Theosophical Society and other esoteric organizations. The presence of Doudelet in Livorno was the catalyst for the flourishing of a generation of local artists interested in Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and Spiritualism (Cagianelli 2009, 2021).

This was the generation of Livorno artists before Fontani. In the city, however, another strong tradition was the landscape painting, often compared to Impressionism, of the so-called Macchiaioli. The tradition persisted long after the death of its most illustrious representatives, Silvestro Lega (1826–1895), Telemaco Signorini (1835–1901), and Giovanni Fattori (1825–1908), and by the time of World War II had become somewhat repetitious and academic. Mario Puccini (1869–1920), a pupil of Fattori and an “involuntary Van Gogh” (Marchioni 2021) who spent time in psychiatric hospitals, had still been a creative voice in the wake of the Macchiaioli, but he had also died in 1920.

In 1945, a “Modern Artistic Group” (Gruppo Artistico Moderno, GAM) was founded in Livorno “with the specific aim of opposing the Macchiaioli tradition and prepare the way for the avant-garde” (Fontani 2005–6, 9). One of GAM’s founders was Fontani. The GAM organized three exhibitions, in 1945, 1946, and 1948. During the third exhibition, in October 1948, the Manifesto of Eaismo was launched by Fontani, Pellegrini, Neri, Landi, and Favati (Favati et al. 1948; see Appendix 2).

Dalí started painting *Uranium and Atomica* immediately after the Hiroshima bombing, but as an organized movement devoted to an “atomic art” Eaismo predates all the others (Cagianelli 2002, 36). While Dalí was both terrorized by the atomic bomb and enthusiastic about the mystic potential of nuclear physics, and Baj ended up focusing on the risk of annihilation, the artists from Livorno were somewhere in the middle. Fontani and his friends were even accused by critics such as journalist and artist Milziade Torelli (1910–1989), in the predominantly left-wing Tuscany of their time, of being in favor of nuclear weapons (Torelli 1948), while they were in fact trying to exorcize them through the arts.

Torelli and other critics might have overlooked (Fontani and Battisti 2020, 15) that, in the conclusion of their Manifesto, the Eaisists had written that

It should be clarified, however, that the movement does not extol the atomic age, tremendous and evil, nor is it inspired by the phenomenon of that tragic human progress that generated it in its external and mechanical aspects. EAISM will express the tragedy of the 20th century by being inspired by the sense of that tragedy, that is, the sense of humans plunged to live in it, seeking to restore again in humans, and translate into works, the shattered balance of the equation humanity-world (Favati et al. 1948, 11).

Indeed, Fontani himself believed that after Hiroshima there was no room for the sweet Spiritualism inspired by Theosophy of his pre-World-War-II works. Fontani’s 1948 work *Grafodinamica (Dinamica di Assesamento o Frattura e Coesione)* [Graphodynamics (Dynamics of Settlement or Fracture and Cohesion)] was a manifesto of Eaismo in itself, and a statement of its persuasion that both the bombings and the new science of the atom required a new way of painting.

Several other paintings, including *Nuclear Composition* of 1954 and *Nuclear* of 1958, are representative of Fontani’s continuing focus on the atomic theme.



Figure 4. Voltolino Fontani, *Grafodinamica* (*Dinamica di Assesamento o Frattura e Coesione*) (1948).

The meditation on the consequences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was shared by the other Eaists. Pellegrini's *Macerie* (Rubble, 1949), on the disasters left by the bombs, is known only through a black-and-white reproduction, but his more famous *A Dove Is Shot* (1950) also symbolically denounces the wars.

Not much is known of the Eaist period of Neri, except a picture of him and his paintings at the inaugural Eaist exhibition in Florence. But he maintained a similar style in later works after he moved to Busto Arsizio, Lombardy. Although Landi was primarily a poet, encouraged by his Eaist colleagues he also started painting the anguish of the atomic era, including in his 1949 *Obsession*.

The third Eaist exhibition at the Galleria Pascucci, Grosseto, in 1959—after the second organized in Livorno in 1953—was the last one in the history of Eaismo as an established movement. By then, it has recruited some new artists, including Giuseppe Roffi (1911–1991), Corrado Carmassi (1893–1982) from Collesalvetti, Danilo Gedè (1911–1996) from Livorno, and sculptor Giulio

Guiggi (1912–1994) from Pomarance (Pisa), whose women are reminiscent of those caught by the Vesuvius eruption in Pompeii—or by a nuclear explosion (Micieli 2014). Germano Fontani (1917–1998), Voltolino’s brother, joined the ranks of the Eaist poets (Fontani 2005–6, 22–3).

Giancarlo Cocchia (1924–1987), from Livorno, was among those who participated in the Eaist exhibitions as “independent” artists. His *Fear of the Atomic Bomb* is dated 1965, but still maintains the Eaist spirit. It does not express only the fear mentioned in the title, but the dissolution of the bodies hit by the atomic blast.

In fact, as an organized movement, Eaismo lasted until 1959 only, but even in his later “oneiric” production (Romano 2002) Fontani continued to allude to atomic scenarios. Just like Dalí, Fontani also turned to Catholic religious painting, most notably in the church of Saint Giovanni Gualberto in Valle Benedetta, Livorno (Romano 2002, 59–60).

The same did other Eaists. For example, Neri designed and directed the painting of frescoes on the walls of the “oratorio” (youth center) of Sacconago in Busto Arsizio, today unfortunately almost destroyed (*Varesenoi.it* 2021). Guiggi worked in the church of the Arciconfraternita della Misericordia in Livorno (now the Romanian Orthodox church of the city). Cocchia decorated the church of Our Lady of Lourdes in Livorno’s borough of Collinaia (*La chiesa di Collinaia e la pittura di Giancarlo Cocchia* 1987). Church work was well paid, but it may also indicate that religion was perceived as a source of hope after the Eaists’ confrontation with the threat of the atomic bomb.

Conclusion: The Aesthetics of Senzatomica

As American curator Michael R. Taylor noted, while they might have made the atomic art movements more well-known to the general public, ultimately the court cases were a distraction and contributed to their demise (Taylor 2016, 10). While until a recent re-discovery, where the studies of Francesca Cagianelli played a key role, Eaismo was mostly a local Tuscan phenomenon, Baj’s anti-nuclear-weapons paintings were always popular, not to mention the Italian continuing success of Dalí.

When Senzatomica came, reminiscences of these Italian artistic movements may have played a role in making its campaigns more immediately understandable. Even children through their drawings exhibited at its events contribute to giving to Senzatomica an artistic touch.

There is always something new in how Senzatomica uses the arts to convey its message. What has happened in the last few years is a cooperation with Luca Barcellona, one of the leading international names in the world of calligraphy, who teaches at the Italian Calligraphy Association and has held workshops in Europe, the U.S., Canada, Japan, and Australia. Christopher Calderhead, the editor of the specialized *Letter Arts Review*, wrote in 2009 that

Energy and the virtuosity are the two words that come immediately to mind when I see the work of Luca Barcellona. There are few lettering artists working today with such an artistic range and light, easy control of their tools. Luca manages to straddle two worlds—formal, calligraphic lettering and the street-savvy demi-monde of graffiti—and to work expertly in both (Calderhead 2009, 17).

The image shows the Senzatomica logo, which is the word "Senzatomica" written in a vibrant green, cursive, handwritten style. The letters are fluid and connected, with a sense of movement and energy. The logo is centered on the page.

Figure 5. Luca Barcellona, Senzatomica logo, 2021.

Barcellona designed Senzatomica’s new logo and brand identity. The logo deliberately looks like “handwriting,” emphasizing that each volunteer should “handwrite” the project and create it daily through a personal participation.

In his 2015 encyclical letter on ecology *Laudato Si’* Pope Francis wrote that the cultural “settings” we are surrounded by, of which art is certainly a part, “influence the way we think, feel and act” (Francis 2015, no. 147). Both for the “nuclear” artists and for Senzatomica, art can contribute to change our way of thinking, feeling, and acting, which is also the only path to realistic results in the difficult field of nuclear disarmament.

Appendix I

Manifesto of Nuclear Painting (1952)

The NUCLEAR want to break down all the “isms” of a painting style that inevitably falls into an academicism, whatever its genesis.

They can and they want to reinvent painting. The forms disintegrate: the new forms are those of the atomic universe. The forces are electric charges.

The ideal beauty does not belong to a caste of stupid heroes or robots. But it coincides with the nuclear representation of humans and their space.

Our consciousnesses charged with unforeseen explosives prelude to a FACT.

The nuclear lives in this situation, which only humans with extinguished eyes cannot grasp. The truth does not belong to you, it is inside the ATOM. The nuclear painting documents the search for this truth.

Brussels, February 1, 1952

Enrico Baj

Sergio Dangelo

Appendix II

Manifesto of Eaismo (1948)

On September 3, 1948, at the “Amedeo Modigliani” School of Art [in Livorno] VOLTOLINO FONTANI, ANGIOLO SIRO PELLEGRINI, and ALDO NERI (painting), MARCELLO LANDI, and GUIDO FAVATI (poetry) laid the foundation for the EAIST movement.

EAISM wants to bring art back to its supreme values, that is, to express with essentiality and intimacy our presence in the world. It therefore aims to free artistic expression from the cerebralism in which it has become entangled in the last fifty years. We want to lead it back to the necessary naturalness, intended to express with the greatest humanity of commitment and expressive coherence the problems that press within us, first as human beings and then as artists.

It is called EAISM, that is, Atomic Age Movement (E, A, ism) because the discovery of atomic energy is regarded by EAISTS as the acquisition of a principle that will revolutionize our conception of the universe. It will thus alter that sentimental balance and the morality that found its support and justification in it. Therefore, it is capable of confronting us with problems of incalculable magnitude, such as those posed by the inadequacy and mismatch existing today between the truth and freedom achieved by scientific thought and the retrogressive and traditional stage of our sentimental and moral life.

EAISM therefore does not share, except in certain aspects of them, the programs of other contemporary movements. They do not perceive the urgent need of pursuing with sincerity of purpose and depth of introspection the human values capable of standing firmly (as the only certain points of reference) in the new conception of the universe. Nor do they perceive the new values that announce themselves to us. They conceive art as a refuge for the initiates and as an oasis where they remain enclosed, far away from the complex travails of humanity. In particular, we denounce:

I - FUTURISM, because it proposes to illustrate only the external visual aspects of reality, suggesting a trivial superposition of planes as the mechanical result of a succession of optical images on the retina, rather than the intimate problematic nature of reality.

II - CUBISM, which intends to celebrate only the physical aspects of reality or, in particular cases, pass on it a subjective and partial judgment, without understanding its richness of suggestions, and emptying it of its deep sense of divinity.

III - FAUVISM, because it expresses only the external splendor of the reality, in a funambulistic game of abstract candor, without bothering to penetrate its human motives.

IV - SURREALISM, because it conceives artistic expression as an experiment of automatism of a subconscious nature, instead of employing the means of expression as a conscious way of translating a dominating feeling of the soul into word and figure.

V - EXISTENTIALISM, because it wants to conceive human presence in the world as the effect of a cruel play of forces foreign to us, without bothering instead to affirm the value and essence of humanity, while it is only by pursuing the latter that we can escape bewilderment, vertigo, and nausea.

VI - HERMETICISM, because it reduces the word to a pure phonic and musical fact, denying its natural function as the signifier of a concrete reality, which alone gives to it consistency and value.

VII - ABSTRACTISM, because, in a way similar to what hermeticism does with the words, it adopts signs and colors as elements of a merely arbitrary play, no longer capable of signifying the humanity of the vision, nor of communicating it to the audience.

VIII - LETTRISM, and its closest progenitor, DADAISM, which, in the deliberately elementary nature of their puerile sounds, express of the modern age only the aspect of bewilderment and babbling, instead of seeking what fundamental values of modernity are capable of surviving the disintegration, including spiritual disintegration, which threatens us.

EAISM therefore proposes a new content to artistic inquiry, inviting artists to assess the consistency and solidity of the myths of our perilous humanity, convinced as it is of the need for art to reconnect with the reality of life and its feelings with commitment and sincerity. It also proposes, on a technical level, to express the poetic and figurative results of that investigation with essentiality, conciseness, and intuitiveness.

The above is expressed more distinctively in the answers to the following questions.

Can aspects of Eaism be universally acceptable? May they perhaps have points of contact with other recent movements? Does EAISM constitute only a polemic stance in opposition to other “isms,” or is it the effect of a spontaneous conviction arising from the particular needs of our age? Does it respond to latent needs in our century, or do we forge new isolated and ahistorical ideas? Is the true face of EAISM a formulary of propositions deliberately asserted for the purpose of

distinguishing it from what already exists, or does it derive from an unequivocal logic? Finally: will the realization of Eaist painting and poetry be linked to the enunciation of a particular technical and dialectical procedure, or will it be enacted in total freedom of expression?

The Eaist movement (EAISM), which wants to affirm the need for art to be consistent with the spiritual needs and fundamental problems of the age in which it flourishes, proclaims the need for artistic manifestation to be adequate to the aspects of human thought and human sensibility consequent to the technical-dynamic and philosophical evolution of humanity. The mechanical progress, the great scientific discoveries, and above all the atomic disintegration, constitute the latest milestones of human thought at the end of the second millennium A.D. However, all this so far had no relations with art, notwithstanding the common claim that art needs to be progressive and in tune with the present era.

As for painting, [Pablo] Picasso [1881–1973], [Georges] Braque [1882–1963], [Henri] Matisse [1869–1954], [Marc] Chagall [1887–1985], and to some extent [Amedeo] Modigliani [1884–1920], [Massimo] Campigli [1895–1971], and [Mario] Sironi [1885–1961], only partly felt the need to grasp and express with exhaustive commitment the complex sense of the evolving humanity. More often than not, they took refuge in a refined tasting of the primitive expressions of humanity: Egyptian, early Christian, Negroid [sic], and so on—heedless of the spiritual travail of the age in which we live. This is a symptom warning us of how there are those who may act more because they are driven by snobbish and bourgeois prejudice, than as a result of thoughtful reflections. However, only the latter can put us in a position to identify the irrecusable truths and the needs of our suffering humanity. Indeed, to return to the origins, to the virgin motives of the past, is tantamount to secluding themselves from the evolutive history of humanity, not grasping its meaning in terms of art—which is illogical as well as immoral from an artistic point of view.

The age of the world is in the air and in all things. We carry our oldness in our blood from the time we are children, and a grown man or woman can never be a child again.

Against such positions stands EAIST art, which asserts the urgency of expressing the meaning of our age even in the character it has of no longer allowing for a calm and absorbed mental processing of the data of our sensitivity. It is thus not at odds with today's impressive speed of mechanics, physics, and

chemistry. It also disavows the literary aberrations and fashionable deformities in order to restore art to its universal values.

EAISM will have no points of contact with today's artistic movements because, contrary to what they do, it will always express, and demandingly, in essentiality and intimacy, the human presence in the world, while making use, to express it, of all the contributions, cultural and technical, which this epoch can put at our disposal.

We no longer have, for painting and writing, the calm worldview of a Titian [1489–1576] or of a [Ludovico] Ariosto [1474–1533]. The restlessness brought about by progress, and even the physiological shortcoming effects of the biological changes of the species, make us different.

Nevertheless, the EAIST movement wants to reaffirm the universality of artistic expression, while asserting that art must adapt to the particular needs of our current age, and this without imbuing the works we create with polemical meanings.

In this sense, EAISM stands as a historically valid movement, insofar as it seeks to express the reality of our time and combat all the deliberate abstractions and artistic oddities, which are not art, but cerebralism.

The EAISM is not a list of prescriptions. It advocates the most sincere and free manner of expression, which will enable the artist to grasp and fix the fleetingness and energy of pictorial or poetic emotion. Pictorial emotions, that is, which will not be deflected or vitiated by formulas or technical impediments, because the very need for directness and immediacy of the work's realization will facilitate the artist's task.

The fleeting pictorial or poetic emotion will be realized so virgin and essential that it will still have the energetic appearance of the idea. Indeed, so much is the expressive freedom left by EAISM to the artists, that if the EAIST painters, to render with the necessary essentiality and immediacy the idea that has enlightened them, will feel it unnecessary to dwell on painting certain anatomical details of a figure, because dwelling on them would distract them from their core realization, then they will be authorized to omit these details. The part of the figure they will represent will be able to suggest in itself the existence of what has not been painted.

So what if the EAIST painters will abolish some lines or even a face, or if, in order to express a nude, will trace only the linear harmony of a pelvis or a single shoulder? The amateurs, when confronted with this, may be puzzled or bewildered, may even think that the painting is missing three quarters of the execution, but they will never be able to condemn the EAISTS, as their easy judgment will be, this time, just genuine ignorance. The EAISTS who are truly EAISTS must, through what is expressed, suggest the presence of what they have not paused to realize. The audience could not fail to perceive it, that presence.

It follows that the EAISTS must abolish all complacency for any form of trappings and rhetorical superstructures. They will always seek in painting and writing that bare essentiality, which will enable them to express their intuition according to the universal values of painting and poetry with adherence and consistency, the result of education and sensitivity. To do this, today's humans, thanks to technical-publishing progress, have at their disposal an abundance of cultural materials: publications, monographs, color reproductions, and so on. They can thus achieve for the education of their taste and sensibility a complete knowledge of what has been done in art, and this will facilitate their cultural enrichment. This is appropriate, because the EAISTS must also be masters of technique, capable of expressing fully and comprehensively their vision.

The EAIST painters and poets are not pleased with abstract and difficult modes, much less with impenetrable languages. Since, moreover, the artists, before being artists, will also have to be human in the most complete sense of the word, they will need to express themselves with a richness of different forms.

Looming, in what is said above, is the answer to the asserted need to make art consistent with the dynamism of the world, the need for an EAIST coherence.

It should be clarified, however, that the movement does not extol the atomic age, tremendous and evil, nor is it inspired by the phenomenon of that tragic human progress that generated it in its external and mechanical aspects. EAISM will express the tragedy of the 20th century by being inspired by the sense of that tragedy, that is, the sense of humans plunged to live in it, seeking to restore again in humans, and translate into works, the shattered balance of the equation humanity-world.

And this will necessarily happen: not only because art, if you will, has always, at all times, expressed the sense of the age in which it flourished, but more because

EAISM programmatically proposes to grasp and express the sense of the century in which it flourishes, in elevation of spirit.

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Livorno, October 1948

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Daisaku Ikeda's Philosophy and Soka Gakkai's Actions Against Nuclear Weapons: Reviving Teachings of Nichiren Buddhism

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ABSTRACT: For over a half century, Soka Gakkai has been modernizing Buddhism as a religion relevant for contemporary human societies through a worldwide action promoting peace, culture, and education. This paper offers a tentative answer to the questions, “Can religions actually mobilize for nuclear disarmament?” and “How does religious activism actually influence nuclear weapon issues?” In political realism, nuclear weapon policies are national governments’ sole or exclusive prerogative. Non-state actors do not have any power or decision-making authority. However, bilateral or multilateral political negotiations on nuclear weapon issues between governments have been historically deadlocked. As an actual example of a non-state actor playing a relevant role, this paper will introduce Daisaku Ikeda (President of Soka Gakkai International)’s private diplomacy with the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan during the Cold War, based on the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism founded in the 13th-century Japan, and Soka Gakkai’s peace activities against nuclear weapons today, which continue Ikeda’s campaigns and refer to the same roots.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Disarmament, Citizen Diplomacy, Daisaku Ikeda.

Introduction

In history, disarmament and diplomacy have been exclusive prerogatives of national governments. In particular, they have been the main, if not the only, players in the field of nuclear weapon issues. However, all the bilateral and multilateral negotiations on nuclear weapon issues have been deadlocked. The NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) system, which is the only place where nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states take seats together to work on nuclear disarmament, has been severely weakened. It is also a serious concern that the Ukrainian crisis might encourage other states to consider rearming to

protect their national security. The crisis has generated rapidly mounting tensions towards developing, possessing, and using more lethal weapons.

This paper aims to explore whether non-state actors, especially religious organizations, can be effective players and promote nuclear disarmament. Soka Gakkai is a Buddhist lay association and has members in 192 countries and territories (as of August 2022). It has been a pioneer in promoting worldwide anti-nuclear-weapons activities. The origin of its peace movement and actions was Daisaku Ikeda. Born in 1928, he was the third President (1960–1979) and is from 1979 the Honorary President of Soka Gakkai. He promoted a private diplomacy (or citizen diplomacy) during the Cold War, which was based on the teachings of Nichiren (1222–1282), a monk within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and the founder of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan. Ikeda's private diplomacy achieved significant results in the relations with the USSR and China. It mitigated tensions and fear of nuclear warfare in Northeast Asia.

This paper will explore some fundamental causes of nuclear weapon issues, Nichiren's teachings, Ikeda's philosophy of peace and disarmament, his citizen diplomacy and its outcomes, and Soka Gakkai's actions against nuclear weapons.

1. The Fundamental Causes of Nuclear Weapon Issues

Basically, what are nuclear weapon issues? They are often defined as issues with political, diplomatic, security, and human rights dimensions. All of them are examined according to different points of view. However, nuclear weapon issues are exclusively political matters between nation-states and their governments. It appears that non-state actors do not have any right to make decision, nor authority, on such highly political matters. However, many diplomatic and political negotiations on nuclear weapon issues, such as the Six Party Talks with North Korea in the early 2000s, have been deadlocked.

The Six Party Talks have been stopped since 2007. During the negotiations, North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003, and has continued its nuclear tests. Not only there is no positive progress, the situation is getting worse each year. In fact, the number of nuclear weapon states has been increasing (Hiroshima for Global Peace 2021). It looks like another nuclear arms race is developing today. More countries may be encouraged to rearm, including by acquiring nuclear

weapons, by the lesson of what happened to Ukraine. The role of governments is undoubtedly crucial, but they cannot reach an overall settlement of the issues based only on their political and diplomatic efforts.

What is thus the fundamental cause of the nuclear weapon issues? It is because of confrontations between states. Why do they confront each other? Why do states want to possess nuclear weapons? There are many direct causes, but the root motivation is because of an escalation of fears in the leaders' and people's minds. Fear becomes the fundamental point of view. States tend to develop their nuclear arms in three main cases: (1) under tremendous pressures, (2) feeling isolation, or (3) putting themselves in extremely disadvantageous positions, as it happened to some states in the Second World War and the Cold War. These occasions accelerated the nuclear arms race.

2. Nichiren's Teachings and Views on World Peace in the 13th Century

The origin of the anti-nuclear activities of Daisaku Ikeda and Soka Gakkai can be traced back to Nichiren's teachings and actions in the 13th century.

Because the main concept of his missionary activities was the happiness of the individual person based on Mahayana Buddhism, Nichiren was a rare Japanese figure who focused on the entire world and not on Japan only. Almost all Japanese in the Middle Ages were aware only of Japan. In his writings, Nichiren mentioned the Sanskrit word *jambudvīpa*, in Japanese *enbudai* (閻浮提), which means "the entire world," many times.

It means one of the four continents situated in the four directions around Mount Sumeru. Jambudvīpa is located to the south and is the place where the Buddhas appear. It is often used in the sense of the entire world (see Nichiren 1999, 1238).

It is also a feature of Nichiren Buddhism that, unlike religions that only seek peace of mind, it seeks to practice its principles in contemporary society. At a time when modern concepts of democracy, world peace, and human rights did not exist in the feudal society of Japan, Nichiren admonished the de facto supreme leaders of the military government three times (in 1260, 1271, and 1274). His words were a challenge to create dialogues within the government and with citizens.

Japan faced serious natural disasters and invasion from another country: nationwide poverty, the historical earthquake of Shoka in 1257, and the attacks by Mongolian Empire in 1274 and 1281. In terms of peace building, he suggested that the government should consider a world peace if it sought its peace and security:

If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquillity throughout the four quarters of the land [i.e., the entire world], should you not? (Nichiren 1999, 24).

Also, he admonished the rulers to respect their citizens “A king sees his people as his parents,” he wrote in his 1279 “Offerings in the Snow.” He advised rulers to handle the affairs of the state based on human-centered thoughts. He regarded the citizens as the most important resource of the Japanese land rather than the political leaders. Some may claim that he introduced the principle that sovereignty should reside in the people. However, all his advice was rejected and ignored by the government.

3. Ikeda's Peace Philosophy and Private Diplomacy During the Cold War

Ikeda has consistently stated that cultural exchanges and person-to-person dialogue are the key to mitigating conflicts and supporting inter-state diplomatic relations. He believes it is a direct way to advance the cause of nuclear disarmament in the world. To demonstrate this, we should look at Ikeda's private diplomacy during the Cold War.

In any case, dialogue is the right way, be it at the individual or state levels, to bring peace and stability to our communities. Communities lacking in dialogue eventually result in endless mistrust, suspicion, bitterness and fear, just as a pool of water will stagnate if there are no outlets. We must not forget that feelings will eventually become *idées fixes* and will only increase if let to linger. I believe that the only way to break out from such blind alleys is to be honest and courageous (Ikeda and Kissinger 2008 [1987], 165–66).

In 1960s and 1970s, Ikeda actively conducted his private diplomacy to connect four countries: Japan, China, the USSR, and the United States, trying to mitigate tensions of warfare and the possible use of nuclear weapons. Each government did not have solid communication channels with the others at that time. Japan and the United States did not have official diplomatic channels with China. China had been isolated after their border conflict with the USSR in 1969. Northeast Asia

was a big “powder keg” of the Cold War. Ikeda’s private diplomacy was a form of “low” politics. He visited China and the USSR as a person of religion, culture, and education, following invitations from cultural or educational institutions in those countries. Politicians or people involved in political activities could not be invited because of the political tensions between the countries at that time.

The philosophical base of Ikeda’s actions is the humanism of Nichiren Buddhism. He insisted that mutual distrust creates the political tension that might lead to develop, possess, and eventually use the weapons of mass-destruction.

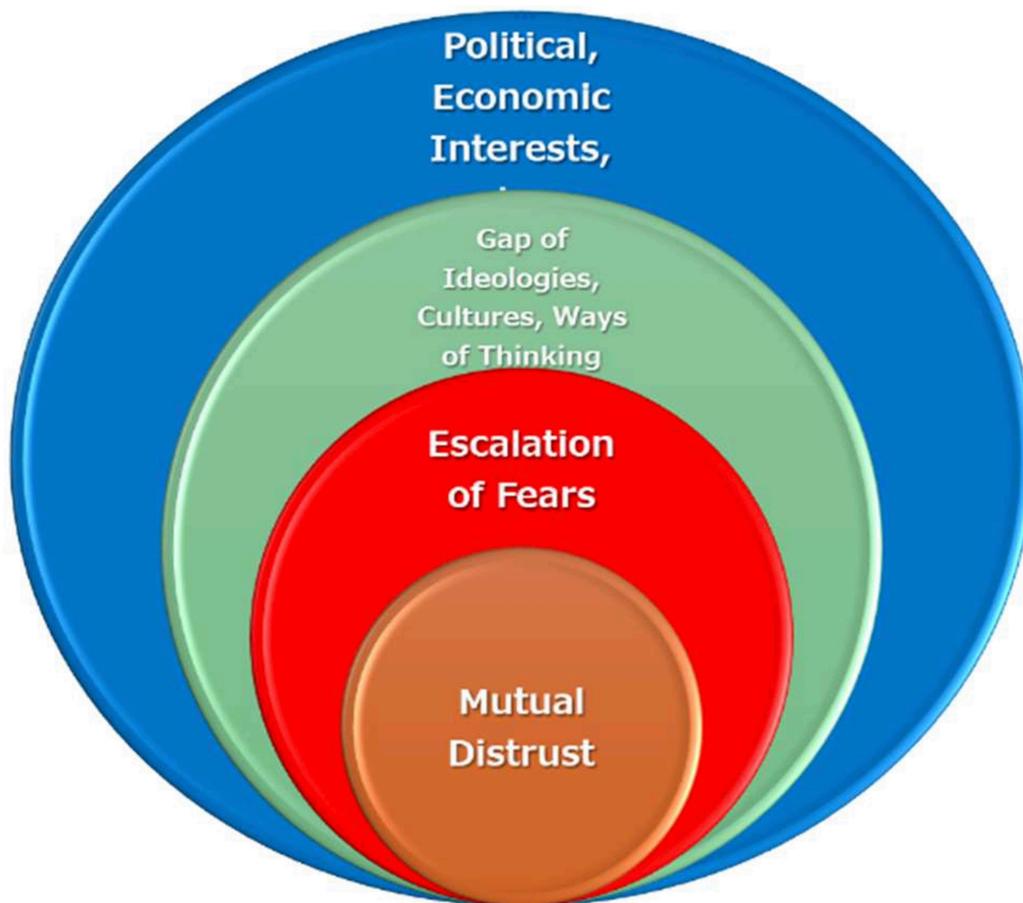


Image 1. Roots of nuclear weapon issues in Ikeda’s thought.

Ikeda advocates overall pluralism, including religious pluralism, and argues in favour of the need to exert efforts to find commonalities among human beings going beyond differences of ethnicity, state, and habits. In terms of religion, his is a clear negation of religious exclusivism. It opposes the ideas that a national religion should dominate a country, that the dominant ethnic group and religion may denounce what is different as heresy. He rejected forms of religion that bind

human freedom and rights by using religious precepts as a tool of seclusion. In fact, the obsession against differences often at work in the religion subconscious is not limited to religion. It can too often also appear in conflicts between ethnic groups and states.

Lecturing at Harvard University in 1993, Ikeda spoke of the Buddhist view that the natural world including humankind exists in interdependent relations.

Buddhism uses the term “dependent origination” (Jpn. *engi* [縁起]) to describe symbiotic relations. Nothing—no one—exists in isolation. Each individual existence functions to bring into being the environment which in turn sustains all other existences. All things, mutually supportive and related, form a living cosmos, what modern philosophy might term a semantic whole. This is the conceptual framework through which Mahayana Buddhism views that natural universe.

Speaking through Faust, [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe [1749–1832] gives voice to a similar vision. “All weaves one fabric; all things give/Power unto all to work and live.” The poet, whose insights now strike us for their remarkable affinity to Buddhism, was criticized by his young friend [Johann Peter] Eckermann [1792–1854] as “lacking confirmation of his presentiments.” The intervening years have offered a steadily swelling chorus of affirmation for the prescience of Goethe’s, and Buddhism’s, deductive vision (Ikeda 1993).

The “Declaration Calling for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons 1957” by Ikeda’s mentor Josei Toda (1900–1958), the second President of Soka Gakkai, was the first declaration demanding the abolition of nuclear weapons in Japan (Toda 1957). Ikeda noted that the use of nuclear weapons itself is a serious challenge to the dignity of life and the right of humanity to its survival.

Also as an outcome of Ikeda’s private diplomacy, Japan and China officially normalized their diplomatic relations in 1972, and the political tension between China and the USSR was relaxed in 1974. Ikeda’s proposal calling for the normalisation of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations (formulated on September 8, 1968, in Japan) was a trigger to persuade both the Chinese and Japanese governments to start discussion for a normalisation of their relationships.

On the other hand, in his meeting with Alexei Kosygin (1904–1980), the USSR Prime Minister, at the Kremlin in 1974, Ikeda obtained Kosygin’s promise not to attack China. He then played a role of messenger to convey the USSR’s position to the US leaders, including Henry Kissinger, and the Chinese government (Saionji 2002, 285). His private diplomacy sharply reduced risks of warfare and nuclear weapon use in Northeast Asia.

Ikeda: China is concerned about the Soviet's approach to it.

Kosygin: The Soviet Union has no intension of either attacking China or isolating it.

Ikeda: Can I pass on to Chinese leaders what you told me?

Kosygin: Certainly (Nakazawa 2004, 61–2).

Ikeda sent to Japanese media his recollections of their dialogue, praising Kosygin's words on nuclear abolition, a subject on which he spent most of the meeting's time.

On the last day of my stay in the Soviet Union, I had an opportunity to have a dialogue with Prime Minister Kosygin. It took about an hour and a half, and I expressed my convictions regarding nuclear issues. Prime Minister [Kosygin] stated clearly that the Soviet Union had no intension of using nuclear weapons and that it was seriously considering their total abandonment through due process. He was not thinking of isolating China. I make it a point to accept things said by people of responsibility. Perhaps, he shared his innermost feelings because I was a civilian and not a politician. I also confirmed in China its strong decision and will towards total abolition of nuclear weapons. It seems to me that all mankind share that wish. I asked myself how could the wishes be bridged. There is no other way than for the top leaders of the world to come together to continue patiently to talk about the matter. At the same time, the key lies in having a civilian exchange on a broad front (Ikeda 1974).

Ikeda compared the relation of politics and economics, and other fields. and cultural, educational, and peaceful exchanges to the relation of a ship and the sea.

Assuming that a ship represents politics and economy, then the sea on which the ship sails is the ties between people. At times, the ship may be wrecked but as long as there is sea, comings and goings will continue. Culture, education and peaceful exchanges are, therefore, the right way that will build eternal friendship (Kobayashi 2012, 60).

His private diplomacy proved that non-state actors, especially people of religion, culture, and education are influential in nuclear disarmament.

4. Japanese Soka Gakkai's Actions Against Nuclear Weapons

The atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 are the common origin and main motivation of the activities of all the Japanese civil society organizations against nuclear weapons, including the Japanese Soka Gakkai. The Japanese Soka Gakkai is Japan's first organization that called for abolishing nuclear weapons in Japan, as demonstrated by the 1957 speech delivered by its Second President Toda.

When all is said and done, Soka Gakkai was the first organization in Japan that came out against nuclear weapons. Its founding chairman was an educator and the organizations heads anti-nuclear-weapons [campaigns] with its numerous publications on testimonies of *higaisha* (survivors) and anti-war [activists] (my interview with Katsuko Kataoka, Secretary General of Japan Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War [JPPNW], Former North Asia Regional Vice-President of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons [IPPNW], Professor Emeritus of University of Hiroshima, October 31 2012; in Tobisawa 2018, 512).

Soka Gakkai in Japan now includes 8.27 million households, with an estimated about 10 million members. It is one of the most active organizations against nuclear weapons, and continues to conduct various activities promoting this aim throughout the world.

For example, it has been active in recording, publishing, and exhibiting the experience of atomic bomb survivors, the *hibakusha*, over half a century (see Hiroshima Soka 2020a). It was very difficult for the survivors to share their experience, or even to confess that they were survivors in the Japanese society at that time. In fact, they were discriminated, and they and their families had serious disadvantage in getting jobs and even getting married. For example, there was a rumor that survivors will have malformed children because of the radiations. Therefore, many of them preferred not to discuss their experience. The Japanese Soka Gakkai regarded as one of the most important anti-nuclear-weapon activities to pass the firsthand experience, told in the survivors' authentic voice, down to the new generations. It was not only for restoring the survivors' human rights in the society; it was also regarded as significant for the future of Japan and the world. In 2005, the Soka Gakkai Women's Peace Committee produced a movie based on the experience of 180 women survivors (see Soka Gakkai 2015).

Such a large and serious issue may not be resolved in one generation. In fact, today, many anti-nuclear-weapons civil society organizations suffer a serious stagnation in their activities, mainly due to the aging of the survivors, the fading memories of nuclear bombing, as well as a shortage of successors willing to take on the mission. However, Soka Gakkai has succeeded in nurturing a young generation that feels responsible for anti-nuclear activities, by involving members of the Soka Gakkai Youth Peace Committee as well as its Youth Division Members, who plan and manage anti-nuclear exhibitions and signature-collecting campaigns against nuclear weapons.

The starting point can be traced back to Toda bequeathing Ikeda and others his instructions to carry on nuclear abolition activities (Hiroshima Soka 2020b). It is in line with the teaching of Buddhism called “Oneness of Mentor and Disciple” (Soka Gakkai 2010) that disciples will carry on to achieve the wish of their mentor (Soka Gakkai 2021). This is a thought that enables enterprises and activities to perpetuate themselves; at the same time, it is a wisdom that prompts young people to act spontaneously, and is applicable to all organizations and systems. It may be a successful model. It can be enormously effective in prompting activities that require long-term commitment across generations.

Conclusion

The governments around the world have long believed that diplomacy and disarmament are their exclusive responsibilities. Needless to say, there are no other political decision makers. I do not intend to emphasize the limitations of government diplomacy; rather, its narrowness, and suggest that in solving problems it will be more effective from a long-term perspective to seek comprehensive diplomacy in collaboration with non-state actors, especially religious organizations.

Ikeda and Soka Gakkai's anti-nuclear-weapons activities originate in the Nichiren Buddhist philosophy of the 13th century. Based on this religious philosophy, Ikeda conducted private diplomacy based on cultural, educational, and art exchanges with China and the USSR, and other Communist countries, at a time when diplomatic channels were closed, as well as with the United States and many other countries. According to him, all breakdowns of relations between countries that could lead to developing nuclear weapons stem from mutual distrust, from conflict of political interests, and from obsessions with national and religious differences nurtured over time. He believed that overcoming those issues and nurturing mutual understanding would finally lead to the abolition of nuclear arms.

The example of the dialogues Ikeda conducted with leading figures in the world shows that “low” politics consisting of cultural exchanges can at times be more efficient than “high” politics in resolving nuclear issues and inter-state political tensions, as well as the Cold War context. Ikeda's private diplomacy was founded on the extension of his dialogues, and was true to his commitment to

“sustainability.” He received important statements in his person-to-person dialogues with the leaders. This was an example of how a private diplomacy that has a religious background can draw out true intentions not necessarily made public in formal inter-state relations or between politicians.

Ikeda found value in sustaining the dialogue, and in recognizing differences of views rather than necessarily arriving at a conformity of opinions. This is the opposite of inter-state diplomacies, where disagreement would result in a sudden cooling of relations. Ikeda’s private diplomacy proved that non-state actors that refer to a religious philosophy can dramatically contribute to worldwide nuclear disarmament and to preventing states from developing, possessing, and using nuclear weapons.

Today, Soka Gakkai continues to promote a long-term grassroots movement against nuclear weapons, which is based on the teachings, philosophy, and actions of Nichiren and Ikeda, and involves a significant number of younger generation members. In Japan, they have published and spread testimonies of survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those people have been unfairly discriminated throughout their lives.

As mentioned earlier, the nuclear weapons issue may not be resolved in a generation. Therefore, the Soka Gakkai’s style of activities, based on the Buddhist spirit of “Oneness of Mentor and Disciple,” offers a successful model to work on such a long-term mission. Ikeda and Soka Gakkai embody the teachings of Nichiren, which treasure dignity of life, in their present-day actions against nuclear weapons.

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Senzatomica: Transforming the Human Spirit for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons

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ABSTRACT: Senzatomica is a campaign for total nuclear disarmament promoted by the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai, an organization affiliated with Soka Gakkai International. The article is divided into two parts. The first part provides some information on the campaign, and on the exhibitions that constitutes its main—but not only—tool for raising awareness on nuclear weapons. The second part examines the Buddhist approach that is characteristic of the Senzatomica campaign, and which makes it different from many other initiatives for nuclear disarmament that also exist in Italy

KEYWORDS: Senzatomica, Nuclear Disarmament, Inner Disarmament, Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai in Italy, Buddhism in Italy, Buddhism and Nonviolence.

The Senzatomica Campaign

Senzatomica (“Without Atomic”) is a campaign for total nuclear disarmament promoted by the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai. The campaign is part of a broader international anti-nuclear movement that has reframed the debate on nuclear weapons by abandoning the geopolitical perspective of national security, and embracing the perspective of what it calls human security. In this perspective, the catastrophic effects of nuclear weapons on our health, societies, and the environment must be at the center of all discussions about nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

Outlawing and eliminating nuclear weapons is essential for a genuine human-centered security founded on respect for basic rights, including rights to education, health care, decent work, and a clean environment.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), a movement of non-governmental organizations in 60 countries, believes that discussions about nuclear weapons must focus not on narrow concepts of national security, but on the effects of these weapons on human beings—on our health, our societies, and the environment on which we all depend.

The processes that led to treaties banning landmines in 1997 and cluster munitions in 2008 demonstrated the importance of adopting a humanitarian-based discourse. New political coalitions were formed, longstanding deadlocks were broken, and two whole classes of weapons were outlawed. ICAN adopted a similar approach for nuclear weapons (ICAN 2022). Senzatomica—an official partner of ICAN—shares this approach.

One of the most important tools used during the Senzatomica campaign has been the itinerant multimedia exhibition “Senzatomica: Transforming the Human Spirit for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons” (Senzatomica 2022).

By means of evocative images, allegorical installations, and explanatory texts on panels, the exhibition aims to stimulate the reflection on nuclear disarmament. The exhibition is also an opportunity to reflect on wide-ranging issues, such as the social responsibility of science; responsibility towards future generations; the environmental impact of nuclear testing; and arms’ costs.

The exhibition Senzatomica had its official opening in Florence on 26 March 2011. Since then, it has been requested by another 80 Italian cities large and small. It has been visited by more than 365,000 people, more than 40% of whom were primary, middle, and high school students (information obtained from interviews with Senzatomica activists; I also rely on my own experience as a member of the Scientific Committee of Senzatomica).

The Senzatomica campaign is made up of ordinary people: citizens of all ages, professions, cultures, and economic status. They are members of the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai, who put the peace commitment of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282) into concrete actions: in this case, actions for nuclear disarmament.

Young people are leading the campaign. More than 15,000 volunteers have been actively involved in the exhibitions in the 80 cities, in roles such as receptionists, guides, contact persons with the media, institutions, and schools; production of didactic materials; concerts, performances, and other activities in

support of the exhibition. But in general all members of the Italian Soka Gakkai know about the campaign and promote it, at least by talking to other people.

Senzatomica is involved in many advocacy activities with parliamentarians and local representatives, and dialogues and collaborates with many other organizations that are committed to nuclear disarmament. They include organizations of scientists, such as USPID-Scientists for Disarmament, and the Pugwash Conferences, but also the Red Cross and the Italian Peace and Disarmament Network. In general, Senzatomica is willing to dialogue with all but has a policy of sharing joint initiatives only with organizations with a high level of reputation and seriousness, scientific rigor, and nonviolent approach.

Origins and Goals of Senzatomica

At the origin of Senzatomica is the teaching of Daisaku Ikeda. He has been defined as a peacebuilder, a Buddhist philosopher, an educator, and a poet. He was president of the Soka Gakkai lay Buddhist organization in Japan from 1960 to 1979, and is the founding president of Soka Gakkai International (SGI). SGI is one of the world's largest and most diverse community-based Buddhist associations. It promotes a philosophy of empowerment and social engagement for peace. Ikeda is also the founder of the Soka Schools System and several international institutions promoting peace, culture, and education (“Soka Schools” 2021).

Every year, Ikeda publishes a “Peace Proposal,” which explores the interrelation between core Buddhist concepts and the diverse challenges global society faces in its effort to realize peace and human security.

Nuclear disarmament is a recurring theme in all Ikeda's peace proposals, in the footsteps of his mentor Josei Toda (1900–1958), but in 2009 he dedicated an entire proposal, entitled “Building Global Solidarity Toward Nuclear Abolition,” to the necessity and urgency of abolishing nuclear weapons (Ikeda 2009). Senzatomica is the Italian response to this call for global solidarity.

Daisaku Ikeda's proposal on “Building Global Solidarity Toward Nuclear Abolition” contains suggestions for a five-part plan to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. It is addressed to the states that have nuclear weapons, to the United Nations, to all states (both nuclear and non-nuclear), but above all it is

addressed to the citizens of the world, calling them to clearly manifest their will for the outlawing of nuclear weapons.

The aim of the Senzatomica campaign is for Italian citizens to become aware of the nuclear threat, to become protagonists of a parallel diplomacy, to reject the paradox of security based on nuclear weapons, and—together with the citizens of all countries—to claim the right to a world free of nuclear weapons.

An increasing awareness of nuclear weapons is fundamental. Although there has been a lot of talk in recent months about the nuclear threat because of the war in Ukraine, this subject has basically been ignored by the media for decades.

Informing about the existence of nuclear weapons and the threat they pose to humankind is essential, especially because there is a false narrative about them, a sly and ambiguous reversal of perspective whereby they are portrayed as peacekeeping tools. This is the paradox of deterrence, a peace based on the terror of mutually assured destruction: a lie, which has made the world less secure.

The aim of informing about nuclear weapons is not to frighten, but to raise the level of awareness and critical capacity of choice. Informed citizens will claim their own right to survive and to protect the next generations. In addition, they can become actors in effective actions of parallel diplomacy, i.e., that form of diplomacy characterized by informal and unofficial contacts and activities between private citizens or groups of individuals. It does not replace official diplomacy, but explores possible solutions outside the sphere of formal talks.

These objectives are intermediate steps, and converge in a common direction, which is the final goal of the campaign: the approval of a treaty banning nuclear weapons. This goal was achieved in 2017, when the United Nations General Assembly approved the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), but the campaign has certainly not concluded its mission. Now, the goal is for Italy to ratify the TPNW. The ultimate aim is the total elimination of nuclear weapons.

As the preamble of the TPNW states, a sense of urgency to ensure the security of all humanity lies at the foundation of this treaty. Its primary purpose is protecting the right to live of all the people with whom we share this planet, and ensuring the survival of generations to come.

Roots and Inspiration of Senzatomica

The Senzatomica campaign has a Buddhist approach. In general, peace building by peaceful means is at the core of the activities of SGI, following the path of Nichiren Daishonin's teaching, especially in his most important treatise.

On July 16, 1260, Nichiren presented the treatise titled *Rissho Ankoku Ron*, literally "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land," to the political ruler of the day. This was a passionate cry for a return to the original purpose of Buddhism, securing the peace and happiness of the people. For Nichiren, this was an objective that could only be achieved through a philosophy that rigorously upholds the infinite dignity and potential of each individual.

If we wish first of all to bring security to the nation and to pray for our present and future lives, then we must hasten to examine and consider the situation and take measures as soon as possible to remedy it (Nichiren 1999, 24).

Nichiren's impassioned remonstrance to the authorities was motivated by his deep wish for peace and happiness for the people. Specifically, he was speaking out to prevent the outbreak of war in the form of internal strife and foreign invasion.

The Buddhist approach of Senzatomica is evident in the two pillars outlined in the above mentioned Daisaku Ikeda's Peace Proposal of 9 September 2009, entitled "Building Global Solidarity Toward Nuclear Abolition." These pillars are: respect for the dignity of life in all its manifestations; and strong belief that an individual transformation will lead to positive changes in both local and international communities.

With regard to the first pillar—respect for the dignity of life in all its manifestations—, Ikeda often quotes a fundamental Buddhist teaching:

Life is the most precious of all treasures. One day of life is more valuable than all the treasures of the major world system (Nichiren 1999, 955).

In this perspective, all the treasures in the universe cannot replace a single life. The life of each individual is a priceless treasure full of infinite possibilities and nothing is more precious or has a higher value than life.

The destruction of any nation or state is unacceptable, even if it were to be justified as essential to the maintenance of world peace. Likewise, the sacrifice of ordinary citizens cannot be justified in the name of achieving security for the state (Ikeda 2009, 5).

The second pillar—the strong belief that an individual transformation will lead to positive changes in local/international communities—is the most original aspect of Ikeda’s thought on nuclear disarmament.

In Ikeda’s vision, nuclear disarmament can only be the result of a profound transformative path in relationships, both between states and between people. In fact, Ikeda believes that the real significance of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons is by no means limited to their physical elimination. Rather, it involves transforming the very nature of states and interstate relations.

If we are to put the era of nuclear terror behind us, we must struggle against the real “enemy.” That enemy is not nuclear weapons per se, nor is it the states that possess or develop them. The real enemy that we must confront is the ways of thinking that justify nuclear weapons; the readiness to annihilate others when they are seen as a threat or as a hindrance to the realization of our objectives (Ikeda 2009, 12).

This way of thinking—and this destructive option—operates at all levels of relationships: between states (with various forms of “destruction” of the enemy, of which nuclear weapons are the highest manifestation); between communities; between groups; between individuals.

The concept of transformation is essential. It begins with the transformation of the way of thinking, especially of the way of thinking that considers the option “total destruction of the other” as a viable way to resolve a conflict. Consequently, disarmament must first of all be “inner disarmament.”

“Inner disarmament” is a non-violent approach to conflicts of whatever nature for their transformation. It is transformation guided by dialogue, animated by creativity in the search for solutions based first and foremost on the recognition of the dignity of the other.

Pope Francis, who is very committed to nuclear disarmament, also draws attention to the need for a moral disarmament, which he calls “integral disarmament.” Worthy of note, in this perspective, is the address to participants in the International Symposium “Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament,” of November 10, 2017 (Francis 2017).

In that message, the Pope quoted the words of his predecessor John XXIII (1881–1963) in the 1963 encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*:

Unless this process of disarmament be deep and complete, and reach men's very souls, it is impossible to stop the arms race, or to reduce armaments, or—and this is the main thing—to abolish them entirely (John XXIII 1963, no. 113).

Ikeda often strongly emphasizes the power of dialogue:

The power to move people at the deepest level is not found in formulaic assertions or dogma, but in words that issue from a person's experience and carry the weight of that lived reality. Exchanges conducted in such language can mine the rich veins of our common humanity, bringing back to the surface glistening spiritual riches that will illuminate human society. This is the conviction that has supported me over the years as I have conducted dialogue with people of different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. It is indeed in the encounter between people whose paths in life have differed that our eyes are opened to vistas that would not otherwise have been visible. It is in the resonance of people encountering each other in the fullness of their humanity that the melodies of a new creative energy unfold. This is the true significance of dialogue: It can serve as a treasure house of possibilities, a dynamo for the creation of history (Ikeda 2016, 10).

But dialogue is not simple. Ikeda outlines the spiritual effort of a transformative dialogue:

Peace is always a competition between resignation and hope. Dialogue is the arduous and continuous effort to remove all obstacles that obscure our common humanity. Authentic dialogue is a deep and uninterrupted spiritual effort that seeks to bring about fundamental human transformation both in ourselves and in others (Ikeda 2007).

In the *Lotus Sutra*, there are figures who embody the capacity for dialogue: for example, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, who seek wisdom with perseverance and diligence, or the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, who bows respectfully before anyone, with absolute conviction of the existence of the Buddha nature in himself and others, and with unshakable faith in the infinite possibilities of change.

From this point of view, the teachings of Daisaku Ikeda and the nonviolent tradition of Buddhism converge in the general paradigm of nonviolence. The ways of dialogue, soft power, inner disarmament, are not naïveté, nor do they make people vulnerable. The dialogue master is not a loser, a weak person, but a person of exceptional self-control, with an extraordinary capacity to embrace the other, and a tenacious attitude to protect life.

Everybody may become a dialogue master. There is consistency with Buddhist teachings in the behavior of Senzatomica campaigners. The volunteers are not experts per se but common people who studied the issue, passing from “not

knowing” to “knowing and willing to get other people to know.” They are ordinary citizens, who feel in their lives “the competition between resignation and hope” and ask themselves the crucial question: what can I do? What can I do for peace in my daily life? At what point is my inner disarmament?

All campaigners participate in a training on the Senzatomica campaign’s topics of nuclear disarmament and on its Buddhist inspiration, and deepen the link between exterior disarmament and inner disarmament. They study, and put what they study into practice. They challenge themselves in their daily lives to practice disarmament in their family, social, and work relationships. By making the decision to take daily action to reduce conflict with others, to speak with the persons in front of them, to share their humanity on its deepest level, they are fighting against their own sense of powerlessness, which on its greatest scale manifests itself as passive acceptance of the existence of nuclear weapons.

The practice of dialogue is a very visible characteristic of the campaigners. It emerges in their dealing with visitors to Senzatomica’s exhibition, with institutions at all levels, and with other organizations.

I find this aspect especially remarkable. Determined to inherit the spirit of the *hibakusha*, those who survived the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, Senzatomica’s campaigners continue to move forward in building a world liberated from the nuclear deterrence theory, and in which all world citizens are encouraged to dialogue with each other, creating a culture of peace and trust.

On a potentially controversial issue such as nuclear weapons, there is a constant search for common ground with the interlocutor, the construction of an area of mutual sharing and recognition, an effort to carefully listen to the reasons of the other. Ultimately, rather than an attempt to convince, Senzatomica is about a firm determination to create value in relationships.

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Reviews

Claire Newell, Katherine Rushton, Sophie Barnes, Janet Eastham, and Jack Leather. “Call Bethel.” Produced by *The Telegraph*, London, UK, June 21–July 12, 2022. Podcast. Available on YouTube’s *The Telegraph* channel.

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

Introduction

Between June 21 and July 12, 2022, the British daily *The Telegraph* released four episodes of the podcast “Call Bethel” and four companion articles. The series described how the Jehovah’s Witnesses handle allegations of sexual abuse. It claimed that they tend not to report abusers to the police, focusing on two United Kingdom cases concerning two British ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses who were convicted of sexual abuse of children called Peter Stewart and Clifford Whitely, and on a case in the United States, in Montana.

The Telegraph’s series also revamped the sensational allegations, launched in an article published in the United States by *The Atlantic* in 2019, that the Jehovah’s Witnesses keep one or more “secret databases” with the names of their members accused of sexual abuse (Quenqua 2019). The implication is that if this list was given to the authorities or to lawyers representing the victims, perpetrators who otherwise escape prosecution would be identified, punished, and prevented from harming other children.

I will examine the Stewart, Whitely, and Montana cases in detail, and discuss the database issue. Preliminarily, however, I believe it is necessary to put *The Telegraph*’s series into context. Unbeknownst to the journalists who produced it, in the same months when they were preparing their podcast many scholars of

religions were busy debating an issue that is central for the series: should the legal protection of the confessional privilege be eliminated in cases of sexual abuse of children? This discussion started in the decade of the 2010s, when Ireland passed in 2015 a law called “Children First Act” and in 2017 the final report of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was released (Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse 2017).

More recently, the academic community has discussed in sessions organized at several leading scholarly conferences the comprehensive book *Religious Confession and Evidential Privilege in the 21st Century*, edited by British barrister Mark Hill and by A. Keith Thompson, professor and associate dean at the University of Notre Dame Australia School of Law, which includes chapters about several countries and religions (Hill and Thompson 2021).

I have reviewed the book myself (Introvigne 2022a), and would shortly summarize the discussion here. The Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches regard auricular confession, where penitents report their sins to a priest to receive absolution, as a sacrament. They consider the secret of the confession sacred and inviolable. Priests cannot reveal secrets learned in confession to anybody, including their bishops or secular authorities, under penalty of excommunication. While Protestants in general were critical of auricular confession, the Anglican and some Lutheran Churches maintained it, although its practice is now comparatively rare.

European states protected the secrecy of confession based on their recognition of, or agreements with, national churches. For instance, English law protected the secret of confessions to the Anglican Church but did not offer the same protection to Catholic priests who heard confessions. Although a special protection for national churches still exists in several countries, the Hill-Thompson book describes an evolution that started in the 19th century and led democratic countries to protect a “confessional privilege” for all religious organizations where devotees confessed their sins to the organizations’ authorized personnel.

As the book demonstrated, in the United States and elsewhere courts noted that the Catholic model where the penitent confesses to one priest is not the only possible form of confession. They protected the secrecy also of confessional practices when more than one authorized minister or elder receives the

confession, notes may be taken, and they may be confidentially shared with the upper echelons of the religious organization for advice or stored. This happened in cases concerning Reformed denominations and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as the Mormon Church. As we will see, this is very much relevant for *The Telegraph's* story.

This movement to extend the confessional privilege was somewhat reversed in the 21st century, with the scandals of the pedophile clergy in the Catholic Church and other denominations. Voices were heard that the legal protection of the confessional privilege should be eliminated in cases of sexual abuse of children. Laws were passed to this effect in Ireland in 2015, in most Australian states and territories, in some states of the U.S., and elsewhere in the world. These laws mandate that even when revelations about sexual abuse of children are received in confession, priests or other religious personnel should immediately inform the police.

As also detailed in the Hill-Thompson book, both the Catholic Church and the main Orthodox Churches reacted by instructing their priests to violate these laws and, if necessary, go to jail rather than breaching the secret of the confession. The same book presents different opinions and the arguments of the critics of the anti-confession laws, who argue that they violate religious liberty, open a breach that would eventually destroy the protection of confession also in fields other than sexual abuse of children, and are of little practical effect, because criminals would not confess their crimes to priests or other religious ministers if they know that they may be reported to the police.

The Telegraph's series presents the issue, which was at the center of the Montana case, whether the confessional privilege should suffer exceptions in cases of sexual abuse of children, as if it was something peculiar to the Jehovah's Witnesses. They are described as a uniquely stubborn organization when it comes to defend the confidentiality of information obtained in contexts similar to confession.

In fact, as we have seen, the matter has been one of the most debated among scholars of religion and law in recent years, a context *The Telegraph* completely ignores. Had it considered it, *The Telegraph* might have compared the position of the Jehovah's Witnesses to other religions, including the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches.

While the latter order their priests to violate any law that would ask them to report information about sexual abuse of children obtained in confession and suffer the legal consequences—which are declared preferable to excommunication and ultimately eternal damnation—the Jehovah’s Witnesses instruct their elders to comply with the laws of the land.

Where the confessional privilege was granted without exception—the situation discussed in the Montana case—, they relied on it as did other religious organizations. When the laws call for mandatory reporting in cases of sexual abuse, they obey the laws. Today, Jehovah’s Witnesses go one step further, and instruct their elders, when children are at risk, to report credible allegations of child sexual abuse to the police even in jurisdictions that do not have mandatory reporting laws (“Jehovah’s Witnesses Scripturally Based Position on Child Protection” 2020 [2018], no. 5; see also Introvigne 2021a, 67–73).

Two other methodological problems negatively affect the reliability of *The Telegraph*’s series. The first is that it relies almost exclusively on information received by apostate ex-members and their lawyers. “Apostate” is not an insult. It is a technical term used by sociologists to designate those ex-members who become militant critics of the religious organizations they have left. Most ex-members are not “apostates,” but only apostates talk to the media. Of course, they often offer partial and biased accounts (Introvigne 2022b).

The Telegraph’s podcast includes less than thirty seconds where Zoe Knox, a well-known scholar, shortly refers to some beliefs of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but neither she nor any other academic is interviewed about the criticism at the core of the series. After the very short guest appearance of Knox, the narrator expresses *The Telegraph*’s beliefs that “Aside from academics, the people who are really experts on this are those who’ve lived it: former Jehovah’s Witnesses.” By “former Jehovah’s Witnesses” *The Telegraph* means the apostates, a common media fallacy.

The reporters’ excuse for talking only to the apostates (and their lawyers) is that “It’s hard to speak frankly to people who are still Jehovah’s Witnesses, because they think everyone else is worldly and could be doing Satan’s work.” Scores of academic scholars who have written books about the Jehovah’s Witnesses and interviewed hundreds of them may testify that it is not true that “speaking frankly with them” is impossible.

By working with apostates and, as they admit, “press clippings,” the reporters made mistakes they might have easily avoided. In the podcast, they repeat three times that the Royal Australian Commission “discovered” records of “1,800 sexual abuse cases” among the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Australia (with 1,006 perpetrators) and claim that “in almost every case” the incidents were not reported to the police. This is false.

As Holly Folk, a professor of religious studies at Western Washington University who has studied the issue of Jehovah’s Witnesses and sexual abuse, explained, the Royal Commission figure “reflects the sum of all disciplinary reports and referrals, proven and unproven, that had been submitted to the Jehovah’s Witness organization in Australia over a 65-year period.” The “vast majority” of these cases referred to incest and other instances of abuse in the family, rather than in any religious institutional setting (Folk 2021).

“The accusation that there was a cover-up is also not true,” Folk wrote. “Of the 1,006 case files that the Jehovah’s Witnesses provided to the Royal Commission, 383 had been reported to the police at the time they had happened, and 161 had resulted in convictions. The notion that the Jehovah’s Witnesses had hidden information, or had not cooperated with law enforcement, or that these cases had not been brought to justice when they were reviewed and regarded as believable, is simply not true” (Folk 2021).

A final remark is that laws protecting children against sexual abuse and the social sensitivity about the issue evolved in time. Judging cases of the 1960s with the standards of the 2020s is unfair with respect to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and any other organization. The podcast mentions this point, but then somewhat forgets it.

In September 2021, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, a statutory inquiry for England and Wales, published its report on “Child Protection in Religious Organisations and Settings” (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse 2021). While including some criticism, the report also emphasized the positive aspects of the child protection policy set in place by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and mentioned its historical evolution and improvements (see Introigne 2021b).

The report acknowledged that (1) Jehovah’s Witnesses now have a policy to report allegations of abuse to the statutory authorities “if a minor is still in danger

of abuse,” even when it is not mandated by local laws, and “even if there is only one complainant and no other corroborating evidence” (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse 2021, 65, par. 6.3); (2) Jehovah’s Witnesses provided evidence to demonstrate that the policy is applied in practice (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse 2021, 64–6, par. 6.1–6.9); and (3) Jehovah’s Witnesses are one of the few religious organizations which have an internal disciplinary process which can lead to the expulsion of congregants who have committed child abuse (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse 2021, 71, par. 30). Of course, this strictly ecclesiastical process is independent from reporting the abusers to the authorities, and secular courts cannot interfere with it.

The Peter Stewart Case

To prove that the Jehovah’s Witnesses have a bad habit of not properly warning their members against sexual abusers of children, *The Telegraph* focuses at length on the case of Peter Stewart (1929–2001). This is understandable, because on June 19, 2015, the London High Court of Justice found that the Jehovah’s Witnesses were negligent in handling the case and had to pay damages to one of Stewart’s victims (High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division 2015). The decision concluded that the local elders knew of Stewart’s problems and failed to adequately inform and warn their congregation, and in particular the victim’s mother, about him.

It would seem that here *The Telegraph* has its smoking gun proving that its general theory is true. However, the fact that the 2015 decision of the High Court has been published is actually very useful. It allows a study in contrast of how Mr. Justice Globe, in his decision, assessed the facts and the behavior of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, as opposite to how *The Telegraph* presented them.

Understandably, a journalistic podcast privileges drama, and there is nothing wrong about it—unless drama is used to slander a whole religious community. *The Telegraph* introduces us to Daria (not her real name) who in the late 1980s was a small girl living with her Jehovah’s Witness mother after her father had left them. A well-liked and gentlemanly Jehovah’s Witness came to their home to offer spiritual guidance. Daria, now in her thirties, tells in graphic details the

story of how she was abused and raped for years by this man, Peter Stewart, and was too terrorized to inform anybody, including her mother.

In 1994, Daria heard that Stewart had been arrested for his sexual abuse of another girl. She still kept silent. Then, in 2000, she claims she saw Stewart at the back of the Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Hall during a meeting, and she finally told her mother of the abuse. The mother wrote to Stewart and he wrote back, admitting his guilt and expressing repentance. He called himself a "pervert" and told Daria's mother that he was undertaking "mechanical operations" that would prevent him from abusing other children. Daria's mother informed first an elder and then the police. When the latter moved to investigate the case in 2001, the agents found Stewart dead in his home.

Another woman then appears in the podcast, "Michelle." She describes her emotion when she learned about the case of Daria, as she had also been abused by Stewart. Reportedly, she told the elders about the abuse and their immediate reaction was that she had misconstrued what happened. However, she later learned that Stewart had been investigated and demoted from his position as ministerial servant. She blames the Jehovah's Witnesses for not having taken harsher action against Stewart on her case and informed immediately the police, which might have protected Daria. Michelle testified before the already mentioned Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), and blamed in particular an elder called Alan Orton (1937–2020).

According to *The Telegraph*, the story of Peter Stewart proves "what elders in the Jehovah's Witnesses do when someone in their community is accused of sexually abusing a child. The system's a closely guarded secret." *The Telegraph* understands that its use of the present simple ("what elders... do") is problematic. It notes that, "The Jehovah's Witnesses told IICSA that Michelle's abuse took place more than 30 years ago and is not a reflection of its current child safeguarding policies. But that's small comfort to Michelle."

Here, the lack of context emerges again. As mentioned earlier, today the Jehovah's Witnesses's policy is that "even if the elders have no legal duty to report an accusation to the authority," they should "report the matter if a minor is still in danger of abuse or there is some other valid reason" ("Jehovah's Witnesses Scripturally Based Position on Child Protection" 2020 [2018], no. 5). That policies were different in the 1980s or 1990s is not only true for the Jehovah's Witnesses. It is also true for the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England,

or secular organizations such as the Boy Scouts. Simply, the social awareness and the understanding of sexual abuse of children was not what it is now.

In the court case of “Daria,” Mr. Justice Globe acknowledged that different experts who testified before him agreed on three points. First, “The level of understanding of child sex abuse in 2015 [when the case was decided] is very different to [sic] the level of understanding in the late 1980s and early 1990s.” Second, “In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was an emerging awareness of child sexual abuse, which was a long way short of a developed understanding of the complexity of the issue.” Third, “The Jehovah’s Witness organisation could be viewed as ahead of its time in terms of its educative publications addressing the issues of child sexual abuse” (High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division 2015, paragraph 116). This is not the position of the Jehovah’s Witnesses only, which *The Telegraph* derisively dismisses as being of little comfort to the victims. This is the conclusion of the court. Judging cases of the 1980s and 1990s with the standards of today is not only unfair. It does not make sense.

The court decision also adds details not mentioned by *The Telegraph*, and helps reestablishing a correct chronology. As the court reconstructs the case, in 1990 an elder was informed that Stewart had molested a young girl (the one *The Telegraph* calls Michelle) “by touching her through her underwear” (High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division 2015, paragraph 29). Stewart admitted this was true. “The judicial committee decided that, because he was remorseful and genuinely repentant, he should not be disfellowshipped. Instead, he was given scriptural reproof and counsel admonishing him that he should never be alone with children in any circumstances and was removed as a ministerial servant” (High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division 2015, paragraph 30). The congregation was informed that Stewart had been disciplined (but not for what reason, as usual among the Jehovah’s Witnesses), and warned to watch their children against possible abuse. The two announcements were not directly connected, and whether those who heard them would be able to make the connection is a matter of dispute.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the elders and to everybody else except him and the girl, Stewart was routinely abusing Daria since 1989. He continued until 1994 when he was “arrested and later convicted of and imprisoned for sexually abusing a young female relative and a young boy in the congregation” (High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division 2015, paragraph 25). On January 7,

1995, Stewart disassociated himself as one of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Still, Daria did not mention to anybody that she had been abused by Stewart until she “found out about his imminent release. It affected her badly and eventually she told her mother what had happened” (High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division 2015, paragraph 26). This was in 2000, and at that time Stewart was no longer a Jehovah’s Witness, as he had disassociated himself in 1995.

Daria sued based on the claim that, had the elders disfellowshipped Stewart rather than simply demoting him, and personally warned her mother and other relatives about what was going on, she would have been saved from further abuse. Daria was awarded damages based on the current British laws, and precedents concerning the Catholic Church. The judge derived from them that the elders had been negligent in not advising Daria’s family specifically and unequivocally about the threat represented by Stewart.

Does this mean that *The Telegraph* reported the story correctly? Not exactly. We only hear the voices of Daria and Michelle, and of a lawyer, Kathleen Hallisay, described as “a thorn in the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ side.” Clearly, the *Telegraph* reporters root for her. “In a way, Kathleen’s job mirrors ours in the investigation team. She has been trying to Hoover up every detail she can about the Jehovah’s Witnesses, collecting documents, speaking to survivors. We have been doing the same.”

One who tried to be fairer was Mr. Justice Globe in Daria’s case. One can even perceive a certain reluctance in rendering a decision in her favor, as if he knew beforehand it would be used to tarnish the reputation of the elders, who would be presented as protecting abusers and mistreating victims.

This was not the impression the judge had of elder Alan Orton, who looks so much like the villain in the podcast, and his colleagues. “I found them,” wrote Mr. Justice Globe, “all to be honest, upright, loyal, and devout men for whom being a Jehovah’s Witness is and has been for many years a way of life for them and their families. In that there were differences of recollection between them or hesitation in their answers, it was not borne out of any ulterior motive. All are horrified by the sexual abuse that occurred and are extremely remorseful that a Jehovah’s Witness should have caused such harm to the claimant” (High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division 2015, paragraph 121). The judge also mentioned Orton’s “obvious honesty,” and characterized him as a “completely honest” man (High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division 2015, paragraph 35).

These “honest, upright, loyal and devout men” acted by the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ standards of 1990, more than thirty years ago, which, while being “ahead of their time” with respect to other religious and secular organizations, cannot be compared to those of 2022. Orton and his colleagues navigated between protecting the confidentiality of their ecclesiastical judicial proceedings and warning congregation members they should protect their children. They testified that in fact they did warn the parents privately. However, the judge concluded that either their recollections of events that happened decades before the court case were not accurate, or they had not given a clear enough warning. As a consequence, Daria got her damages. However, those who present men of “obvious honesty” as evil protectors of pedophiles are themselves not honest.

The Clifford Whitely Case

The Telegraph’s podcast claims that the Jehovah’s Witnesses do not effectively protect their children from sexual abusers who are members of their congregations, and in fact their main concern is to hide the abuse cases to protect their reputation. The case the podcast devotes more time to concerns Peter Stewart, an old case where the inadequate handling of the incident the Jehovah’s Witnesses were accused of dates back to 1990.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses can easily answer that this was more than thirty years ago, before their new Child Protection Policy was enacted in 2018/19. Inadequate handling of sexual abuse in 1990, while not uninteresting, would not be particularly newsworthy now. To generate interest for its podcast, *The Telegraph* had to argue that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are still failing to protect their children and hiding abuse today.

The IICSA noted that the Jehovah’s Witnesses provided evidence to demonstrate that the 2018/19 policy is applied in practice (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse 2021, 164–66, par. 6.1–6.9). By looking at a case that had already been discussed by the IICSA, however, *The Telegraph* tries to prove that in 2019 the Jehovah’s Witnesses were still not cooperating with the police.

As *The Telegraph* presents the story, in 2019 a 21-year-old woman introduced as “Lacey Jones” told her mother that her stepfather, Clifford Whitely (spelled “Whiteley” in some documents), had abused her when she was 11. The mother

confronted the man, who ended up admitting this had happened once, when he was drunk (although he was later sentenced for three counts of sexual abuse, not one only). The wife reported him to the elders, to whom he repeated his (partial) confession. This was enough to have him disfellowshipped. Lacey's sister, who had left the Jehovah's Witnesses, went to the police, and an investigation started.

According to *The Telegraph*, Detective Philip Endzor of West Midlands Police, who appears in the podcast as a man having little sympathy for the Jehovah's Witnesses, asked the two elders who had received Whitely's confession to sign written statements. They asked Detective Endzor to put his request in writing and explained that they had concerns about the confidentiality of Whitely's confession. In the podcast, Endzor reports his impression that in fact the elders "were flatly refusing to cooperate in any shape, form or fashion."

After several months, Endzor wrote that he "needed the elders notes of Clifford Whitely's confession. Once again, the elders said they were willing to help, but because the notes were confidential religious communication, they'd need Clifford Whitely's permission, or Detective Endzor would have to get a court order." He did get a court order, with which the Jehovah's Witnesses complied.

Eventually, Whitely was sentenced to nine years in jail. In *The Telegraph's* podcast, we hear Detective Endzor stating, "I do find it difficult to comprehend why they were almost deliberately trying to obscure a legitimate investigation from a young lady who had been sexually assaulted. I've got to say, this is probably the most awkward of organisations to deal with."

With some dramatization, this is the story Endzor had told the IICSA before. However, the IICSA also heard one of the elders involved, Rudi Dobson. The IICSA did not question his veracity. As in the Stewart case, the chronology presented in the podcast is somewhat confused, and the two statements by Dobson to the IICSA (Dobson 2020a, 2020b) help clarify it.

On February 25, 2019, Dobson was informed by Lacey's mother of her daughter's accusations against Whitely. He and another elder visited the girl's home, offered comfort, and informed her and her mother that they had the absolute right to inform the police. Dobson repeated it to Lacey and her sister in a phone conversation that night. On February 26, he was informed they had contacted the police. On February 27, Whitely was arrested and released on bail.

The national Branch Office of the Jehovah's Witnesses advised the local elders not to proceed against Whitely immediately, not to interfere with the police's activities. On March 19, an ecclesiastical judicial committee examined the confession Whitely had rendered to the elders and disfellowshipped him.

Detective Endsor first contacted Dobson on March 1, asking for a written statement about the incident. Dobson asked Endsor to put his request in writing, as there might have been questions of confessional privilege and data protection, which he needed to examine with the Branch Office. As Dobson told the IICSA, "The next communication I had with DC Endsor was a telephone call in early to mid-July 2019. Rather than providing me the list of questions, as I had asked for on 1 March 2019, DC Endsor proceeded to threaten and intimidate me, ridiculing my faith and my activity as a religious minister. He told me that I should resign as a religious minister so that I could then reveal confidential information. When I told him I would not do so, he said: 'how can you sleep at night?' I found his actions and threats to be offensive and disturbing" (Dobson 2020b, 2, no. 9).

After this stormy conversation, on July 24 Endsor wrote to the elders asking to release all documents about Whitely's confession and disfellowshipping. On August 2, the elders replied that these documents were privileged and they can release them only with Whitely's own consent; they will however comply with a court order. On October 1, Endsor obtained his court production order, and on October 3 the elders gave him the requested documents.

Although British data protection laws were mentioned, this is also a case of dealing with documents protected by the confessional privilege. Substantially, Whitely had rendered a confession to the elders. However, as mentioned earlier, there is a difference between the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Jehovah's Witnesses. The former believe that the secret of confession is of such a high theological status that their priests are instructed that they should not comply with laws or court orders asking them to release confessional material, and face the consequences. The Jehovah's Witnesses believe they should respect the laws of the land. As a consequence, even if the material about Whitely was intrinsically of a confessional nature, they gave it to the police once a court order was issued.

They complied with the order within 48 hours. In the podcast, Endsor claims that the case was delayed by the Jehovah's Witnesses' tactics. In fact, it was delayed by his own prejudices against the Jehovah's Witnesses, non-

understanding of the laws on data protection and confessional privilege, and attempts to bully the elders by threatening and screaming rather than following a normal procedure. He was asked to formulate his requests in writing, and it took Endorsor four months to do it. Endorsor was told the Jehovah's Witnesses would have complied with a court production order, but he got it only seven months after he had started his investigation.

The Whitely case does not prove that the Jehovah's Witness do not respect their own policy on cooperation with secular authorities in cases of sexual abuse of children. It just proves that the religious prejudices of certain police officers may delay the very cases they are investigating.

The Montana Case

The Telegraph's podcast, also discusses cases in the United States. In particular, we hear the voices of the plaintiffs in a case in the American state of Montana, where they obtained a verdict of \$35 million against the Jehovah's Witnesses. The verdict was reversed by the Supreme Court of Montana on January 8, 2020 (Supreme Court of Montana 2020), which affirmed that the Jehovah's Witnesses were excepted from Montana's mandatory reporting laws in cases of sexual abuse of children because the information obtained by the elders was protected by the confessional privilege.

The podcast includes an ironical comment by one of the plaintiffs after the Supreme Court decision: "Congratulations Watchtower. You won the right to keep sexual abuse secrets. You know, that's a little [messed] up, if you ask me." The impression created is that, for some arcane American legal technicality, the Jehovah's Witnesses were authorized to "keep sexual abuse secrets" and shield the abusers from legal prosecution.

This is a typical case where what was at stake was the confessional privilege. In fact, the Supreme Court of Montana examined precisely whether what the Jehovah's Witnesses had been accused of not having disclosed to the secular authorities was information obtained during a "confession."

The Montana case was about a man called Maximo Nava-Reyes, who in 1994 married a fellow member of a Jehovah's Witnesses' congregation in Thompson Falls, Montana. The woman had two daughters and one son. One daughter and

the son revealed to the congregation's elders that they had been sexually molested by Nava-Reyes. In 2004, they convened an ecclesiastical judicial committee, obtained his confession, and disfellowshipped him.

One year later, he managed to persuade the elders that he was genuinely repentant and determined to change his ways, and was reinstated as one of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Unbeknownst to the elders and other members of the family, however, he was now molesting a small girl. His wife had two daughters. One had accused Nava-Reyes of abuse; the other was the mother of a young girl nicknamed "Lexi."

In 2016, Lexi and her aunt, who had also been molested, sued the Jehovah's Witnesses claiming that, had they reported to the secular authorities Nava-Reyes's wrongdoings and confession in 2004, he would have been stopped and prevented from causing further damage.

In 2004, the current policy instructing Jehovah's Witnesses elders to report to the police, when a minor is in danger, instances of sexual abuse even when reporting is not mandatory under local laws was not yet in force, although the elders were instructed to comply with mandatory reporting laws where they existed.

In 2004, the Jehovah's Witnesses interpreted Montana law to the effect that reporting was mandatory in principle, but statements received as confessions should not be disclosed under the confessional privilege. Montana law stated that, "A member of the clergy or a priest is not required to make a report under this section if the communication is required to be confidential by canon law, church doctrine, or established church practice" [§ 41-3-201(6)(c), of Montana's Mandatory Child Abuse Reporting Statute (MCA)].

The Supreme Court's decision is important because it deals with the argument that if a confession is rendered to more than one priest or elder and notes are taken there is no confessional privilege. Statutes protecting the secrecy of confession were passed with the Catholic model in mind, but it was later recognized that restricting the confessional privilege to the Catholic one-on-one confession would unjustly favour the Catholic Church over other religious organizations where confessions are received by committees rather than by a single minister.

As mentioned earlier, American courts in cases concerning the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and other denominations had already stated that a communication can be a “confession” and remain protected by the confessional privilege even if the sinner confesses to more than one priest or elder, if notes are taken of the confession, and these are shared with others in the religious organizations’ hierarchy, provided confidentiality remains guaranteed throughout the process.

As early as 1917, in the case *Fred Reutkemeier v. Ben Nolte*, the Supreme Court of Iowa extended the confessional privilege to a “confession of sin” made by a Presbyterian woman to her pastor and three congregational elders (Supreme Court of Iowa 1917). In 1994, the Supreme Court of Utah concluded that confessions made to a Latter-day Saint bishop (the equivalent of a parish priest) did not lose their privileged status because the bishop later transmitted them for review to a Stake (the equivalent of a diocese) High Council Court (Supreme Court of Utah 1994).

Other decisions reached the same conclusion (e.g. Supreme Court of Montana 1998; Court of Appeals of Washington 2007), with a federal appeals court stating in 1990 that excluding from privilege confidential communications that reached more than one minister of the same religious body would risk “restricting the privilege to Roman Catholic penitential communications” only, which would be constitutionally impermissible (United States Court of Appeal for the Third Circuit 1990, 385).

The Supreme Court of Montana agreed. The plaintiffs had argued that since Nava-Reyes’ confession was known by multiple local elders and had been forwarded to the New York-based headquarters of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, it was not truly a confession and was not protected by the confessional privilege. The Supreme Court, however, noted that among the Jehovah’s Witnesses the process of receiving confessions necessarily “involves multiple elders and congregation members” and this is not inconsistent with its confidentiality (Supreme Court of Montana 2020, 13–4, no. 25).

While Lexi’s attorney claimed that a confession can only be “a communication between two people” (and not more than two), the Supreme Court agreed with the Jehovah’s Witnesses that “imposing a narrow definition of confidentiality impermissibly could discriminate between different religious beliefs and practices, protecting confidentiality of reports made in a confession from a

parishioner to priest, like the traditional Catholic practice, while offering no protection to a congregant's disclosures to a committee of elders using a process like that followed by the Jehovah's Witnesses" (Supreme Court of Montana 2020, 16, no. 30). This is consistent with previous U.S. case law.

The Telegraph's podcast presents the Montana case outside of the ongoing debate on the confessional privilege. It fails to explain that what was at stake was the secrecy of confession, and that American courts for more than one hundred years have maintained that restricting the protection of confession to the Catholic one-on-one model would create a constitutionally impermissible discrimination between different religions.

Not being told of this context, those who listened to the podcast might only conclude that the Jehovah's Witnesses exploited some strange loopholes of American law to protect a sexual abuser—while in fact what they protected was the principle that the content of confessions to religious ministers should not be disclosed, and the devotees' trust that it will not.

The "Secret Databases"

The Telegraph's podcast is structured as a crescendo leading the audience to the most sensational revelation of them all. It is alleged that the Jehovah's Witnesses maintain in several countries "secret databases" with the names of all their members who have been accused of sexual abuse. We are told that they refuse to disclose them to the authorities, with *The Telegraph* implying that if they did so they would save countless potential victims.

In fact, the podcast argues that it is not the authorities only who may have a legitimate interest in obtaining these lists. It presents as a hero an American lawyer who managed to subpoena the lists for his country, included in cardboard boxes, although under a protective order he was not authorized to exploit them for chasing potential clients, and ultimately had to give them back pursuant a settlement.

This makes for an exciting story: secrets, sex, and mysterious boxes that include "the truth" but whose content cannot be revealed. As every good story, there are villains, i.e., the Jehovah's Witnesses who do not want the truth to be revealed, and a hero, the American lawyer who explains that "there are emotional

benefits for victims in fighting their abusers in court.” What benefits, emotional or otherwise, there are for the lawyers, who in American sexual abuse cases often work on contingency and pocket the largest parts of the damages, is not explained.

While entertaining, the story is not exactly new, as similar references to “secret databases” have been made by American media in the last few years (see e.g. Quenqua 2019). But what are these “secret databases,” exactly? Are they a strange peculiarity of the Jehovah’s Witnesses only?

Several years ago, with other scholars, I was asked by the Holy See to participate in a closed-door conference and give advice on the plague of sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests. One of the suggestions we made was to establish a database including all credible accusations of sexual abuse of minors raised against Catholic priests throughout the world, and keep it with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican. This suggestion was incorporated in 2011 in the same Congregation’s *Guide to Basic Procedures in Cases of Sexual Abuse* (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 2011). In fact, the centralized database was aimed at solving the problems of priests with a past of abuses who moved from one country to another, hoping that international communication between bishops would not work perfectly and their old sins would not be known in their new diocese.

The database in the Vatican is obviously confidential and is not shared with lawyers, journalists, or even secular authorities. Perhaps *The Telegraph* can call it “the secret Vatican database of sexual abusers.” However, when it was created, it was generally acknowledged by experts in the field that it served a useful purpose, and its introduction was applauded rather than criticized.

This Catholic example helps, once again, to put the question of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ “secret databases” in context. The same valid reasons for centralizing the information about credible reports about sexual abuses in the Catholic Church in one office in the Vatican also apply to the idea of having reports about allegations of sexual abuse among the Jehovah’s Witnesses collected and indexed, at least nationally, in one central location rather than leaving them at the level of local congregations only. We live in times of mobility, and information would surely run a higher risk of being lost, forgotten, or not made available to those who need to know it if it remained at the local level.

The useful purposes of such records include checking the background of those proposed for certain positions within a religious organization, or confidentially warning congregations where somebody who has been accused of sexual abuse moves from a different location. There are, however, purposes for which these records are definitely not intended. They include allegations that, if reported, have been taken seriously, but are not necessarily true. If the content of these lists would not be kept under lock and key, it may ruin the reputations of some unjustly accused and cause enormous suffering. Of course, in the hands of greedy lawyers or unscrupulous journalists it may also cause a fishing frenzy without regards whether the allegations are true or false.

The Telegraph's podcast clearly aims at creating the impression that if these "secret databases" would be shared with the police, and even the lawyers, instances of sexual abuse could be prevented. In fact, as it happened in the Australian Royal Commission case, the Jehovah's Witnesses when summoned by proper authorities did share their local lists. In Australia, this happened in 2017, and the Royal Commission reportedly forwarded 551 names to law enforcement. Five years later, in 2021, American scholar Holly Folk noted that "over the past five years, we have not seen in Australia a massive wave of arrests and prosecutions of Jehovah's Witnesses, as it should have happened had the Royal Commission 'discovered' a substantial number of 'hidden' cases" (Folk 2021). We can only guess what would have happened if the 551 names had been leaked to the media.

The Telegraph's indignation at the existence of the "secret databases" is based on a confusion. Where there are mandatory reporting laws, the Jehovah's Witnesses and anybody else have a duty to report allegations of sexual abuse they become aware of to the secular authorities. Whether or not they also report these allegations to their national headquarters through what they call forms S-77 has nothing to do with the duty of reporting them to secular authorities. The two matters are separated and different. Sending forms S-77 to branch offices is an internal ecclesiastical procedure. The procedure is indeed useful to protect potential victims but even if it wasn't, as long as it complies with local laws on privacy, it is something secular authorities have no business interfering with. As far as England and Wales are concerned, questions based on media reports were raised by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). The

Jehovah's Witnesses explained their document retention policy, and the IICSA had nothing to object.

The sensational “secret databases” appear less sensational when examined more closely, just as the cases presented by *The Telegraph* appear slightly different when the actual court decisions are read. The only possible conclusion is that *The Telegraph's* podcast is a biased presentation of a number of serious issues, using almost exclusively hostile sources, and is aimed at damaging the reputation of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Clearly, all victims of sexual abuse deserve our sympathy and support. But so do religious minorities that are victims of slander, stereotyping, and generalizations.

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A “report” on *Coercive Control in Cultic Groups in the United Kingdom*, by a British organization called The Family Survival Trust, has been published in July 2022, and widely publicized through British media. The aim of the “report” is to support, by presenting the results of an ad hoc survey, the Trust’s lobbying efforts to extend to “cults” existing UK legislation against coercive behavior in family and interpersonal relationships, defined as the use of “assault, threats, humiliation, and intimidation, and other abuse.”

What is The Family Survival Trust? It was once called FAIR (Family Action Information Rescue)—but “Rescue” was changed into “Resource” in 1994, after the group had been involved in controversies about “cultists” “rescued” through deprogramming. It is a historical British anti-cult organization and the local affiliate of FECRIS, the European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sects. Wisely, the “report” never mentions the affiliation with FECRIS, an organization that is experiencing a crisis after the Russian war in Ukraine. FECRIS’ problems come from the staunch support its Russian affiliate organizations, whose names no longer appear in its website, and its current board member and Vice President until 2021 Alexander Dvorkin, offer to the Russian aggression, claiming that “cults” are behind the Ukrainian resistance (Berzano et al. 2022).

How was the survey conducted? A simple answer is that we do not know. The report tells us that “105 people were surveyed about their experiences of being in cults in the UK or cults based in the UK” (2). We have experience of surveys, and

we know that a survey is only as good as its sample. How was the sample selected? Again, we do not know but a clue is that 74% stated that “cult education” of the type provided by the Trust is a key element in “recovery” from the “cults” (11). This suggests that the majority of, if not all, the 105 respondents were “apostates,” i.e., former members of groups labeled as “cults” who have been socialized by the Trust or by others into an anti-cult subculture, and have turned into active opponents of the movements they have left.

“Apostate” is not an insult, nor is it a synonym of “ex-member.” Scholars of religion have demonstrated that only a minority of those who leave a religious group turn into active opponents of it, i.e., into “apostates.” Most just go on with their lives, and are not interested in joining crusades against the movements they have left. “Apostates,” however, are the only ex-members the anti-cult movements use as testimonials and introduce to the media (Introvigne 2022a).

Obviously, a survey conducted among apostates only does not tell us what movements labeled as “cults” are all about, although it may be interesting to understand the attitudes of the apostates. If somebody would conduct a survey among militant followers of Donald Trump about the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, the results would likely be that 100% of the respondents believe that the vote was stolen by the Democrats. The survey would not prove that this was the case (as we all know, courts of law have determined otherwise), it would just confirm to us that Trump supporters do believe in this false theory. Similarly, what the Trust’s survey tells us is that apostates hate “cults” and want them punished by the laws. We knew this already, but the question is how representative 105 hand-picked apostates are of the broader constituency of those who have left new religious movements, not to mention those who happily remain there.

Some answers are quite surrealistic. For instance we read that 66% of the respondents “experienced group-directed celibacy” (50). Had the Trust interviewed Roman Catholic priests, the percentage would have been 100% (although perhaps not all respected the “directions” about celibacy in practice), but what this proves about “coercive control” is unclear. The source of some information is even less clear. We read that it is “estimated” that “1,500 to 2,000 cults currently operate in the UK.” (8). The number appears fantastic, and the source quoted is a BBC radio show advertising the Trust and its survey. There, we hear the estimate of 1,500 to 2,000 “cults” active in Britain from the voice of

anti-cultist and “exit counselor” Graham Baldwin, who does not explain how he calculated the figure (Stonehouse 2021). This is beyond bad scholarship, and verges on intellectual fraud.

Irrespective of discussions about “coercive control” in family or interpersonal settings, in the Trust’s report the cat comes out of the bag as early as page 2, where we read that “coercive control” is “also known as brainwashing” (2). We understand that what the Trust wants is legislation criminalizing brainwashing. There is only one problem with this. Brainwashing does not exist. Mainline scholars of new religious movements have debunked it as a pseudo-scientific theory already in the 20th century. One of the authors (Introvigne) published this year a short book on the subject with Cambridge University Press (Introvigne 2022b), which also reviews the detailed studies of the other author (Richardson) on both “brainwashing” and methodological problems in the study of new religious movements (Richardson 1985, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2014, 2015; Ginsburg and Richardson 1998; Kilbourne and Richardson 1984; Richardson, Balch and Melton 1993; Richardson and Introvigne 2001, 2007).

Our colleague Dick Anthony (1939–2022), who passed away in July this year, played a key role as an expert witness in the *Fishman* case of 1990, which remains a decisive American legal precedent establishing that brainwashing theories about new religious movements are not part of mainline science (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990).

There is a tiny minority of scholars who accept the notion of “brainwashing,” including a co-author of the Trust’s report, Alexandra Stein. As W. Michael Ashcraft wrote in the standard textbook about the history of the academic study of new religious movements, these scholars seceded from the mainline field and created something called “cultic studies,” which lives in its own isolated bubble. “Cultic studies,” Ashcraft wrote, were never accepted as “mainstream scholarship.” They continued as “a project shared by a small cadre of committed scholars” but not endorsed by “the larger academic community, nationally and internationally” (Ashcraft 2018, 9).

The survey argues that brainwashing does exist in “cults” by citing responses from its (largely self-selected) sample about three different categories of behavior. The first includes serious crimes, such as coercing members to “prostitution” (38, 52), physical violence, rape, and sexual abuse. Obviously, we do not

condone any of these, and are aware that they may occur in some new religious movements just as they occur in traditional religions. Pedophile Catholic priests and terrorists who use or misuse the name of Islam are part of old rather than new religious traditions. When these crimes are committed, they should be reported to the police, whose investigations may lead to trials where courts of laws will determine whether the suspects are indeed guilty. To achieve this result, there is no need of new anti-cult laws. Terrorism, assault, rape, and sexual abuse are already punished by existing and regularly enforced statutes.

There are also laws against financial contributions and donations so extravagant that they come close to extortion or fraud, although they should be interpreted conservatively, to avoid discriminatory situations where donations to “normal” religions are tolerated while money given to unpopular groups is regarded by definition as obtained through fraud. The European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2011 and 2013 that France cannot use the argument that they are given to “cults” rather than bona fide religions to argue that gifts to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other groups are not legitimate donations (European Court of Human Rights 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

The incidence of rape (50) and other crimes (10), of which those who participated in the survey stated they were either coerced participants or victims is high, but this is easily explained by the fact that it is more likely for those who were abused to contact anti-cult movements and become apostates.

The second category includes practices that, while disliked by some, have already been examined by courts of law and found not to be illegal. One is shunning (20–3), the teaching and practice by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other religions, that members in good standing of their religion limit or cease their contacts with disfellowshipped ex-members and those who have formally left the group, unless they are cohabiting relatives. We have both written about the issue (Introvigne 2021, 2022c; Richardson 2021), and listed a large number of court decisions in several countries, which have concluded that the practice is not illegal.

It would also be difficult to legislate against shunning, as the Trust’s report requests. The law cannot compel anybody to associate with former friends one no longer trusts, and many divorced ex-spouses as well as their relatives and supporters shun divorced partners from whom they feel betrayed. The Trust can

answer that it only wants the teaching of shunning to be prohibited, but if the practice is not illegal, teaching it cannot be illegal either.

Another group mentioned by name is the Korean movement Shincheonji (18–9) and its practice of inviting perspective converts to Bible study courses without disclosing which religious group is organizing them (on which see Introvigne 2020). The issue may become moot, as even opponents have recognized that now Shincheonji does use its name (Tan 2022), but the Korean Supreme Court has recently ruled that, while “ethically reprehensible,” the practice per se is not illegal (Supreme Court of Korea 2022). Also, it has nothing to do with brainwashing. If brainwashing were effective, “cults” could freely disclose their name and still brainwash their “victims.”

The third category includes practices that are part of the normal exercise of religious liberty in a pluralistic society. For example, some groups are stigmatized because they forbid extramarital or premarital sex. This is not specific of “cults,” and, although differently interpreted by confessors, is still part of the official teaching of the Catholic Church in its *Catechism*, the normative statement of its faith (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 2353), and of several conservative Christian denominations. If preaching against sex outside of the marriage is part of brainwashing, thousands of priests and pastors of mainline churches are guilty of it.

As is typical of anti-cult approaches, it seems that the report does not accept that believers can freely decide to surrender a part of their liberty to join a religious organization or order. We are told that 83% of the sample did unpaid labor (36), many were prevented from watching TV or going to the movies (10), and a majority had to swear total obedience to the leaders. What we are not told is how many of these apostate respondents had been ordinary members and how many had joined ordained communities comparable to a Catholic or Buddhist religious order. Cloistered Catholic nuns do not watch TV or go to the movies either, nor are they paid for their work in the convents. Both Buddhist and Catholic members of religious orders should accept that their superiors regulate many aspects of their lives. This is also part and parcel of the disciple-guru relationship in India, where “guru” is certainly not an insult and refers to a millennia-old form of spirituality.

This is part of the freedom of believers to decide how they want to live. Some lifestyles may be part of what 16th-century French philosopher Étienne de la

Boétie (1530–1563), who did not like it, called “voluntary servitude” (Anonymous [Étienne de la Boétie] 1577: but for the problem of identifying the “real” first French edition of the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* see Calemard 1947; Barmann 1989). It is a lifestyle somewhat difficult to understand in our individualistic world. Yet, declaring that all those who embrace it are “brainwashed” and that the law should declare their way of living illegal denies the very bases of religious liberty.

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