

---

# The Journal of CESNUR



Volume 6, Issue 6  
November–December 2022

---

⊗ The Journal of CESNUR ⊗

**Director-in-Charge** | Direttore responsabile

Marco Respinti

**Editor-in-Chief** | Direttore

Massimo Introvigne

*Center for Studies on New Religions, Turin, Italy*

**Associate Editor** | Vicedirettore

PierLuigi Zoccatelli

*Pontifical Salesian University, Turin, Italy*

**Editorial Board / International Consultants**

Milda Ališauskienė

*Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania*

Eileen Barker

*London School of Economics, London, United Kingdom*

Luigi Berzano

*University of Turin, Turin, Italy*

Antoine Faivre (†)

*École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, France*

Holly Folk

*Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, USA*

Liselotte Frisk (†)

*Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden*

J. Gordon Melton

*Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA*

Susan Palmer

*McGill University, Montreal, Canada*

Stefania Palmisano

*University of Turin, Turin, Italy*

Bernadette Rigal-Cellard

*Université Bordeaux Montaigne, Bordeaux, France*

**Instructions for Authors** and submission guidelines can be found on our website at [www.cesnur.net](http://www.cesnur.net).

**ISSN: 2532-2990**

*The Journal of CESNUR* is published bi-monthly by CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions),  
Via Confienza 19, 10121 Torino, Italy.

## Contents

### Articles

- 3     Beth Sarim: Princes, Slander, and the Millennium  
*Massimo Introvigne*
- 24    “I Will Shoot Him, or Cut His Throat, Spill His Blood on the Ground”:  
Mormon Blood Atonement and Utah Capital Punishment  
*Michael W. Homer*
- 47    Scientology, Jehovah’s Witnesses, “Cults,” and Conspiracy Theories in  
Russia Before and During the War in Ukraine  
*Rosita Sorytè*

### Research Notes

- 74    The Assassination of Shinzo Abe and the Unification Church  
*Massimo Introvigne*

### Documents

- 97    The Abe Assassination Case: Supplemental Statement Submitted at the  
136<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Human Rights Committee  
*Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de  
Conscience (CAP-LC)*

## Beth Sarim: Princes, Slander, and the Millennium

Massimo Introvigne

*CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)*

maxintrovigne@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** A perpetual item of anti-Jehovah's-Witnesses controversy is that they built a home in San Diego, California, the "House of the Princes" (Beth Sarim), to welcome there rulers and prophets of the Old Testament when they will be resurrected and serve as "Princes in All the Earth." Waiting for the Princes, it was used by the second president of the Watch Tower Society, Judge Joseph Franklin Rutherford, who died there in 1942. The Jehovah's Witnesses sold the property in 1948. The article reviews the story of Beth Sarim and the controversies that prevented Rutherford from being buried there, as he had wished. It discusses the anti-cult slander associated with Beth Sarim, and the gratuitous comparisons in the media with a controversial Los Angeles new religious movement called The Great Eleven. Finally, it situates the Beth Sarim episode within the context of the evolving millennial theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

**KEYWORDS:** Jehovah's Witnesses, Joseph Franklin Rutherford, Beth Sarim, Robert J. Martin, Millennialism, Divine Order of the Royal Arms of the Great Eleven, The Great Eleven.

### *Beth Sarim*

At the address 4440 Braeburn Road, San Diego lies a 2-story house built between October 10, 1929, and January 17, 1930, in Spanish eclectic style, with a 3<sup>rd</sup>-floor round tower. It was designated on August 23, 2001, as a historical landmark by the San Diego Historical Resources Board (Flanigan 2001; San Diego Historical Resource Board 2001, 2010, no. 474).

The house is known as Beth Sarim, the "House of the Princes," and is mentioned in a significant part of the literature hostile to the Jehovah's Witnesses. This is how their story goes. The Jehovah's Witnesses believed that the world as we know it would soon end. The worthy rulers and prophets of the Old Testaments such as David, Joseph, and others would be resurrected and

would serve as “Princes in All the Earth” (Psalm 45:16, New World Translation used by the Jehovah’s Witnesses) before the end of the present system of things. The Jehovah’s Witnesses prepared a residence in San Diego to host these Princes. However, as the Princes did not manifest themselves, the house was in fact used by the second president of the Watch Tower Society, Judge Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942) to enjoy the good weather, a beautiful house, and a luxurious lifestyle. He died there on January 8, 1942.

The implication in the anti-Jehovah’s-Witnesses literature is often that Rutherford milked his gullible followers of their hard-earned money, and used the Princes as a pretext to enjoy a nice house in California. Told in these terms, the story is certainly false, and relies on typical anti-cult stereotypes. The real story of Beth Sarim is, on the other hand, much more interesting.

### *Who Built Beth Sarim and Why*

That Rutherford went to Beth Sarim because the expected Princes did not appear is not true. Documents clearly show that the house was originally built using private funds to give to Rutherford a place where he could work and take advantage of weather conditions better than those available at the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ headquarters in Brooklyn, New York. Why was this needed, and how did the idea of Beth Sarim as an administrative center for the resurrected Princes arise?

Those associated with the Watch Tower Society (the name Jehovah’s Witnesses was adopted later, in 1931) were conscientious objectors, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses are today. During World War I, their refusal to serve in the military was regarded as a serious crime in the United States, as in other countries. With others, Rutherford was arrested and sentenced to a jail term of 20 years on June 21, 1918. Happily, with the end of the war, cooler tempers prevailed. The 1918 decision was overturned on appeal, and the prosecutor decided to drop the charges.

However, the time spent in jail took a serious toll on Rutherford’s health. He was diagnosed with chronic pneumonia, and left with only one regularly functioning lung. Doctors noticed that warm weather improved his condition. In particular, time spent in San Diego was especially effective. A local doctor called

Albert Ernest Eckols (1904–1940) treated Rutherford and advised him to escape the humid and cold winter of New York. He should rather spend in San Diego the winter seasons, he advised, or better still the rest of his life. By 1929, Rutherford had been wintering in San Diego for a few years on the doctor's recommendation. However, it had proved difficult to find a house suitable for Rutherford and his staff that could be rented for just a few months each winter (Martin 1930, 405).

Robert J. Martin (1878–1932) was one of the Watch Tower co-workers who had been arrested and sentenced with Rutherford in 1918. He came from a wealthy family, although he had sold his shares in the Martin Boards company to his brothers to devote himself full-time to the Watch Tower work. Martin testified that it was he and other Watch Tower devotees that prevailed upon Rutherford and persuaded him to acquire a permanent residence in San Diego. Finally, he accepted, and Martin went to California to consult with Dr. Eckols.

It was Eckols himself who purchased two lots of land in fashionable Kensington Heights, and transferred their property to Martin on October 8, 1929 (Flanigan 2001, 4). On October 10, Martin entered into a contract with the locally prominent J.W. Gernandt Construction Company to build the 2-story house, completed with a tower symbolizing the Watch Tower Society (Flanigan 2001, 2, 4). The notice of completion of the building was filed by Martin on January 17, 1930 (Flanigan 2001, 9).

On March 3, 1930, when media controversies had already started, William Edwin Van Amburgh (1863–1947), another of those sentenced in 1918, who served as treasurer of the Watch Tower Society, signed a written statement that “not one penny” had left the society's coffers to pay for the house (Martin 1930, 406). Martin and others had provided the money.

On December 24, 1929, while the house was being built, Martin transferred the property of the lots and the building to Rutherford until the end of the judge's life on earth, with the stipulation that it will then pass to the Watch Tower Society. Martin testified that in fact Rutherford “refused to have [the property] for himself, except to use it for the Lord's work” (Martin 1930, 405). Hence, the provisions about the Princes arose from Rutherford's insistence that the property originally funded and put at his disposal by his doctor and friends be deeded not to him but to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.

It should also be clarified that Rutherford was not on vacation in San Diego. He directed from there an organization that was growing and expanding to numerous countries, and wrote in the house several books (*Consolation* 1942, 5–6).

### *The Princes*

To understand the Princes connection, there is no need to consult the sensational accounts of the media of the time or the anti-Jehovah's Witnesses literature. What Beth Sarim had exactly to do with the Princes was clearly spelled out in the deed between Martin and Rutherford signed on December 24, 1929.

Both the grantor [Martin] and the grantee, the said JOSEPH F. RUTHERFORD are fully persuaded from the Bible testimony, which is the Word of Jehovah God, and from extraneous evidence that God's kingdom is now in course of establishment and that it will result beneficially to the peoples of earth; that the governing power and authority will be invisible to men but that kingdom of God will have visible representatives on the earth who will have charge of the affairs of the nations under the supervision of the invisible ruler Christ; that among those who will thus be the faithful representatives and visible governors of the world will be David, who was once king over Israel; and Gideon, and Barak, and Samson, and Jephthae, and Joseph, formerly the ruler of Egypt, and Samuel the prophet and other faithful men who were named with approval in the Bible at Hebrews the eleventh chapter. The condition herein is that the said WATCH TOWER BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY shall hold said title perpetually in trust for the use of any or all of the men above named as representatives of God's kingdom on earth and that such men shall have possession and use of said property hereinabove described as they may deem for the best interest for the work in which they are engaged.

[...] IT IS FURTHER PROVIDED that if the said JOSEPH F. RUTHERFORD while alive on the earth shall by lease, deed or contract provide that any other person or persons connected with the said WATCH TOWER BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY shall have the right to reside on said premises until the appearing of David or some of the other men mentioned in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews as above set forth even such person or persons so designated by the said JOSEPH F. RUTHERFORD in such lease or other paper writing shall have the right and privilege of residing on said premises until the same be taken possession of by David or some of the other men herein named and this property and premises being dedicated to Jehovah and the use of his kingdom it shall be used as such for ever. Any persons appearing to take possession of said premises shall first prove and identify themselves to the proper officers of said Society as the person or persons described in Hebrews chapter eleven and in this deed (Martin 1930, 406–7).

The last clause was not unnecessary. In an interview he granted in January 1931 to *The San Diego Sun*, a newspaper that at the end of the same year would merge with *The Evening Tribune* into *The Tribune-Sun*, a predecessor of the contemporary *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Rutherford explained that

One morning as I was going from the house to the garage, a queer-looking creature approached me, tipped his dirty hat and cried, "Howdy, judge, I'm David." "Go and tell that to the winds," I told him, and he left without arguing the matter (Wyatt 1931).

Rutherford did not believe that "a gaunt, unshaven tramp" might have been one of the Princes. He interpreted the Bible to the effect that

David, Gideon, Barak, Samuel, Jephtae [sic], Joseph and Samuel will be sent there to wrench the world from Satan's grasp clothed in modern garb as we are, and able, with little effort, to speak our tongue (Wyatt 1931).

Prophetically, in entering the house, Rutherford had declared that he realized "the possibility of some old codger turning up bright and early some morning and claiming he is King David" (*Pittsburgh Gazette* 1930).

The 1939 article commented that Rutherford "pictured the arrival of the biblical delegation perhaps in frock coats, high hats, canes and spats." He also noted that the Princes will find in the house "French telephones," "Kolnisch Wasser from Cologne," and "a new, yellow 16-cilinder" coupe car in the garage (Wyatt 1931). The journalist was clearly amused but at least he let Rutherford express himself in his own voice, and his article was less sensational than others published in the media of the time.

There is thus little doubt that Rutherford and the Jehovah's Witnesses did contemplate the possibility that the Princes may return and find a base of operations in San Diego. However, they did not appear during Rutherford's lifetime, and he died at Beth Sarim of cancer on January 8, 1942.

### *The Controversy About Rutherford's Burial*

Rutherford had expressed the wish to be simply buried within the Beth Sarim property. The local authorities objected that the lot was not an authorized cemetery, but the battle was soon fought not so much about funerary legislation but about the Jehovah's Witnesses.



In November 1941, Rutherford had surgery in Elkhart, Indiana, from which it became clear he would not recover. He asked to be brought back by train and ambulance to Beth Sarim, as he wanted to die and be buried there. In anticipation of his death, his co-workers formed a corporation called Beth Sarim's Rest, whose purpose was to operate a small cemetery located three hundred feet from the house and down the nearby canyon slope, invisible from any house. Rutherford confirmed his wish to be buried in the Beth Sarim property to Dr. George Roy Stevenson (1887–1959), the physician who assisted him in his last days and signed the death certificate (*Los Angeles Times* 1942a).

When Rutherford died, the corporation and the mortician sought permission for Rutherford to be buried there. However, although Beth Sarim's Rest was duly incorporated, it needed a "conditional permit" to operate a cemetery. The permit was sought, while Rutherford's remains continued to be kept in the mortuary (*Los Angeles Times* 1942a). It was denied by San Diego's Planning Commission after two weeks, on January 24 (*The Fresno Bee* 1942a).

The question was more political and religious than administrative. Several organizations petitioned the authorities not to grant the permit. The Veterans of Foreign Wars, which still resented Rutherford's advocacy of conscientious objection while another World War was being fought, wrote that "Judge Rutherford during his lifetime taught intolerance; therefore, as a manifestation of our 'tolerance,' we do not wish him buried." Troublemakers gathered in front of Beth Sarim, and sometimes trespassed inside the property, shouting cruel mockery such as "How long are you going to keep the old boy on ice?" (*Consolation* 1942, 3–4).

259 owners of nearby properties also signed a petition opposing the burial, but the Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that those who signed had been deceived by the Witnesses' opponents into believing that a large cemetery was planned there, while in fact they had no intention to bury in the plot anybody else than Rutherford. When this was clarified, some of the neighbors signed the Jehovah's Witnesses' own petition in favor of the burial, which in its first version gathered 1,070 names (*Consolation* 1942, 6). By the end of the process, the number of supporting signatures would rise to 14,693. After the denial by the Planning Commission, the Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the decision before the Board of Supervisors. The appeal was also denied, on February 2 (*Monrovia Daily News-Post* 1942; *The Ventura County-Star Free Press* 1942).

Undaunted, the Jehovah's Witnesses on January 6 brought the case to the local County Superior Court (*The Sacramento Bee* 1942) and, reportedly at the judge, Arthur L. Mundo's (1895–1983), suggestion (*Los Angeles Times* 1942b), filed on February 28 another request for burial further away from any house (*The Fresno Bee* 1942b). This

New location for interment was in almost the center of the property known as Beth-Shan, which is roughly 75 acres of canyon and mesa land, adjoining Beth-Sarim but separated by a half-mile width of canyon.

This property, also belonging to WATCHTOWER, has one small and one large dwelling upon it and a few out-houses, and consists of some fruit trees and other cultivated patches in aggregate about seven acres, and about 65 acres of unreclaimed brush, either too steep, or rocky, or inaccessible for development. It offers retreat for all forms of animal life common to this portion of southern California, such as coyotes, bobcats (lynxes), rabbits, Blue Mountain quail, doves, and songsters of many varieties, all of which die and are buried without fuss under the leaves of the cactus and greasewood. Judge Rutherford, in a discussion before his death, had said that as a second choice he wished to be buried somewhere on these wild acres.

In order that all the objections made in regard to the first site near to Kensington Heights might be removed in regard to this new site, it was requested that only a ten-foot-square cemetery be granted. The spot was also inaccessible except by private road a half mile long and closed by a gate. Dr. Alexander Lesem [1879–1957, the local County Health Officer] looked at the site himself and declared that there was no health hazard. (He also stated that there was no health hazard in the first site) (*Consolation* 1942, 9).

After a hearing on February 28, on March 14, 1942, the second petition was also denied by the Planning Commission (*Los Angeles Times* 1942b), with the Veterans of Foreign Wars continuing to agitate for denial of any burial outside of an established cemetery. On March 16, the decision was confirmed by the Board of Supervisors (*Los Angeles Times* 1942c). The Jehovah's Witnesses were treated quite harshly, with one of the commissioners telling them: "Our patience is at a limit; we cannot spend any time with this; we are too busy with defense work" (*Consolation* 1942, 11). The Jehovah's Witnesses appealed again to Judge Mundo of the Central District Court, where the trial started on April 1 (*Los Angeles Times* 1942d). It quickly turned into a trial of the Jehovah's Witnesses and their expectation that the Princes will return to Beth Sarim.

The local authorities admitted that there would have been no problems in burying an ordinary citizen in the new location. However, Rutherford was so famous that his burial place, even with no monument as the Jehovah's Witnesses

offered, would attract “pilgrimages.” In fact, pilgrimages to their deceased leaders’ graves are not part of the practices of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and they explained it to the court. To no avail, as Judge Mundo ruled against them on April 16 (*San Bernardino Daily Sun* 1942).

While according to some local media they had originally considered continuing the legal battle (*San Bernardino Daily Sun* 1942), the Jehovah’s Witnesses finally realized that in the heated war climate further appeals to higher courts would be futile. They decided, having obtained the authorities’ permission on April 18 (*Daily News* [Los Angeles] 1942; *Oakland Tribune* 1942), to bring the remains of Rutherford to Staten Island, New York (*Los Angeles Times* 1942e).

They were buried there on April 25, 1942, at dawn, in a burial plot of the Woodrow Road cemetery, near the Watch Tower Society’s property from where it operated a radio station. This was reported both by the Jehovah’s Witnesses (e.g. *Consolation* 1942, 16) and the media (*Red Bluff Daily News* 1942; *The Fresno Bee* 1942c). The *Los Angeles Times* offered more details than other newspapers:

The body was taken in a hearse from a funeral home to the cemetery without cortege. At the cemetery entrance a small group of followers was waiting. They carried the casket from the hearse to the grave. Nathan [Homer] Knorr [1905–1977], Rutherford’s successor and president of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, corporate title of the sect, read a few prayers and the casket was lowered into the grave (*Los Angeles Times* 1942f).

Rutherford, Martin, Van Amburgh, and Clayton J. Woodworth (1870–1951), who had been sentenced to jail together in 1918, all rest in the same cemetery and plot. In 1952, the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ publication *Awake!* commented

How appropriate it is that the remains of these men who labored together during their lifetime, Rutherford, Van Amburgh, Martin and Woodworth, should be buried there together! Not that we attach importance to the remains or to the spot of burial, but we see appropriateness in the circumstances and know that the unity is a reality (“The Things They Did Go Right with Them” 1952).

However, the fact that the Jehovah’s Witnesses burial site in the Woodrow Road cemetery had no grave markers was used to support the legend that Rutherford had been clandestinely buried in the area adjacent to Beth Sarim, in defiance of the court’s order. The legend is still occasionally repeated today. However,

Rutherford's remains traveled east pursuant to an official authorization by County Health Officer Dr. Lesem, and accompanied by the authorized mortician, Harvey Lewis (1885–1972). The legend is thus just a late legacy of the emotions that accompanied the whole controversy.

### *Media Reactions*

In 1806, Italian poet Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) wrote one of the most famous poems of the Italian literature, one that generations of Italian students have been requested to memorize, “Sepulchers” (*Dei sepolcri*). It is a deep meditation on the meaning of the graves for the living. Foscolo, although a progressive poet himself, nostalgically lamented that the French Revolution and Napoleon I (1769–1821) had created a restrictive burial policy, while Italians were accustomed to see illustrious citizens buried in churches or in mausoleums placed in the center of their cities (Foscolo 1807).

American and, in particular, California funerary laws were never as strict as their European counterparts that followed the Napoleonic model. The Jehovah's Witnesses were able to argue in court that the case law of California's Supreme Court looked with favor both to burial in remote and isolated locations even when they were not legally part of cemeteries, and to liberally accommodating the wish of the deceased whenever possible (*Consolation* 1942, 8). In the Rutherford case, these precedents were not followed, not because of any peculiar local health or zoning reason but due to the hostility against the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The confrontation with the Roman Catholic Church in the area was particularly harsh. The fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses were conscientious objectors mobilized against them, in the middle of World War II, organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion (*Consolation* 1942, 10). Catholic media were among the most hostile in reporting about Rutherford's death (see e.g. *The Tablet* 1942). Ultimately, it was prejudice against the Jehovah's Witnesses that prevented Rutherford's wish to be buried in the property around Beth Sarim to be honored.

This was initially acknowledged by the local San Diego media. In January 1942, some of the articles published by *The Tribune-Sun* and *The San Diego Union* were surprisingly balanced. The *Union* reported, without disapproving it,

the opinion of Beth Sarim's next-door neighbor, one A.L. Jacobs, who said he had no sympathy for the Jehovah's Witnesses but he believed that if Rutherford "wanted to be buried there, that's the place to put him" (*The San Diego-Union* 1942).

The Jehovah's Witnesses acknowledged the initial fairness of the local media, calling their January reports "unbiased" (*Consolation* 1942, 7). However, they also noted that the tune of the media coverage changed in the following months, perhaps under Catholic influence. The media looked into their own archives and found that both local and national media had treated Beth Sarim in the 1930s as a typical example of the practices and beliefs of a "cult."

*Time* in 1930 compared the Jehovah's Witnesses to the two main Rosicrucian organizations that had their world headquarters in California, the Rosicrucian Fellowship in Oceanside and the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis in San Jose, and offered a pseudo-sociological explanation of why "cults" were flourishing in the state:

Flowery, sun-drenched California, where Nature exhibits itself in mystical opulence, where plenty of people have plenty of money, where there are many invalids contemplating eternity, is particularly propitious for this flourishing (*Time* 1930).

In one of the most bizarre turns of the whole story, stereotyping the Jehovah's Witnesses as a "cult" was also reinforced by a comparison with an organization that had nothing to do with them, known as The Great Eleven.

#### *A Faulty Comparison: The Great Eleven*

A surprising number of newspapers, probably based on a United Press syndicated story, had published in 1930s stories about Beth Sarim and the Princes comparing the Jehovah's Witnesses to The Divine Order of the Royal Arms of the Great Eleven (*Nashville Banner* 1930; *The Neosho Daily News* 1930; *Washington Herald* 1930; *Syracuse Herald* 1930, which also offers a comparison with the community around Jiddu Krishnamurti, 1895–1986, in Ojai). Known in short as The Great Eleven, it was a Los Angeles new religious movement founded in 1922 by May Otis Blackburn (1881–1951). She had also established a parallel (but not identical) organization called "The Church of the Divine Science of Joshua, the Branch, the Headstone of the Corner" (Supreme

Court of California 1931, 2). Since Blackburn's movement is almost completely forgotten, an excursus into its history and controversies is needed.

Blackburn was born in Storm Lake, Iowa, but started gathering followers of her numerological speculations about the Bible and the universe (see Blackburn 1936) in Portland, Oregon, and moved to California in 1918. Most of her early followers came from Christian Science, and one of her organizations may have been called "The Church of the Divine Science" to offer them some continuity with their previous religion.

In California, May taught that she and her daughter Ruth Wieland (1898–1978) were the Two Witnesses mentioned in the Book of Revelation, and were receiving messages from Gabriel and other angels (Blackburn 1936). Gabriel had ordered that the revelations should be collected in a book to be published under the title *The Great Sixth Seal* or *The Lamb's Book of Life*. Not only would the book offer a new interpretation of the Bible and reveal hitherto unknown secrets on the origins and destiny of the universe; the publication itself would trigger apocalyptic events, leading to the millennial reign of eleven God-appointed queens, who would have their palaces in Hollywood and include May and her daughter.

When the media compared The Great Eleven to the Jehovah's Witnesses, two sensational events concerning the former organization had occurred. First, the police had discovered in 1929 that two members of The Great Eleven, William (1869–1944) and Martha Rhoads (1869–1944) had kept the body of their adopted daughter Willa Rhoads (1908–1925), who had died at age 16, preserved on salt and ice in the movement's headquarters, then moved it to various locations, hoping she might be resurrected when the kingdom of the eleven queens would come. Willa had been designated herself as one of the queens, and was buried together with the bodies of seven dogs named after the seven musical notes, which had been given to the girl by May Blackburn as a gift.

Whether the dogs had been "ritually sacrificed," as some claimed, and had a special mystical role was never clarified. The police investigated the matter, and found that no crimes had been committed (*Nashville Banner* 1930). It is also possible that Martha Rhoads's ideas about the possibility that Willa would not die and, once dead, might be resurrected came from her interpretation of Christian Science, her former religion, rather than from The Great Eleven's theology (Fort 2019, 258–59).

The second incident concerned a court case started against Blackburn by the nephew of the oil magnate Joseph Benjamin Dabney (1858–1932), Clifford Richard Dabney (1891–1977). He was a disgruntled ex-member of The Great Eleven, and claimed he had been fraudulently persuaded to donate significant sums of money, together with shares of oil companies and land, to support the movement and the publication of *The Great Sixth Seal*, which was never published. In fact, the heavy donations, together with disagreements with his uncle, had almost bankrupt him. Blackburn was arrested, prosecuted, and convicted of grand theft by the Superior Court of Los Angeles County on March 2, 1930.

The jury had heard damning testimonies not only about the Willa Rhoads incident, but also about the fact that the abusive husband of Blackburn's daughter Ruth, a man called Samuel Rizzio (1906–1929), had been killed by The Great Eleven's leaders, probably with poison. Rumors that other members had been killed also circulated. They have been regarded as believable by the author of the only (non-academic) nonfiction book on The Great Eleven, Samuel Fort (Fort 2019), and by those who wrote fiction on the sensational case. They included Rick J. Baudé, the grandson of The Great Eleven leader Gale Conde Banks (1890–1982), who authored *The Blackburn Chronicle* (Baudé 2008), and Kim Cooper, who in *The Kept Girl* (2014) put novelist Raymond Chandler (1888–1959) on the tracks of the homicidal movement (Cooper 2014).

That The Great Eleven committed serious crimes, including homicides, is thus the subject matter of a literary tradition. The movement is now defunct, although according to Fort it did not disappear in 1930, as others had claimed, but remained in existence for several decades (Fort 2019, 462). Fort does build a case for the criminal nature of The Great Eleven, but its legal story is different. In fact, one of the reasons The Great Eleven is of some interest is that it offered to the Supreme Court of California the opportunity for a landmark decision on religious liberty.

In their decision of November 30, 1931, confirming the opinion of the District Court of Appeal of California, Second District, Division One, which on March 23, 1931, had already overcome the Superior Court decision, the California Justices severely chastised the prosecutor for having introduced in the 1930 trial evidence about Willa Rhoads and the alleged homicide of Samuel Rizzio, with the obvious intent of prejudicing the jurors by exposing them to

matters that had nothing to do with the grand theft accusation. The Justices had no sympathy for The Great Eleven. In fact, they wrote that the movement's

whole plan of life and salvation is a babel of incoherency abounding in absurdities of an extreme type and the wonder is that rational minds should have become obsessed by such chimerical delusions (Supreme Court of California 1931, 6).

However, the Supreme Court noted that while it would be illegal to use such delusions to prey on the mentally weak, "In the instant case no claim is made of a weakening of mentality on the part of those who accepted the defendant in the role she manifested herself," including Clifford R. Dabney, who while he was a member of The Great Eleven was perfectly capable of functioning as a businessman (Supreme Court of California 1931, 6). It also came out that Dabney was not a reluctant participant in The Great Eleven but contributed to the movement's lore through his own visions, including one where he saw the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910: Fort 2019, 415).

The Supreme Court concluded that Dabney and others had accepted a strange interpretation of the Scriptures but, being mentally competent, they had done it freely. According to the Justices, from Dabney's point of view at the moment he made the donations, his choice was rational because he believed he could access "the arcanum of all knowledge" and "the paltry dollars which he had expended (...) were as trifles compared with [the] priceless gifts" he hoped to acquire (Supreme Court of California 1931, 6).

While not resisting the temptation to pass judgement on The Great Eleven's doctrines as "absurdities," the Supreme Court ultimately came to a strong statement of religious liberty and the principle that judges were forbidden to investigate whether Blackburn was really talking with angels and receiving revelations.

Any legislative attempt to limit or regulate persons in their claims to the possession of exceptional spiritual power or knowledge would be rejected as a dangerous invasion of the state into the realm of religious freedom and privilege, which, from the beginning of our government, has been guarded by constitutional barriers. The framers of our criminal statutes had in mind material affairs and not spiritual matters nor the punishment of persons who claim or represent themselves, by divine favor, to be endowed with supernatural power, unless the intent to defraud is discernible in the pretense as to the possession of supernatural powers. This power in the instant case, according to the prosecution's evidence, was claimed by defendant to be derived from God agreeable with His written word as recorded in Holy Scripture. That book is an



open record and all who will may solve for themselves the extent or degree of divine power that mortals may hope to attain. Each person is at liberty to interpret it for himself (Supreme Court of California 1931, 5–6).

As for the alleged homicides, further investigations failed to find any evidence and, although vilified in the media, Blackburn was not arrested or prosecuted again until her death in 1951. *People v. Blackburn* appears thus as an early decision where claims by apostate ex-members (i.e., those former members of a religious group who have become its militant opponents: see Introvigne 2022a, 2022b), hints that something that decades later will be called “brainwashing” was at work, and sensational claims by the media were treated with a healthy skepticism by the Supreme Court of California. Its Justices reiterated the principle that professing and teaching unpopular beliefs is not a crime.

As the Court of Appeal had already stated,

It matters not how absurd the faith of the defendant and her followers may seem to be, if in good faith she believed in the cult or creed upon which she was founding this new society, and in the truth of the said representations. Defendant had the same right to organize a society based upon that faith, that her followers had to join with her in creating the society and establishing the community, provided only that they did not conspire together for some purpose prohibited by law. And if for the purposes of such society they chose to invest their money, that was no crime against the state (District Court of Appeal of California, Second District, Division One 1931, 5).

Both in 1931 and in 1942, the media could have applied these lessons in religious tolerance to the Jehovah’s Witnesses—not because the two groups were similar (they weren’t) but because the principle of religious freedom is universal. Instead, they maliciously used The Great Eleven to imply that the Jehovah’s Witnesses too were a “cult,” and that the claims about the return of the Princes were not less absurd than Blackburn’s angelic revelations.

The media coverage of Beth Sarim demonstrates that how the prejudice against groups labeled as “cults” (see Introvigne 2022c) operates is both old and repetitious. Groups that have very little in common with each other—such as the small, secretive Great Eleven, which was hardly capable of publishing anything about its beliefs, and the very public two-million-member organization of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which by the 1940s had published a whole library of texts expounding its interpretation of the Bible—are lumped together under the same derogatory label of “cults.” The sins, real or otherwise, of one group, preferably the most extreme and bizarre, are extended to all the others. One egregious

example is an article in the *Washington Herald*, which uses The Great Eleven as evidence that “Judge Rutherford’s plan [for Beth Sarim] is one of many evidences of strange cult worship in California” (*Washington Herald* 1930).

But were the beliefs of the Jehovah’s Witnesses about the Princes “absurdities” of the type the Supreme Court of California found in The Great Eleven? The question can only be answered by putting the matter in a broader context.

### *But What About the Princes?*

“Fiducia christianorum resurrectio mortuorum; illam credentes, sumus” (The resurrection of the dead is Christians’ confidence. By believing it we are what we claim to be: Tertullian 2016, 5). These words by early Christian apologist Tertullian (155–220) can hardly be clearer. He believed that to be Christian, one has to believe in the resurrection of the dead.

The quote from Tertullian is still included today in the normative statement of the Roman Catholic faith, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which acknowledges that “Belief in the resurrection of the dead has been an essential element of the Christian faith from its beginnings” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 991). The same *Catechism* proclaims that all “those who have done good” will rise with their bodies (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 998). Obviously, they will include the patriarchs, kings, and prophets of the Old Testament who also “have done good.”

However, the Roman Catholic Church today acknowledges that how and when this resurrection will happen is the subject matter of different theological theories and interpretations. It teaches that the resurrection of the flesh will surely happen, but its “‘how’ exceeds our imagination and understanding” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 1000). Based on these warnings, many contemporary Catholic theologians prefer not to speculate on these matters, and the same happens in most liberal Protestant churches. Eschatology is rarely preached today in Roman Catholic and many mainline Protestant congregations. As opposite to this, most Evangelical and conservative Protestants maintain a vivid interest for matters such as the Millennium and the resurrection of the flesh, although they offer very different interpretations (Wessinger 2016).

Several observers of the Jehovah's Witnesses, including the undersigned, believe that a main reason of their success is precisely that they offer a millennial hope increasingly difficult to find in mainline Christian churches. The fact that eschatology is regarded as the most difficult and uncertain part of theology has led to its virtual disappearance from the daily preaching and public discourse of many Christian congregations. This does not mean, however, that ordinary Christians have lost interest in these crucial matters. Organizations that offer clear answers and hope such as the Jehovah's Witnesses are thus successful (Introvigne 2015).

They are, however, not without opponents. Liberal Christians claim that pretending to know the truth about our eschatological future is pretentious and arrogant. Conservatives are not against raising questions about eschatology but find the answers offered by the Jehovah's Witnesses at odds with their standard premillennialism, and thus heretical. The very series of booklets that give to fundamentalism its name, *The Fundamentals*, included a detailed rebuttal of the "vicious system" of the Watch Tower by Presbyterian theologian and former missionary to Italy William Gallogly Moorehead (1836–1914: Moorehead 1910, 123).

When the Beth Sarim discussion occurred, there were also political undertones, which would later reappear in different times and forms. A militant right saw the Jehovah's Witnesses as unpatriotic and perhaps Communist, while a certain left saw them as arch-conservatives and perhaps Fascist (Knox 2018). Today, there is a certain rhetoric about "apocalyptic cults," which resorts, as mentioned earlier, to examples of criminal or suicidal groups, then lumps them together with peaceful and law-abiding organizations (Wessinger 2000). And today of course this strategy of grouping indiscriminately different organizations and phenomena as if they belonged to the same category of "cults" compares Christian millennialism with QAnon and other conspiracy theories, radical supporters of Donald Trump, and anti-vaccination campaigns during the COVID-19 crisis (see Introvigne 2022b).

When all this unnecessary dust settles, we discover that the belief in the resurrection of the flesh, which includes the bodily resurrection of those who "did good" both before and after Jesus, was unanimous in the early Christian church, and is still official Roman Catholic doctrine (although rarely preached). Views of a

literal Millennium are opposed by liberal denominations, but widely shared, although differently interpreted, within the vast Evangelical world.

This is not to say that there was nothing peculiar in the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the 1930s and 1940s. They believed then that those who had faithfully served God in ancient times would be resurrected *before* the end of this system of things and would serve as "princes throughout the land," as the New International Version translates *Psalms* 45:16. In the 1950s, "further study of the Scripture indicated that those earthly forefathers of Jesus Christ would be resurrected after Armageddon" (*Jehovah's Witnesses—Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* 1993, 76).

The matter had always been regarded as speculative, as demonstrated by this passage in *The Watch Tower* of January 15, 1925:

While it is true that the ancient worthies are to be children of the New Covenant, yet there could be no good reason to say that God could not awaken them out of death if he wished to do so before the New Covenant is made. The fact that they are awakened out of death does not put them on trial.

Our opinion is that the ancient worthies will not be resurrected until every member of the Church is gone. We have reached that conclusion by a process of analysis, however, not by some Scriptural statement. We should not arbitrarily say that God will not resurrect them or that he will resurrect them; for we do not know. That he could do it, of course must be admitted. That his awakening them out of death would not be inconsistent with any part of his plan, seems likewise well taken, but it does not seem probable that he will do so ("Questions and Answers" 1925, 23).

The belief that the Princes will be the first to be resurrected, before Armageddon, and serve as the Lord's representatives on earth developed gradually and was then abandoned or corrected. Beth Sarim was a living testimony to a specific phase of the theological development of the Jehovah's Witnesses, based on an interpretation the organization no longer maintains today.

In 1947, Nathan Knorr, as Rutherford's successor as president of the Watch Tower Society, had already announced, before the doctrinal interpretation was revised, that Beth Sarim would be

disposed of, either by outright sale or by rent, because it had fully served its purpose and was now only serving as a monument quite expensive to keep; our faith in the return of the men of old time whom the King Christ Jesus will make princes in ALL the earth (not merely in California) is based, not upon that house Beth-Sarim but upon God's Word of promise ("All Nations Expansion' Assembly" 1947, 382).

In 1948, Beth Sarim was sold to a San Diego physician, Franklyn Davis Hankins (1905–1995), who in turn sold it in 1953 to Gilbert Aubrey Davidson (1868–1957), a banker and former president of the local Chamber of Commerce, of the Panama-California Exposition (Gaebel 1915), and of the San Diego Museum, who was an important figure in the growth of the city of San Diego. Davidson's heirs sold the house in 1959 to another physician and retired U.S. Army Captain, Clarence M. Ching (1908–1994) (Flanigan 2001, 6).

From another point of view, however, the spirit of Beth Sarim faithfully represented what the Jehovah's Witnesses are all about. One detail is that through the unsuccessful battle to bury Rutherford there the Jehovah's Witnesses were able to build a coalition of citizens concerned with religious liberty and, as their 1943 yearbook proclaimed, "a real witness was given in this territory for a period of months" (*1943 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* 1942, 34). Witnessing for religious liberty will continue to be part and parcel of the Jehovah's Witnesses' testimony up to the present day.

Perhaps more importantly, as Rutherford's book *Salvation* stated in 1939,

the purpose of acquiring that property [Beth Sarim] and building the house was that there might be some tangible proof that there are those on earth today who fully believe God and Christ Jesus and in his kingdom (Rutherford 1939, 311),

as well as in a literal Millennium and in the resurrection of the flesh. By the 1930s, many Christian denominations were already reluctant to preach about eschatology, as if it were something incompatible with modern science and easily derided as superstition. Beth Sarim's paradox was that it fiercely proclaimed by its very controversial existence that some were not shy in cultivating and preaching a millennial hope, which just as the faith in Jesus remained "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (*1 Corinthians* 1:23, New International Version).

## References

*1943 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*. 1942. Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society, Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., and International Bible Students Association.

- “All Nations Expansion’ Assembly.” 1947. *The Watchtower* 48 (24, December 15):379–82.
- Baudé, Rick J. 2008. *The Blackburn Chronicles: A Tale of Murder, Money and Madness*. Raleigh, NC: Lulu.com.
- Blackburn, May Otis. 1936. *The Origin of God*. Los Angeles: DeVorss.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 1992. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Consolation*. 1942. “San Diego Officials Line Up Against New Earth’s Princes.” 23(592, May 27):3–16.
- Cooper, Kim. 2014. *The Kept Girl*. Los Angeles: Esotouric Ink.
- Daily News* [Los Angeles]. 1942. “Judge Rutherford’s Body Will Rest in New York.” April 20.
- District Court of Appeal of California, Second District, Division One. 1931. *People v. Blackburn*. 297 P. 599 (Cal Ct. App. 1931). Accessed September 5, 2022. <https://casetext.com/case/people-v-blackburn-55>.
- Flanigan, Kathleen. 2001. “Beth Sarim: House of the Princes.” Report to the Department of Parks and Recreation of the State of California, August. Accessed September 6, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3C5MeDV>.
- Fort, Samuel. 2019. *Cult of the Great Eleven*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Omaha, NE: Nisirtu Publishing (first edition, 2014).
- Foscolo, Ugo. 1807. *Dei sepolcri. Carme*. Brescia: Nicolò Rettori.
- Gaebel, Arthur H., ed. 1915. *The Panama-California Exposition 1915*. San Diego: The Panama-California Exposition.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2015. *I Testimoni di Geova. Chi sono, come cambiano*. Siena: Cantagalli.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022a. “Are Apostates Reliable?” Series of 5 articles. Accessed September 6, 2022. *Bitter Winter*, January 10, <https://bit.ly/3SDIItN>; January 11, <https://bit.ly/3SFHLiV>; January 12, <https://bit.ly/3AcQ4LN>; January 13, <https://bit.ly/3AgnauA>; and January 14, <https://bit.ly/3dnzKii>.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022b. *Brainwashing: Reality or Myth?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022c. “Why Media Hate ‘Cults.’” *Bitter Winter*, September 5. Accessed September 6, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3CpFMcw>.
- Jehovah’s Witnesses—Proclaimers of God’s Kingdom*. 1993. Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York.
- Knox, Zoe. 2018. *Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Secular World. From the 1870s to the Present*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Los Angeles Times*. 1942a. “Rutherford’s Burial Balked.” January 12.

- Los Angeles Times*. 1942b. "Burial Dispute Still Unsettled." March 15.
- Los Angeles Times*. 1942c. "Ban on Burial Site Supported." March 17.
- Los Angeles Times*. 1942d. "Legal Battle Resumed on Rutherford Burial." April 2.
- Los Angeles Times*. 1942e. "Sect Abandons Burial Fight." April 20.
- Los Angeles Times*. 1942f. "Judge Rutherford Buried in East." April 26.
- Martin, Robert J. 1930. "The Truth About the San Diego House." *The Golden Age* 11 (274, March 19):405–7.
- Monrovia Daily News-Post*. 1942. "Deny Rutherford Burial Request." February 3.
- Moorehead, William G. 1910. "Millennial Dawn: A Counterfeit of Christianity." In *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, vol. VII, 106–27. Chicago: Testimony Publishing Company.
- Nashville Banner*. 1930. "Mansion Awaits King David's Coming." March 23.
- Oakland Tribune*. 1942. "Witnesses to Ship Leader's Body East." April 20.
- Pittsburgh Gazette*. 1930. "Home Willed to Prophets." March 19.
- "Questions and Answers." 1925. *The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence* 46(2, January 15):23.
- Red Buff Daily News*. 1942. "Jehovah Sect's Leader Buried." April 25.
- Rutherford, Joseph Franklin. 1939. *Salvation*. Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., and International Bible Students Association.
- San Bernardino Daily Sun*. 1942. "Burial Permit for Sect Leader Denied." April 17.
- San Diego Historical Resources Board. 2001. "Resolution Number no. R-01082101: Historical Designation of Property on 4440 Braeburn Road." August 23, 2001. Accessed September 6, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3SvQgN5>.
- San Diego Historical Resources Board. 2010. "Historical Landmarks Designated by the San Diego Historical Resources Board." Accessed September 6, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3SMB7GU>.
- Supreme Court of California. 1931. *People v. Blackburn*. 214 Cal. 402 (Cal. 1931). November 20. Accessed September 5, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3CsYlMq>.
- Syracuse Herald*. 1930. "Judge Awaits Next Coming of King David." March 23.
- Tertullian. 2016. *Treatise on the Resurrection*. Edited with an introduction, translation, and commentary by Ernst Evans. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.
- The Fresno Bee*. 1942a. "Rutherford Burial Request Overruled." January 25.
- The Fresno Bee*. 1942b. "Rutherford Sect Makes New Burial Plot Try." March 1.
- The Fresno Bee*. 1942c. "Rutherford Buried in Staten Island Grave." April 25.

- The Neosho Daily News*. 1930. "California Mansion Awaits the Coming of King David." March 24.
- The Sacramento Bee*. 1942. "Cult Loses Fight Over Burial of Its Leader." February 7.
- The San Diego Union*. 1942. "County Planners Deny Rutherford Burial Plea." January 25.
- The Tablet*. 1942. "J.F. Rutherford Dies on Coast: Head of 'Witnesses' Anti-Catholic Organization." January 17.
- "The Things They Did Go Right with Them." 1952. *Awake!* February 22:25–6.
- The Ventura County-Star Free Press*. 1942. "Jehovah's Witnesses Denied Permission to Bury Rutherford." February 3.
- Time*. 1930. "California Cults." March 31.
- Washington Herald*. 1930. "Cult Prepares \$75,000 House for King David." March 24.
- Wessinger, Catherine. 2000. *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate*. New York: Seven Bridges Press.
- Wessinger, Catherine, ed. 2016. *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wyatt, Virgil A. 1931. "David's House Waits for Owners." *The San Diego Sun*, January 10.



## **“I Will Shoot Him, or Cut His Throat, Spill His Blood on the Ground”: Mormon Blood Atonement and Utah Capital Punishment**

Michael W. Homer

*Attorney at law, Salt Lake City, Utah*

*mhomer@sautah.com*

**ABSTRACT:** Joseph Smith favored the death penalty by firing squad or by cutting the throat but he opposed hanging. He also taught there were some sins so grievous that they precluded forgiveness. Brigham Young introduced a new doctrine that provided a process through which these grievous sins could be forgiven, which required that sinners’ blood be shed. Later, leading Mormon apologists such as B.H. Roberts and Bruce McConkie defended this doctrine of “blood atonement” and the church’s support for capital punishment. Only recently, the LDS Church switched to a position that it “neither promotes nor opposes capital punishment,” which gives some hope to those who would like to see the death penalty abolished in Utah.

**KEYWORDS:** Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormon Church, Blood Atonement, Death Penalty in Utah, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young.

### *1. Joseph Smith and Capital Punishment*

When Joseph Smith (1805–1844) organized the Church of Christ in 1830, the most common methods of capital punishment in the United States were hanging and firing squads. His attitudes concerning capital punishment were influenced by Old Testament injunctions, which provided that “whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6 KJV, and Genesis 9:12–3 in Smith’s own translation). In 1831, when Smith translated this Old Testament passage, he received a new revelation that commanded “thou shall not kill, but he that killeth shall die.”

Significantly, the same revelation revealed that “he that kills shall not have forgiveness in this world, nor in the world to come” (*Doctrine and Covenants*

42:18–9 [February 9, 1831]). In addition, Smith received revelations that identified other sins that precluded forgiveness including denying the Holy Ghost (*Doctrine and Covenants* 76:34 [February 16, 1832]), breaking oaths and covenants of the priesthood (*Doctrine and Covenants* 4:41 [September 22 and 23, 1832]), and breaking the new and everlasting covenant (*Doctrine and Covenants* 132:27 [July 12, 1843]). These were similar to what some New Testament writers maintained were unforgivable sins including murder and blasphemy against the Holy Ghost (1 John 3:15; John 5:16; Matthew 12:32; Mark 3: 28–9; Hebrews 6:4–6; Hebrews 10: 26–9).

In 1833, Smith distinguished between hanging, “the popular method of execution among the gentiles [i.e., the non-Mormons] in all countries professing Christianity” and “blood for blood according to the law of heaven” (*Documentary History of the Church* 1909–12, I, 435 [November 5, 1833]). Smith’s characterization of hanging as the gentile form of punishment demonstrates he was aware that it was the most common form of capital punishment.

On March 4, 1843, Smith reconfirmed the distinction between hanging and blood shedding during a meeting of the Nauvoo City Council. Willard Richards (1804–1854) recorded that during the meeting Smith read a letter from James Arlington Bennett (1788–1863), in which he stated that Captain Alexander Slidell Mackenzie (1803–1848) of the US naval brig Somers committed murder when he hanged three mutineers instead of imprisoning them. Richards recorded that Smith agreed with Bennett’s conclusion and that George A. Smith (1817–1875) responded that “imprisonment was better than hanging.”

Joseph then opined that “I am opposed to hanging, even if a man kills another, I will shoot him, or cut his throat, spill his blood on the ground.” Smith also told the Council that “If I ever have the privilege of making a law on the point I will have it so” (Smith 2011, 295 [March 4, 1843]). Joseph also predicted that the captain of the Somers would either be hung or imprisoned, presumably because he had not received such confirmation. Nevertheless, Captain Mackenzie was eventually cleared, and his decision was confirmed.

Smith’s comments concerning capital punishment were consistent with his 1831 revelation, which provided that those who kill

shall be delivered up and dealt with according to the laws of the land; for remember that he hath no forgiveness; and it shall be proved according to the laws of the land (*Doctrine and Covenants* 42:79 [February 23, 1831]).

Smith's perspective concerning shedding of blood may have been influenced by penalties in Masonic rituals. Although these penalties did not specifically relate to the execution of murderers, Masons believed that shedding of blood was an appropriate form of punishment for those who violated oaths of secrecy and were disloyal to the Craft. When Masons took these oaths, they were informed that the penalties included having their throat cut, their breast torn open, and their body severed in two (Grunder 2018, 109, 1004, 1146, 1691, and 1713).

These penalties were interpreted in a larger religious context by many Masons. Critics noted that Freemasonry provided the initiate "with his religion, with his politics" and "defend[s] him against the claims of every other power [...] and holds his soul and body in pledge as a security" (Grunder 2018, 1146). As such, "it substitutes itself in the place of all religion" (Grunder 2018, 109) and "pretends to save men, to conduct them to heaven, and bestow on them the rewards of a blessed immortality" (Grunder 2018, 1713). Some Masons therefore believed they were duty bound to carry out these penalties, as they allegedly did in the case of William Morgan (1774–1826?) because he betrayed the Craft (Grunder 2018, 1000 and 1716–17).

In Nauvoo, Smith incorporated some of these Masonic penalties into his new temple ritual. They were considered viable when an initiate broke an oath of secrecy. These penalties consisted of having "throats cut from ear to ear and our tongues torn out by their roots," "our breasts cut open and our hearts and vitals torn from our bodies," and "our bodies be cut asunder in the midst and all our bowels gust out" (Paden 1931, 20; Anderson 2011).

## 2. *Brigham Young and Blood Atonement*

Smith was murdered before he had the opportunity to make a capital punishment law. Brigham Young (1801–1877), who was sustained as Smith's successor, confirmed his predecessor's position concerning capital punishment. But more significantly, Young also gradually introduced a new doctrine associated with capital punishment that became known as blood atonement. Young based the new doctrine on Smith's teaching that some sins are so

horrendous that those who commit them cannot be forgiven by Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Young taught that those who committed these types of sins could be forgiven by having their own blood shed.

On March 22, 1845, Young announced during a meeting of the Council of Fifty in Nauvoo, “a plan whereby Missouri might be saved.” He was referring to those who persecuted Mormons in Missouri and the resulting bloodshed. He stated that if the Missouri mob

would come to Nauvoo cast themselves at our feet, and say they had sinned a sin unto death, and they are willing to submit to the law, let their heads be severed from their bodies, and let their hearts blood run and drench the earth, and then the Almighty would say they should finally be saved in some inferior kingdom. [...] [W]hen a man comes here who is guilty of murder—we would cut off his head, it would be a million times better for him, than it would to let him live (Smith 2016, 351 [(March 22, 1845)]).

During the same year, William Smith (1811–1893), Joseph Smith’s brother, published a proclamation in the *Warsaw Signal*, in which he claimed Young had acknowledged he knew about a murder and that

it was far better for [the victim] to die, than to live any longer in sin, for that he might now possibly be redeemed in the eternal world. That his murderers had done even a deed of charity for that such a man deserved to die (Smith 1845, 1).

William later signed an affidavit that Young introduced “blood atonement” following the death of his brother and that “it had never been taught in the old church.” He claimed that

if a man disobeyed the propositions of that council, meaning the remaining Twelve, he had to pay for it by the forfeiture of his life and atone for the sin by the shedding of his own blood, or allowing it to be shed by others (*Abstract of Evidence: Temple Lot Case* 1893, 93–4 [Affidavit of William Smith]).

He also asserted he left Nauvoo

because of my objections and protests against the doctrine of blood atonement and other new doctrines that were brought into the church (*Abstract of Evidence: Temple Lot Case* 1893, 98 [Cross-examination of William Smith]).

From December 1845 to February 1846, Young introduced the temple ritual previously reserved for church leaders and their wives to the general church membership. He modified the ritual to include a new oath “to avenge the death of Joseph Smith, the martyr, together with that of his brother, Hyrum [Smith (1800–1844)], on this American nation” (Buerger 1987, 103).

Temple exposés claimed there was a penalty attached to the oath “to have our throats cut, and our hearts and bowels torn out” (G.B.R. 1879: *Deseret Weekly* 1889).

In December 1846, after the Mormons abandoned Nauvoo, Thomas Bullock (1816–1885) recorded that Young informed the High Council in Winter Quarters, Iowa that “[w]hen a man is found to be a thief, he will be a thief no longer, cut his throat, & thro’ him in the River” (Bullock 1843–49, December 13, 1846). During the same month, Willard Richards recorded that Young announced he would not travel with wicked men “who continued to lie & steal & swear & commit iniquity & follow the camp” and that he “would have their heads cut off—for that is the law of God & it shall be executed & I swear that I will not live amongst [them]” (Richards 1821–54, 17, December 20, 1846).

After the Saints arrived in Salt Lake, Young focused again on the Missouri mobs and continued to emphasize beheading as his preferred method of punishment over Smith’s “cutting the throat.” He told an assembly in Salt Lake that

all the leaders of the mob could have been saved in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ would have been to come forward voluntarily & let their heads been cut off & let their blood run upon the ground & gone up as a A smokeing incens before the heavens as an atonement but now they will be eternally damned (Woodruff 1983, III, 240 [July 28, 1847]).

In 1849, John D. Lee (1812–1877) recorded that during a meeting of the Council of Fifty a comment was made concerning “infernals, thieves, Murderers, Whoremongers & every other wicked curst.” The speaker, who was not identified (but Brigham Young was present), said their “Blood ought to flow [sic] to atone for their crimes” and that “their cursed heads [needed] to be cut off that they may atone for their Sins, that mercy may have her claims upon them in the day of redemption” (Lee 1955, 97–8).

### *3. Capital Punishment in Utah*

The Mormons initially organized a theocratic form of government before creating a provisional State of Deseret, which included executive, legislative, and judicial branches with Brigham Young as Governor, Daniel H. Wells (1814–1891) as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Heber C. Kimball (1801–1868) as Assembly President, and William W. Phelps (1792–1872) as Speaker of the

House. In 1850, George A. Smith wrote a criminal code that was enacted by Deseret’s legislature (*Journal History of the Church*, January 23, 1850). The clear intention was to include the methods of capital punishment Joseph Smith told the Nauvoo City Council he would adopt if he had “the privilege of making a law on the point.” He had identified these methods as “cutting the throat” or shooting the murderer.

But the statute reflected Young’s preference for beheading over cutting the throat:

when any person shall be found guilty of murder and sented (sic) to die, he, she or they shall suffer death by being shot, hung or beheaded (*Laws and Ordinances of the State of Deseret (Utah)* 1919, 27).

George A. Smith was present when Joseph Smith mentioned “cutting the throat” which was recorded by Willard Richards. When Richards’ notes were published in the *Deseret News* in 1856 (six years after the first capital punishment statute was passed), Smith was quoted as saying “I will [...] cut off his head” (*Deseret News* 1856, 1) while his words in 1853 had been “cut his throat” (Smith 2011, 295; *Documentary History of the Church* 1909–12, V, 296 [March 4, 1853]).

Young’s preference for beheading may have been influenced by the penalty in the Order of Knight Templars ritual, which was beheading (Richardson 1860, 120–21; *A Ritual and Illustrations of Freemasonry* n.d. [1848], 206–7; the first book included an illustration of the due-guard that “alludes to the penalty of the obligation, impaling the head on the highest spire in Christendom,” while *A Ritual* had an illustration of a decapitated Knight Templar). David Bernard’s (1798–1876) *Light on Masonry*, published in 1829, which relied on Thomas S. Webb’s (1771–1819) *The Freemasons Monitor* (Webb 1802), included an illustration of the beheading of Akirop that took place as an act of vengeance in the degree of Knights of the Ninth Arch, which is described in the book (Bernard 1829, 382–87). Joseph Smith dictated passages of the *Book of Mormon* in June 1829 that included a beheading reminiscent of Bernard’s illustration.

Smith had also identified hanging as “the popular method of execution among the gentiles.” Mormon apostle Jedediah Grant (1816–1856) was even more dismissive of hanging, referring to it as “getting a rope round his neck, and having him hung up like a dead dog” (Grant 1854, 2). Nevertheless, hanging was included as a capital punishment option to allow convicted murders to select the

most common form of death penalty in the United States. But most of those who were executed in Utah chose the firing squad rather than hanging, and no one chose beheading even though it was apparently Young's favorite option.

Although the Mormon leadership originally sought territorial status, they soon determined it was preferable to become a state since they could elect their own officials. Thereafter they modified their petition to the United States Congress but were disappointed when it passed an Organic Act, creating Utah Territory. But in consolation President Millard Fillmore (1800–1874) appointed Brigham Young as Governor, who quickly took a census and organized the election of the Utah legislature. In October 1851, the Utah legislature adopted a joint resolution legalizing the laws of the provisional state of Deseret and appointed a committee “to revise and classify the laws of the State of Deseret” (*Acts, Resolutions and Memorials, Passed by the First Annual and Special Sessions, of the Legislative Assembly 1852*, 205 and 215).

In March 1852, the legislature adopted “An Act in Relation to Crimes and Punishments” that included the same forms of capital punishment previously enacted by the State of Deseret. The ordinance provided that murderers

sentenced to die ... shall suffer death by being shot, hung or beheaded as the court may direct, or the person so condemned shall have his option as to the manner of his execution (*Acts, Resolutions and Memorials, Passed by the First Annual and Special Sessions, of the Legislative Assembly 1852*, 142–43).

The statute provided two methods (firing squad and beheading) that complied with God's laws and ensured the convicted murderers future salvation, and a third (hanging) that retained the gentile method.

#### *4. Justifiable Killing*

The “Act in Relation to Crimes and Punishments,” also included provisions which defined “justifiable killing.” One of the provisions stated that a person was justified committing homicide when he

shall kill another in his own defense [...] or in sudden heat of passion caused by the attempt of any such offender to commit a rape upon his wife, daughter, sister, mother or other female relation or dependent (*Acts, Resolutions and Memorials, Passed by the First Annual and Special Sessions, of the Legislative Assembly 1852*, 140).

This statute (like the capital punishment law) was consistent with church teachings that fornicators and adulterers were required to pay the penalty of blood atonement.

The statute was enacted after several men were tried for killing men who had seduced their wives (Cannon 1985). The first case involved Madison D. Hambleton (1811–1870) who killed John Vaughn (?–1851) in February 1851 after he “was detected in open delict” with Hambleton’s wife Chelnecha (née Smith, 1818–1880). Hambleton “was the more incensed at finding the intimacy of the parties had been long standing.” He warned Vaughn to desist but “his evil habits were too strong for him.” Hambleton therefore took vengeance “upon the man who had fouled the milk of his children’s milk” by walking up to Vaughn following a church service and “there blew his brains out” (Grant 1852, 42–3).

Hambleton was tried by the Supreme Court of the State of Deseret, which was presided over by Heber C. Kimball. Although there is no official record of the proceedings, Hosea Stout (1810–1889), who was the prosecutor, recorded in his journal that Brigham Young spoke on behalf of Hambleton and stated he was justified. He was acquitted by the court “and also by the Voice of the people present” (Stout 1964, II, 396). Following the trial Mrs. Hambleton, who apparently was a willing participant in the tryst, was excommunicated by her local congregation for adultery (Madsen 1981, 108–9).

The second case was the trial of Howard Egan (1815–1878). He had killed James Madison Monroe (1823–1851), who had a tryst with Egan’s first wife Tamson Parshley (1824–1905), which resulted in the birth of a son (William Moburn Egan, 1851–1929). Although Brigham Young apparently encouraged Egan to seek revenge, he was still indicted in October 1851. He was tried before Zerubbabel Snow (1809–1888), the only Mormon federal judge in the territory, under both the common law and federal statutes. Mormon apostle George A. Smith represented Egan, and made several arguments in favor of his client’s innocence including precedents from other states.

But Smith’s main contention was that a man who seduces his neighbor’s wife must die based on a principle that “beats and throbs through the heart of the entire inhabitants of the Territory.” He argued that “we are sovereign people, and to seduce the wife of a citizen is death by the common law.” He noted that “in this territory it is a principle of mountain common law, that no man can seduce the wife of another *without endangering his own life*.” This was “the established



principle of justice known in these mountains” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, I, 95–100 [October 1851, Plea of George A. Smith, Esq., on the Trial of Howard Egan for the Murder of James Monroe]).

When Snow instructed the jury, he did not agree with Smith’s application of mountain common law, which he characterized as an argument that Egan killed Monroe “in the name of the Lord.” He noted that this approach “does not change the law of the case” because a “man may violate a law of the land, and be guilty, and yet, so far as he is concerned, do it in the name of the Lord.” Instead, Snow instructed the jury that the federal law at issue was inapplicable because Congress did not have “the sole and exclusive jurisdiction within the limits of the existing territories.” For that reason, he instructed the jury that if it found Egan killed Monroe in Utah Territory he “is entitled to a verdict of not guilty” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, I, 100–3 [October 1851, Charge of Hon. Z. Snow, Judge of the First Judicial District Court of the United States for the Territory of Utah, to the Jury, on the Trial of Howard Egan for the Murder of James Monroe]). Not surprisingly the jury returned a verdict of not guilty within fifteen minutes (Cannon 1985, 314).

Jedediah Grant began sending letters, which may have been authored by Thomas L. Kane (1822–1883), to the *New York Herald* within days after the Utah Legislature approved the statute that a husband could justifiably kill his wife’s seducer (Grant 1852, 42–3). In his third letter (written on April 25, 1852), Grant mentioned the Hambleton and Egan trials, and advanced some of the same arguments George A. Smith made during the Egan trial (Grant 1852, 46–8; see also Stenhouse 1873; Roberts 1930, III, 528, note 18; Arrington 1974, 140–53; Sessions 1982, 100 and 264–65). He then announced that the legislature had passed legislation “making Death the punishment of Adultery” and that it would “be up before Congress for its approval or recission.” But he warned if “our Laws do not offer an *honorable* redress to the American citizen, he’ll have it outside the law” (Grant 1852, 48).

Grant did not acknowledge the practice of polygamy in his letters since it had not been officially announced. But he did emphasize that the church’s position on adultery was consistent with Christian moral teachings. When Orson Pratt (1811–1881) announced the practice of polygamy, he contrasted it with the corrupt and debased laws of the gentiles, which recognized the common law and winked at adultery (*Deseret News-Extra* 1852, 19; Roberts 1930, IV, 56).

Young later complained that those who disliked Mormonism were not focused on polygamy

but they hate this people because they strive to be pure, and will not believe in whoredom and adultery, but declare death to the man who is found guilty of those crimes (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VII, 146 [May 22, 1869]).

### *5. Formal Announcement of Blood Atonement*

In 1852, Brigham Young felt increasingly confident in both his prophetic calling and his position as Governor to reveal to the general church membership some new controversial doctrines, including blood atonement. In January, Young explained the reason African American men were excluded from the priesthood, and in February he announced the doctrine of blood atonement. In April, he explained that Adam was actually God, and then in August both Young and Orson Pratt announced the doctrine of plural marriage.

When Young explained blood atonement, he did so in the context of those who entered into forbidden interracial relationships and particularly those who had sexual intercourse that resulted in the birth of mixed-race children. On February 2, he told legislators that when a man entered into conjugal relations with “the seed of Cain,” the only way to repent of the sin would be to “walk up and say cut off my head, and kill man woman and child.”

He assured them that by doing so “it would do a great deal towards atoning for the sin” and that “it would be a blessing to them—it would do them good that they might be saved with their [brethren]” and that “it is one of the greatest blessings to some to kill them, although the true principles of it are not understood” (Young 1852; Woodruff 1983, IV, 97–8 [January 4, 1852]). Young never wavered in his teaching of blood atonement in the context of interracial relations. In 1863, he repeated that

If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, X, 110 [March 8, 1863]).

Jedediah Grant became an extreme advocate of the doctrine of blood atonement as it was expanded to include other sins. On March 12, 1854, less than a month before Young called him to become his second counselor in the First Presidency,

he preached that it is “their right to kill a sinner to save him, when he commits those crimes that can only be atoned for by shedding his blood” (Grant 1854, 2).

Then in 1856, Young explained blood atonement in a broader context during a period of church history known as the Mormon Reformation. He expanded the crimes that should be punished by blood atonement to include not only murder but also adultery, miscegenation, and apostasy. And significantly he taught that those who had committed those sins could not receive forgiveness without having their own blood shed.

On September 21, he taught in a meeting in the Bowery that

[t]here are sins that men commit for which they cannot receive forgiveness in this world, or in that which is to come, and if they had their eyes open to see their true condition, they would be perfectly willing to have their blood spilt upon the ground. [...] I have had men come to me and offer their lives to atone for their sins. It is true that the blood of the Son of God was shed for sins through the fall and those committed by men, yet men can commit sins which it can never remit (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 53–4 [September 21, 1856]).

During the same meeting, Grant claimed that the doctrine of blood atonement was initially revealed by the Apostle Paul (ca. 5–65 CE), and then encouraged members of the congregation who had committed the most serious sins

to go to the President immediately, and ask him to appoint a committee to attend to their case; and then let a place be selected, and let that committee shed their blood (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 49–50 [September 21, 1856]).

Young’s other counselor, Heber Kimball, also became an enthusiastic proponent of blood atonement. He taught that “when it is necessary that blood should be shed, we should be ready to do that as to eat an apple” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VI, 34–5 [November 8, 1857]). He completely supported Young’s teaching that

those that sin against the Holy Ghost, or shed innocent blood, or consent thereto [...] will have to pay the atonement, or he never can atone for his sin (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VII, 236 [August 28, 1859]).

## 6. *Extra-legal Blood Atonement*

Some critics suggested that church officials believed they could carry out blood atonement outside of the law. They pointed to statements made by church

authorities concerning adulterers and traitors as well as some horrific murders that took place in the territory. With respect to adultery, Apostle Orson Pratt wrote in *The Seer*, a newspaper he published in Washington D. C., that if citizens “have any connection out of the marriage covenant they not only forfeit their lives by the law of God, but they forfeit their salvation also” (Pratt 1853, 42).

Young went further, and preached that if a man

found your brother in bed with your wife, and put a javelin through both of them, you would be justified, and they would atone for their sins (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, III, 247 [March 16, 1856]).

Heber Kimball added that adulterers “cannot whore it here” and that “we will slay both men and women” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, 6: 8 [November 8, 1857]). He also said that adulterers “are worthy of death, and they will get it” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 174 [January 11, 1857]), and even requested “when I am guilty of seducing any man’s wife, or any woman in God’s world, I say, sever my head from my body” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VII, 20 [July 16, 1854]).

Apostle Parley P. Pratt (1807–1857) also claimed that Apostle Paul taught that fornicators deserve this punishment (Pratt 1856, 357).

Young and other leaders suggested that church members could request blood atonement and claimed to know

transgressors who, if they knew themselves, and the only condition upon which they can obtain forgiveness, would beg of their brethren to shed their blood (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 53 [September 21, 1856]).

In 1856, Young revealed “I have had men come to me and offer their lives to atone for their sins” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 54 [September 21, 1856]). He expanded this theme the following year concerning a discourse about adultery. He said,

one of the laws of that kingdom where our Father dwells, that if a man was found guilty of adultery, he must have his blood shed (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 219 [February 8, 1857]).

He therefore asked the audience that if they knew someone who had committed a sin that required blood atonement whether “you love that man or woman well enough to shed their blood?” Young explained that if one knows that if salvation will be withheld, “is there a man or woman in this house but what should say,

‘shed my blood that I may be saved and exalted with the Gods?’” According to Young “[t]hat would be loving themselves, even unto an eternal exaltation. Will you love your brothers and sisters likewise?” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 219–20 [February 8, 1857]).

In 1856, a church member made such an inquiry. Bishop Isaac Haight (1813–1886) sent a letter to Brigham Young concerning a man who had conjugal relations with a woman before they were married. The man felt guilty and confessed to Haight and even indicated “if the Law of God requires his Blood to be spilled he will most willingly comply with Anything required that he may be saved.” But given these circumstances Young advised Haight to “Tell the young man to go and sin no more repent of all his sins and be baptized for the same” (Haight 1856).

Young noted (perhaps alluding to the case Haight referred to him) that,

But now I say, in the name of the Lord, that if this people will sin no more, but faithfully live their religion, their sins will be forgiven them without taking life (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 219–20 [February 8, 1857]).

The following month, he corresponded again with Bishop Haight and reconfirmed “in the name of the Lord, [that] remission and pardon: even of adultery are promised to all that truly repent, confess, forsake their sins, and make restitution” (Young 1857).

Some church officials also suggested that traitors were subject to blood atonement. Jedediah Grant complained that in the United States traitors do not “forfeit their lives” but that Mormon apostates should be under the law of blood atonement. “Putting to death transgressors would exhibit the law of God, no difference by whom it was done; that is my opinion” (Grant 1854, 2). Heber C. Kimball taught that when men

turn traitors to God and His servants, their blood will surely be shed, or else they will be damned, and that too according to their covenants (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 375 [August 16, 1857]).

Kimball said that those who had received their endowments and “made certain covenants” were the “most worthy to be slain” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, 6:38 [November 8, 1857]). This suggests that the traitors were church members who had received their temple endowments, taken oaths, and had agreed to have their own lives taken if they revealed any secrets from the temple. He claimed that

after Jesus’s crucifixion the apostles kicked Judas until his bowels came out and that

when men will forfeit their and turn against us and against the covenants they have made, and they will be destroyed as was Judas (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VI, 125–6 [December 13, 1857]).

Kimball’s story was an elaboration of Reed Peck’s (1814–1894) memory that Joseph Smith claimed Peter killed Judas by hanging him but incorporated a sanguinary method (“Minutes and Testimonies, 12–29 November 1838, Copy [*State of Missouri v. Gates et al. for Treason*]” 1838, 45).

Nevertheless, some church apologists have claimed that “Young’s listeners probably understood this rhetoric as hyperbole” (Smith 2016, 351, note 521). They have cited Young’s 1848 statement that “I have feelings,” and even though he would “often say cut his infernal throat. Still I do not mean any such thing” (Historian’s Office 1848; see also Young 2007, 279–80; Woodruff 1983, III, 330–33 [March 17, 1848]). But it is just as likely that Young knew his listeners were terrified by such comments. Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898) observed that when Young preached that “for some sins no blood would be acceptable except the life & blood of the individual,” “he made the hearts of many tremble” (Woodruff 1983, IV, 451 [September 21, 1856]).

There is some evidence that Young’s loose talk may have encouraged some church members to conduct blood atonement outside the civil law. This impression was seemingly confirmed following the Mountain Meadows Massacre on September 11, 1857, when Mormons slaughtered 120 members of a wagon train that originated from Arkansas and traveled through Utah bound for California. There were also other suspicious deaths in the territory that reinforced this impression.

But regardless of whether some extra-legal executions were carried out, Young and other church officials acknowledged from the pulpit that although

[t]he wickedness and ignorance of the nations forbid this principle’s being in full force, but the time will come when the law of God will be in full force (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 219–20).

Even Grant complained that the territory could not enforce laws “justifiable before God, without any contaminating influences of Gentile amalgamation, laws,

and traditions,” and compared God’s laws to “the doings of different governments” (Grant 1854, 2).

Young repeated his belief in blood atonement during an interview with the *New York Herald* in May 1877, when he stated that “we believe execution should be done by the shedding of blood instead of by hanging.” But he also told the correspondent that since the church could not order executions, the doctrine of blood atonement was carried out through the civil law of “capital punishment for offenses deserving death, according to the laws of the land” (*New York Herald* 1877; *Deseret News* 1877a).

### 7. Apologetics

Following Young’s death, the *Deseret News* editorialized that “all the government of earth” should pronounce the death penalty on the murderer, and “let his blood be spilled upon the ground as an offering, instead of strangling him to death like a dog” (*Deseret News* 1877b; *Deseret Evening News* 1879). New prophets continued to support Young’s emphasis on capital punishment as the method of achieving blood atonement well into the twentieth century.

When Utah was admitted as a state in 1896, the legislature adopted the same capital punishment law previously passed by the State of Deseret and the Territory of Utah with the exception that it dropped the option of beheading. Thereafter church officials continued to confirm that Utah’s capital punishment law was enacted to grant

unto the condemned murderer the privilege of choosing for himself whether he die by hanging, or whether he be shot, and thus have his blood shed in harmony with the law of God, and this atone, so far as it is in his power to atone, for the death of his victim (Smith and Evans 1905, 15–6).

In 1930 Brigham H. Roberts (1857–1933) in his *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, published by the church, provided the first sophisticated apologetics for the doctrine of blood atonement. He maintained that Smith’s views on capital punishment were consistent with both Old and New Testament passages (Roberts 1930, IV, 129, note 41), then argued that when Young introduced blood atonement, he did not go beyond what the Apostle Paul taught as documented in the Bible (Roberts 1930, IV, 126–30).

Roberts also argued that Young did not institute a system of blood atonement outside of the secular system of justice (Roberts 1930, IV, 130–33). He did acknowledge, however, there had been “certain extreme and unqualified utterances of some of the leading elders of the church” (not including Young) that some interpreted as allowing that blood atonement could be carried out “by the legal authority vested in the church.” Nevertheless, Roberts wrote that “the suggestions seemingly made in the overzealous words of some of these leading elders were never acted upon” (Roberts 1930, IV, 126 and 130).

Following Roberts’ apologetics, the church’s position concerning blood atonement did not change. In 1958 Bruce R. McConkie (1915–1985) explained the doctrine in his magnum opus entitled *Mormon Doctrine*. He included an entry on blood atonement that explained

there are some serious sins for which the cleansing of Christ does not operate, and the law of God is that men must then have their own blood shed to atone for their sins (McConkie 1958, 87).

As such, McConkie wrote, “capital punishment is ordained of God” (McConkie 1958, 104). He also noted that the doctrine could not be practiced except through capital punishment laws, and that secular governments which have abolished such laws are examples of “the direful apostasy that prevails among the peoples who call themselves Christian” (McConkie 1958, 104). He further explained that “hanging or execution on gallows does not comply with the law of blood atonement, for the blood is not shed” (McConkie 1958, 314).

## *8. Reversals and Modifications*

But when a second edition of *Mormon Doctrine* was published in 1966, the entries for both “capital punishment” and “hanging” were eliminated while the entry for “blood atonement” was retained (McConkie 1966). Then in 1978, McConkie provided a rationale for striking the entry on hanging. In correspondence he explained:

We do not believe that it is necessary for men in this day to shed their own blood to receive a remission of sins. This is said with a full awareness of what I and others have written and said on this subject in times past (McConkie 1978, 1).

Two years later, the Utah legislature eliminated hanging and substituted lethal injections but still retained firing squads as a method of execution.



Despite these revisions in McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* and his correspondence concerning hanging, the church made no official announcements concerning blood atonement. Then in 1987 the church privately modified its position when it recorded in its *Journal History of the Church* that "the Church neither promotes nor opposes capital punishment" (Special Affairs Committee 1987). This explains why McConkie's entry for "capital punishment" was eliminated. His charge that the elimination of the death penalty by secular governments was "further evidence of the direful apostasy" could no longer be maintained when the church no longer advocated that the death penalty was necessary to carry out the Lord's commandment concerning blood atonement.

The modifications concerning hanging specifically and capital punishment generally were in direct opposition to Joseph Smith's position that murderers should not only be executed but that the method of execution must result in shedding of blood. Nevertheless, these changes were not publicized and were relatively unknown. Even though one church spokesperson referred to them during a private meeting in 1989, it was noted in a press report that "no mention was made of an official church statement" (*Post Register* [Idaho Falls] 1989). Even the contributors to *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, which was published in 1992, were seemingly unaware of these developments since they only noted that "capital punishment is viewed in the doctrine of the Church to be an appropriate penalty for murder" ("Capital Punishment" 1992).

But two decades later in 2003, when the Utah Legislature debated proposed legislation that the firing squad be eliminated, the church's *Deseret News* reported that a church spokesperson confirmed the church "has no objection to the elimination of the firing squad in Utah" (Thomson 2003). One observer noted that absent this announcement "there probably would have been a question among some legislators and it may have not made it out of committee" (Thomson 2003). In 2004, the legislature passed a bill that abolished firing squads as a method of execution. The following year the church finally announced in the *Deseret News* its broader position that "We neither promote nor oppose capital punishment" (Clarke and Whitt 2005). This was followed in 2010 by a statement disavowing Blood Atonement:

The "so-called 'blood atonement' by which individuals would be required to shed their own blood to pay for their sins, is not the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We believe in and teach the infinite and all-encompassing atonement of

Jesus Christ, which makes forgiveness of sin and salvation possible for all people (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2010).

But in 2021 the legislature passed legislation that allowed firing squads to be used again under specific circumstances, which were primarily focused on whether execution by lethal injection was determined to be unconstitutional or if the state was unable to lawfully obtain the necessary substances to perform lethal injections. The following year, a bill was introduced to eliminate capital punishment.

The proponents of abolishing capital punishment elected not to emphasize the church’s position, other than to indicate it was neutral on the issue, even though most of the legislators were Mormons. Significantly, they did not emphasize that the church no longer taught that capital punishment is a God-sanctioned method to effectuate blood atonement in appropriate situations. During the debate in committee, the focus was on the length and costs of appeals. But one witness quoted the Old Testament command in Genesis 9:12–3, and another testified that capital punishment is a blessing to those convicted of capital crimes.

It is unclear whether Utah legislators understood the current church position, and this may account in part for the bill’s failure to survive a committee vote. The church has not provided any rationale for discarding Joseph Smith’s teaching concerning capital punishment, or Brigham Young’s more controversial pronouncements about blood atonement. The church does not justify modifications in doctrine or acknowledge that prior doctrines became anachronistic, and even more significantly were not inspired. Because of this, some members have continued for decades to repeat apologetics concerning the non-eligibility of Blacks to hold Mormon priesthood (Homer 2014, 391–92).

There is a similar gap between the apologetics advanced by B.H. Roberts and the church’s current neutral position concerning capital punishment and its apparent position that blood atonement is no longer viable even when the death penalty is imposed pursuant to secular laws. When lobbyists failed to present these implications of the church’s current position, it is likely that some legislators relied on Roberts’ apologetics in the *Comprehensive History of the Church*, which is still considered to be the official history of the church.

Nevertheless, the church is gradually supplanting Roberts’ official *Comprehensive History* with a new multi-volume treatise entitled *Saints*. While

only three of the projected four volumes of *Saints* have been published, it is clear that it is intended to replace Roberts' more sophisticated history. In the first volume, it was noted that the "global reach of the restored gospel" has increased so markedly that "it is time to update and include more Saints in the story" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2018, xvii–viii).

And yet the story as it relates to blood atonement is much shorter than Roberts' version. The second volume of *Saints* notes that Young and others

had even drawn on Old Testament scriptures to teach that certain grievous sins could be forgiven only through the shedding of the sinners' blood (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2020, 245).

It then related the story of Isaac Haight, and concluded that even though Young "sometimes let his fiery sermons go too far" he did "not intend for people to be put to death for their sins." Instead,

Brigham's forceful preaching and his counsel for mercy were intended to help Saints repent and draw closer to the Lord (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2020, 246).

Although the final volume of *Saints* (which will include the period from 1956 forward) has not been published yet, it is unlikely to include any in-depth explanation for the reversal of the church's position on capital punishment or blood atonement. Nevertheless, one could easily argue that the modifications of doctrines relating to both priesthood eligibility and capital punishment have brought the church in conformity with mainstream beliefs and practices, and have aligned it in a more favorable position for future growth and for "more Saints in the story."

Even such an explanation could foster a better understanding by Utah legislators when they again consider the abolition of capital punishment.

## References

Note: The edition of *Doctrine and Covenants* quoted in the article is the one published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City 1981. The *Journal History of the Church* is a daily history of The Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1830 to 2008, kept in the Church History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah.

*Abstract of Evidence: Temple Lot Case.* 1893. Lamoni, IA: Herald Publishing House and Bindery.

*Acts, Resolutions and Memorials, Passed by the First Annual and Special Sessions, of the Legislative Assembly.* 1852. Great Salt Lake City: Brigham Young.

Anderson, Devery Scott. 2011. *The Development of LDS Temple Worship, 1846–2000: A Documentary History.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books.

*A Ritual and Illustrations of Freemasonry.* n.d. [1848]. London: W. Reeves.

Arrington, Leonard J. 1974. “Mormonism: Views from Without and Within.” *BYU Studies* 14:140–53.

Bernard, David. 1829. *Light on Masonry.* Utica, NY: William Williams.

Buerger, David John. 1987. “The Development of the Mormon Temple Endowment Ceremony.” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 20, 4:33–76.

Bullock, Thomas. 1843–49. “Thomas Bullock Journals, 1843–1849.” MS 1385, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Cannon, Kenneth L., II. 1985. “‘Mountain Common Law’: The Extralegal Punishment of Seducers in Early Utah.” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 51:308–27.

“Capital Punishment.” 1992. In *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vol., I, 255. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Clarke, Alan W., and Laurelyn Whitt. 2005. “Death Penalty Is Never Justified.” *Deseret News*, April 15. Accessed October 21, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3D0Wb6f>.

*Deseret Evening News.* 1879. “Death Penalty for Murder.” May 16.

*Deseret News.* 1856. “History of Joseph Smith: March, 1843.” VI, 12 (May 28):1.

*Deseret News.* 1877a. “Interview with Brigham Young.” XXVI, 16 (May 23):2–3.

*Deseret News* 1877b. “The Death Penalty.” XXVI, 45 (December 12):8.

*Deseret News-Extra.* 1852. “Special Conference of the Elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Assembled in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, August 28, 1852.” September 14:9–53.

- Deseret Weekly*. 1889. “‘Mormons’ and Citizenship.” XXXIX, 22 (November 23):684–93.
- Documentary History of the Church* [aka *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*]. 1909–1912. Revised edition. 7 vol. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co.
- G.B.R (Mrs.). 1879. “Lifting the Vail” [sic]. *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 28.
- Grant, Jedediah M. 1852. *Three Letters to the New York Herald*. New York: n.p.
- Grant, Jedediah M. 1854. “Discourse” [March 12]. *Deseret News* IV, 20 (July 27):2.
- Grunder, Rick. 2018. *Mormon Parallels: A Bibliographic Source*. South Jordan UT: Bear Hollow Books.
- Haight, Isaac. 1856. Letter, October 29. CR 1234-1, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Historian’s Office. 1848. “General Church Minutes, March 17, 1848.” Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Homer Michael W. 2014. *Joseph’s Temples: The Dynamic Relationship Between Freemasonry and Mormonism*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Journal of Discourses*. 1854–86. 26 vol. Liverpool: F.D. and S.W. Richards (vol. I). F.D. Richards (vol. II), Orson Pratt (vol. III), G.D. Watt (vol. V), G.D. Watt, J.V. Long, and Others (vol. VI–VII), G.D. Watt and J.V. Long (vol. VIII–X), B. Young (vol. XI), Albert Carrington (vol. XII and XXI–XXII), Horace S. Eldredge (vol. XIII–XV and XVII), Joseph F. Smith (vol. XVI and XVIII), William Budge (vol. XIX–XX), John Henry Smith (vol. XXIII–XXV), and Daniel H. Wells (vol. XXVI); and London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot.
- Laws and Ordinances of the State of Deseret (Utah)*. 1919. Salt Lake City: Shepard Book Company.
- Lee, John D. 1955. *A Mormon Chronicle: The Diaries of John D. Lee*, edited by Robert Glass Cleland and Juanita Brooks. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library.
- Madsen, Brigham D. 1981. *A Forty Niner in Utah, With the Stansbury Exploration of Great Salt Lake: Letters and Journal of John Hudson, 1848–50*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- McConkie, Bruce R. 1958. *Mormon Doctrine*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft.
- McConkie, Bruce R. 1966. *Mormon Doctrine*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft.
- McConkie, Bruce R. 1978. “Letter of Bruce R. McConkie to Thomas McAfee,” October 18. Accessed October 21, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3z4ga2z>.
- “Minutes and Testimonies, 12–29 November 1838, Copy [*State of Missouri v. Gates et al. for Treason*].” 1838. Accessed October 20, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3z9wmji>.

- New York Herald*. 1877. “Interview with Brigham Young.” May 6.
- Paden, William D. 1931. *Temple Mormonism: Its Evolution, Ritual, and Meaning*. New York: A.J. Montgomery.
- Post Register* [Idaho Falls]. 1989. “Church Leaders Meet with Capital Punishment Foes.” April 30.
- Pratt, Orson. 1853. “Celestial Marriage (Continued).” *The Seer* 1, 3 (March):41–47.
- Pratt, Parley P. 1856. “Marriage and Morals in Utah.” *Deseret News* V, 45 (January 16):357.
- Richards, Willard. 1821–54. “Willard Richards Journals and Papers.” Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Richardson, Jabez. 1860. *Richardson’s Monitor of Free-Masonry*. New York: Lawrence Fitzgerald.
- Roberts, Brigham H. 1930. *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. 6 vol. + vol. 7, Index. Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press.
- Sessions, Gene Allred. 1982. *Mormon Thunder: A Documentary History of Jedediah M. Grant*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Smith, Joseph. 2011. *The Joseph Smith Papers. Journals. Volume 2, December 1841–April 1843*. Salt Lake City: LDS Church Historian’s Press.
- Smith, Joseph. 2016. *The Joseph Smith Papers. Administrative Records. Council of Fifty Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*. Salt Lake City: LDS Church Historian’s Press.
- Smith, Joseph F., Jr., and Richard C. Evans. 1905. *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage: A Discussion*. Independence, MO: Zion’s Printing and Publishing Company.
- Smith, William. 1845. “A Proclamation.” *Warsaw Signal* II, 32 (October 29):1.
- Special Affairs Committee. 1987. “Statement on Capital Punishment.” *Journal History of the Church*, August. Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Stenhouse, Thomas Brown Holmes. 1873. *The Rocky Mountain Saints*. New York: D. Appleton and Co.
- Stout, Hosea. 1964. *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout*, edited by Juanita Brooks. 2 vol. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2010. “Mormon Church Statement on Blood Atonement.” *Deseret News*, June 18. Accessed October 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3gHDnRZ>.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2018. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days. Vol. 1: The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2020. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days. Vol. 2: No Unhallowed Hand, 1846–1893*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
- Thomson, Linda. 2003. “Church Not Against a Firing-Squad Ban.” *Deseret News*, September 4. Accessed October 21, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3DqjaZN>.
- Webb, Thomas Smith. 1802. *The Freemasons’ Monitor, Or, Illustrations of Masonry*. New York: Southwick and Crooker.
- Woodruff, Wilford. 1983. *The Wilford Woodruff Journals*. 10 vol. Salt Lake City: Signature Books.
- Young, Brigham. 1852. “Speech of February 5, 1852.” In “Historian’s Office reports of speeches, 1845–1885.” Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Young, Brigham. 1857. “Letter to Isaac C. Haight,” March 5. In “Brigham Young Office Files Transcriptions [1974–78]. Letterbooks, Volume 3, 1857, February 19–April 1,” 461–2. Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Young, Brigham. 2007. *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young*. Salt Lake City: The Smith-Pettit Foundation.

## Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, "Cults," and Conspiracy Theories in Russia Before and During the War in Ukraine

Rosita Šorytė

*European Federation for Freedom of Belief*

rosita\_soryte@hotmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** Russia's repressive policy against groups labeled as "cults" or "extremist religions" received new impetus from the invasion of Ukraine. It was claimed that "cults," including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology, Neo-Pagans, Satanists, and Pentecostals, secretly directed by the American CIA, had organized the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014, and were exciting Ukrainian anti-Russian feelings in 2022. They have also been accused of acts of sabotage in Russia and of preparing a coup against the Putin regime. While these accusations may be regarded as ridiculous by foreign observers, they play a significant role in domestic Russian propaganda. Russian anti-cultists also quote as evidence that they should be taken seriously the support they received before the 2022 war in Ukraine (and, in some cases, even after) by the European anti-cult federation FECRIS, which did condemn the invasion but continued to maintain ambiguous relations with its old Russian friends.

**KEYWORDS:** "Cults" in Russia, "Cults" and the War in Ukraine, Anti-Cult Movement in Russia, FECRIS, Alexander Dvorkin, Alexander Novopashin, Alexander Korelov, Roman Silantyev, Scientology in Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

### *Introduction*

On July 12, 2022, the Security Council of the Russian Federation, a body chaired by Vladimir Putin himself that includes the chiefs of the different Russian security agencies, devoted a special meeting to "how to neutralize internal threats to national security" (Security Council of the Russian Federation 2022).

According to the official press release, this dissent is significantly fueled by religious organizations. Participants in the meeting agreed that in Russia there is still too much "religious permissiveness," and religion is often used for "negative purposes."



One of the recommendations made by the Council was to consider introducing a new law on religion, which would distinguish between five categories. “Traditional religions,” whose activities will be promoted and supported, will be at the top. “Destructive cults,” which will be prohibited, will be at the bottom. In the middle will be “non-traditional religions” and “foreign religions,” whose activities will not be prohibited but limited and kept under surveillance (Security Council of the Russian Federation 2022).

This meeting confirmed the recent emphasis on “traditional religions” rather than on the Russian Orthodox Church only. “Traditional religions” is not a code word for “Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).” It includes Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism.

There is a reason why Putin, who in several speech had promoted the “spiritual security” of Russia by implying that the spiritual identity of the country is intrinsically connected with the ROC, now uses “traditional religions” in the plural. Discussing Russian casualties in the Ukrainian war is forbidden in Russia. However, by looking at various available data, in May 2022 the magazine *Foreign Policy* concluded that members of Buddhist (particularly Buryat) and Muslim (particularly Chechen and Daghestani) religious minorities

appear to be disproportionately fighting and dying in the Kremlin’s army—while ethnic [Orthodox] Russians, especially those from better-off regions such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, overwhelmingly manage to avoid duty at the front (Kovalev 2022).

The magazine reported data gathered by Russian independent (and semi-underground) media according to which

by May 18, Buryatia had lost 117 soldiers (the actual number is likely higher), whereas the city of Moscow, with a population around 15 times Buryatia’s, lost only three (Kovalev 2022).

The article concluded that the “dirty secret of the Russian military” is that religious minorities are used as “cannon fodder” (Kovalev 2022).

The Orthodox hierarchy is not happy about these developments. For example, Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, a popular Orthodox lecturer whose role in the fight against religious minorities I will discuss in the article, reacted to the July 12 meeting by stating in an interview that regarding the ROC as being at the same level with other religions and insisting that in Russia there is really “a separation between the [Orthodox] Church” and the state is “ridiculous” (Vdovik 2022).

On the other hand, we should not over-emphasize Putin's acknowledgement of other "traditional religions." The ROC will still maintain a privileged position, presumably as long as Putin remains in power. There are also signs that religious minorities start rebelling against their "promotion" by being sent to die in Ukraine. In October 2022, the Supreme Lama of Kalmykia, Telo Tulku Rinpoche (also known as Erdne Ombadykow), who is also the head of the Tibetan Buddhists loyal to the Dalai Lama in the Russian Federation, followed the thousand of Kalmyks who moved to Mongolia to avoid conscription, and stated that the war

is wrong; nobody needs this war. We are all living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all of us want to live peacefully, each country wants to develop. I think the Ukrainian side, of course, is right—it is defending its country, its land, its truth, its constitution, its people. It is very difficult to say and accept that Russia is right. It is very hard to say so (Whitaker 2022).

The Supreme Lama became the highest Russian religious authority who condemned the war, although he did it only after he had left the territory of the Russian Federation.

### *"Cults" and "Religious Extremism" in Russia*

If the law proposed by the Security Council is passed, creating second-class categories of "foreign religions" and "non-traditional religions" would allow for more limitations of the activities of Roman Catholics (who have their supreme leadership outside of Russia), most Protestants, and even the most moderate and peaceful of new religious movements.

Waiting for a new law, however, two notions are used in Russia to discriminate against religious minorities, "destructive cults" and "extremist religions." The difference between the two categories is that there is a law targeting "extremist religions," while so far there is no law against "destructive cults." All "destructive cults" are also considered "extremist," but not all "extremist religions" are considered "destructive cults."

The word equivalent to the English "cult" in Russian is "секта" (sekta). As it happens in other languages using words derived from the Latin "secta," the correct translation of the Russian "секта" is not "sect" but "cult."

“Sekta” has been used for centuries by the ROC to designate dissident groups it considered as “heretics.” However, its arguments were purely theological and were not very effective in the climate of comparative secularization and religious liberty introduced by the administration of Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007), when several new religious movements believed they were now free to operate in Russia.

As analyzed in detail in a valuable study published in 2020 by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the situation started changing in 1992 (USCIRF 2020). In fact, as the USCIRF study reports, the new notion of “cult” (sekta) was introduced in Russia by a specific individual, Alexander Dvorkin, who returned home in 1992 after having spent the previous fifteen years in the United States, where he both earned a Ph.D. in Medieval Studies and was exposed to the ideas of the American anti-cult movement. The arrival of Dvorkin was perceived as a blessing by the ROC, which immediately hired him as a full-time employee. In 1993, under the auspices of the ROC, Dvorkin founded the Center for Religious Studies in the name of Hieromartyr Irenaeus of Lyons, the first Russian anti-cult movement. Although his academic training was in Medieval Studies rather than contemporary religion, in 1997 Dvorkin was appointed as professor of “Cultic Studies” at Saint Tikhon University, which is operated by the ROC.

In the following decade, as the symbiotic relation between the ROC and the Putin regime consolidated, Dvorkin increasingly cooperated with public security and prosecutors. In 2009, he was appointed as head of the State Religious Expert Council of the Ministry of Justice of Russia, which plays a key role in identifying which groups are “destructive cults” and should be “liquidated.”

As far as the definition of “cults” is concerned, two points should be noted. First, the original contribution of Dvorkin was that he was aware of the (theoretical) secular nature of the Russian state and looked for a definition of “cult” that was non-theological. He was inspired by definitions current in the Western anti-cult movement, but came out with a specific Russian definition. His preferred label to designate movements he called the state to crack down on was “totalitarian cult” (USCIRF 2020).

At first sight, the use of this expression is paradoxical, because Dvorkin presents himself as a staunch supporter of Putin, and the Putin regime has been

itself described as totalitarian by many Russian and foreign observers. Some may argue that Putin operates a "totalitarian cult" too.

However, to some extent, this objection misses the point. The fascist and Nazi regimes openly admitted to be "totalitarian." Yet, at the same time, they persecuted religious organizations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses accusing them of also being "totalitarian." In non-democratic regimes, totalitarianism is a monopoly of the state. If other organizations are "totalitarian," in the sense that they regulate the whole life of their members and determine their attitude on almost all conceivable issues, they become competitors of the state and are severely repressed. Members of such organizations, in fact, live in free spaces of their own and cannot be fully controlled by the state.

Dvorkin could present his notion of "totalitarian cult" as entirely non-theological and compatible with a secular state, although in fact he defined as "totalitarian" all groups that proselytized among the members of the ROC.

Second, while his definition of "cult" had quintessential Russian features, Dvorkin believed that to avoid being perceived as a ROC sectarian operation, Russian anti-cultism should become part of the international anti-cult network. The largest umbrella organization for anti-cult movements in Europe and beyond is called FECRIS, the European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sect, established in France in 1994 and largely supported by funds provided by the French government. Dvorkin in turn created an umbrella organization federating different local anti-cult movements the ROC had created in Russia, the Russian Association of Centers for Religious and Cultic Studies (RATsIRS), later also called Center for Religious Studies. The Russian groups became a very visible component, and generous donors, of FECRIS. Dvorkin managed to be elected Vice President of FECRIS, a position he maintained for twelve years, from 2009 to 2021. While the Russian organizations have disappeared from the list of FECRIS members after the war in Ukraine started (without any official explanation, and they claim to be still part of FECRIS: see *Ansobor.ru* 2022c), Dvorkin remains as a FECRIS board member according to the official records.

Contrary to what many in the West believe, however, Dvorkin and his organizations do not have a monopoly on anti-cultism in Russia. Twenty-two years younger than Dvorkin, Roman Silantyev sometimes describes himself as a "sociologist" although his academic training is in geography and anthropology.

He elaborated a competing definition of “cults” that should be prohibited in Russia, which he calls “destructive” rather than “totalitarian.” Dvorkin occasionally uses the expression “destructive cults” as well but Silantyev regards them as part of a sub-category in the larger field of “destructive movements.” He claims to have invented a new science called “destructology,” and a “Laboratory of Destructology” with Silantyev as chair was created for him at Moscow State Linguistic University in 2019.

Although they have common enemies, Silantyev and Dvorkin have been in competition for positions both with the state and the ROC and for the ideological hegemony on Russian anti-cultism. When Dvorkin was appointed in 2009 chair of the State Religious Expert Council of the Ministry of Justice of Russia, Silantyev was appointed as deputy chair.

It is difficult to imagine somebody more extreme than Dvorkin when it comes to “cults,” but Silantyev fits the bill. His notion of “destructive cults” refers to groups he calls “misanthropic” that consciously operate for the destruction of all human values if not humanity itself (Voloshinskaya 2022).

As mentioned earlier, there is no law against “totalitarian cults” or “destructive cults” in Russia. However, there is a law against “extremism,” which also mentions “religious extremism.” The Russian law on extremism was passed in 2002. The date is significant, as the law came in the year following 9/11 and, although penalties for propagating “extremism” were harsh, both domestic and international observers interpreted it as an understandable reaction against the threat of terrorism operating in the name of radical Islam.

However, in subsequent years, amendments and interpretive documents modified the scope of the law, and explained that a group can be “extremist” even if it does not promote nor justify violence. Were defined as “religious extremist” groups those that teach the superiority of their spiritual path with respect to other religions (meaning the ROC, and perhaps now other “traditional religions” as well). It is mostly on this basis that the Jehovah’s Witnesses were declared “extremist” and “liquidated” in 2017 (Kravchenko 2018).

Obviously, all religions believe that what they teach is somewhat better than what is taught by the other religions, otherwise why should anybody convert to them? But the subtext was that are “extremist” in Russia religions that try to convert members of the ROC, which was further prohibited in 2016 by the anti-

proselytization laws part of the "Yarovaya laws package" introduced by Duma member Irina Yarovaya (Goble 2016). Parenthetically, this is the same Irina Yarovaya, now deputy chair of the Duma, who on July 18 this year made international headlines by claiming that Ukraine has invented a special drug that transforms its military into zombie-like soldiers insensitive to pain and without any remaining trace of human consciousness (Sborov 2022).

### *Sabotage and "Cults"*

In the last few months, several acts of sabotage and mysterious fires destroyed military and civil facilities inside the territory of the Russian Federation. Ukraine has not explicitly claimed the attacks, and Russian authorities have originally explained away the events as accidents.

However, as these so-called accidents multiplied, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the main heir of the old KGB, has adopted the theory, originally advanced by anti-cult organizations, that sabotage and "terrorist" attacks are conducted in Russia by "cults" directed from abroad by the American and Ukrainian intelligence services.

On August 15, simultaneously in six different Russian cities, churches and private homes of a Pentecostal church based in Latvia called New Generation have been raided by the FSB, and dozens of members arrested (Sokolov 2022). Both the FSB press releases and the main Russian anti-cultists, including Alexander Dvorkin (Sokolov 2022) and his deputy in the RATsIRS, Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, who appeared in television to support the raids, explained that New Generation operated "cells" engaged in sabotage activities on behalf of Ukraine (Solovova 2022).

Paradoxically, New Generation, which is led by Pastor Alexei Ledyayev, is controversial in Latvia because in the past it has supported Putin's and Patriarch Kirill's anti-LGBT policies (Springe 2016), and recently has been on the same side of several pro-Russian organizations in refusing COVID-19 vaccination (*Baltics News* 2021). However, it committed the capital sin of sending missionaries to Russia to convert Russian Orthodox devotees to its faith. As a consequence, it was persecuted in Russia as a "cult," and reacted by siding against the Putin regime after the invasion of Ukraine. While it is both a

prosperous and a controversial church, that it has the desire or the capabilities to carry on activities of sabotage in Russia is not believable.

On September 6, the FSB conducted operations in 46 regions of the Russian Federation arresting 187 alleged members of two connected Satanist cults, also accused of conducting sabotage operations on behalf of Ukraine and the United States, Columbine Satanism and Maniacs: Murder Cult (MKU) (*Ansobor.ru* 2022a).

According to most scholars of religion and Satanism, these organizations do not exist. “Columbine Satanism” has been denounced as the most dangerous “cult” in the world by Silantiev (Voloshinskaya 2022). The name comes from the high school massacre in Columbine, Colorado, in 1999, where two teenagers killed 12 students and a teacher. The massacre certainly happened, but Silantiev claims that it was the result of a cooperation between the American Church of Satan founded by Anton Szandor LaVey (1930–1997) and the CIA, whose experiments aimed at creating young killers and deploying them to wreak havoc in various countries. Later, he added to the number of conspirators “the SBU [Security Service of Ukraine] and the centers of information and psychological operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine” (*Interfax* 2022a). There is no evidence that the Columbine killers were in contact with the Church of Satan, nor that they belonged to a larger “cult.”

“Maniacs: Murder Cult” was the name of a small group with 13 subscribers that existed for a few months on the social media VKontakte, which is popular in both Russia and Ukraine. Assuming the FSB was not behind it from the beginning, it was operated in Ukraine by a young Black Metal fan called Yehor Krasnov, who was arrested by the Ukrainian police for stabbing a man in the street. The FSB and Silantiev, however, have claimed since 2021 that Krasnov is not in jail but is used by the Ukrainian intelligence to mastermind a transnational terrorist Satanist cult that may also include supporters of dissident Alexei Navalny (Rudenko and Shandra 2021).

It appears that “Columbine Satanism” and “Maniacs: Murder Cult” are just labels conveniently used by the FSB, with the propaganda support of anti-cult activists, to arrest dissidents and find a convenient explanation for the “accidents” destroying strategically important facilities in Russia. The use of “cults” as scapegoats by Russian authorities to explain their failures in Ukraine, however, is not new, and extends to larger groups such as Scientology.

### *Maidan and the Alleged "American Coup" of 2014 in Ukraine*

The most persistent argument of Russian propaganda about Ukraine is that the war was not started in 2022 by Russia but by Ukraine and the United States in 2014, when what Russians call a "coup" ousted pro-Putin President Viktor Yanukovich. The "coup," this propaganda claims, "compelled" Russia to react by invading Crimea and protecting the separatists who had created the pseudo-republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Eastern part of the Donbass, ultimately leading also to the 2022 war.

In fact, there was no "coup." President Yanukovich had become increasingly authoritarian, and had angered many by announcing that he would not sign the association agreement with the European Union that had been agreed upon, and would rather seek an economic association with Russia. This led to protests by students in Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv that started on November 21, 2013.

They would probably have remained comparatively small had it not been for the fact that the police entered Maidan Nezalezhnosti and brutally beat the students on November 29. Many who would probably not have protested for the European Union joined the ranks of the protesters. "Small Maidans" were organized in other Ukrainian cities. At the beginning of 2014, protesters were evaluated at one million. There were bloody clashes, which left 108 protesters and 13 security agents dead.

On February 21, 2014, with the mediation of the European Union, Yanukovich signed an agreement with the opposition that would have taken the country to new presidential elections. However, in the night between February 21 and 22, he escaped Kyiv and eventually went to Russia. On February 22, the Ukrainian Parliament voted that, having deserted his functions, Yanukovich should be removed from office. The same day, Russia invaded Crimea. The following week, armed Russian separatists started attacking government buildings in Donbass.

The 2014 events generated a large scholarly literature discussing issues of Ukrainian constitutional law and international politics. I would not enter this field, since the purpose of my paper is to examine conspiracy theories about the Maidan Revolution, and in particular the theory that the Church of Scientology, acting on behalf of United States' intelligence services, was among the forces secretly promoting it.



To understand this strange claim, we should first examine the broader conspiracy theory that the United States organized the 2014 Maidan.

### *The Nuland Connection*

The so-called evidence offered by Russian propaganda for this claim centers on one particular American diplomat, the then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland. Stories about Nuland have been revived today, since Nuland is a political associate of President Joe Biden, who was Vice President in 2014. Nuland currently serves as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs.

One reason Nuland has been presented as the villain in many conspiracy theories is that she happens to be the wife of Robert Kagan, one of the best known American neoconservative theorists. There is no doubt that neoconservatives offered a rationale for the war in Iraq and support an anti-Russian policy, although in conspiracy theories they are accused of much more and seen as part of a “deep state” that is trying to rule America dictatorially.

Allegedly, Nuland “confessed” that the United States had organized Maidan in a leaked phone call of February 2014 with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey R. Pyatt, whose audio file was posted on YouTube and divulged by Russian propaganda media. In the phone call Nuland, while not “confessing” anything nor implying that the U.S. had organized Maidan, used an offensive word to designate what she saw as the lack of action by the European Union, which she compared unfavorably to the U.S. support for the anti-Yanukovych forces, and expressed her preference, among different politicians of the Ukrainian opposition, for economist Arseniy Yatsenyuk (*BBC News* 2014).

In fact, she did not say that Yatsenyuk was more pro-American than others, but that as an economist with a distinguished career as president of the National Bank of Ukraine he was well-placed to rebuild the Ukrainian economy, which was in a very bad shape (*BBC News* 2014). Yatsenyuk did become Prime Minister after Yanukovych was ousted in February 2014, but—Nuland’s opinion notwithstanding—was never considered as a serious candidate for the Presidency, and in 2016 his government collapsed because of his contrasts with the President elected in 2014, Petro Poroshenko, on economic matters.

Alexander Dvorkin, which I mentioned as the main leader of the Russian anti-cult movement, went to Serbia in April 2014, where he explained the Maidan events as the result of a conspiracy of “cultists” behind whom was the CIA. Dvorkin said that “behind the Ukrainian crisis there is a secret plan of a group of religious cults and sects in which the political leadership of Ukraine itself is participating.” At the center of this conspiracy was Yatsenyuk, who was “controlled by the CIA through Scientology” (*Srbinfo* 2014).

Two days before his trip to Serbia, in an interview with the radio station *Voice of Russia*, Dvorkin had offered more details. He admitted he had no evidence that Yatsenyuk was an active Scientologist, but claimed he had taken Scientology courses. He explained what auditing in Scientology is all about and claimed, not incorrectly, that it is similar to the Catholic or Orthodox confession, and that Scientologists may tell the auditors about actions they would not like to advertise in public. Dvorkin said:

Yatsenyuk, before his political career, he did take several Scientology courses and paid for it. It is no secret that Scientology as of 1994 has been cooperating very closely with the CIA of the United States of America. The State Department of the USA lobbies the interests of Scientology in all the countries of the world. And Scientology, apparently, shares some of the information it gathers with the Central Intelligence Agency. So, it means that, at least in Yatsenyuk's case, he can be controlled by the CIA (*Voice of Russia* 2014; see Nguyen 2014).

In another interview, to his own website, Dvorkin said:

This, I emphasize, is the most important thing in the story with Yatsenyuk. He took courses in Scientology. So, they probably have a folder of compromising evidence on and about the Prime Minister of Ukraine. Accordingly, he is held tightly by his most sensitive parts. They can control him very easily. It seems to me that this situation is even worse than if he were an open member of the organization. Then it would be clear who he is and what can be expected from him (Chernykh 2014).

The Prime Minister of Ukraine, Dvorkin added,

is a man whose file is kept by a very tough foreign totalitarian organization, and, as many experts note, with ties to the CIA. It is clear that such a person is an absolute puppet. And he will do whatever he is told (Chernykh 2014).

In December 2014, Dvorkin insisted that

Scientologists had put Yatsenyuk into a trance, and pumped out all compromising information about him. So he passed under the control of Scientologists. Scientology has

concluded a secret agreement with the U.S. CIA; therefore, it is clear under whose control Arseniy Yatsenyuk is (Shatilova 2014).

Dvorkin's theory is that, when Scientology was recognized as a religion for tax purposes in the United States in 1993, it agreed in exchange that Scientologists throughout the world would work as CIA agents. "According to many experts, Dvorkin said, from that moment Scientology began to share the information it collected with the CIA" (Chernykh 2014). As Dvorkin said in a popular Russian TV talk show,

In 1993 Scientology signed a secret agreement with the US Internal Revenue Service [to obtain a tax-exempt status], and a secret protocol was attached to this agreement, and according to which, as experts say, they discuss, Scientology supplies its information to the United States Central Intelligence Agency, and for this, the US State Department lobbies the interests of Scientologists in all countries of the world (*Russia 1* 2014).

Everywhere in the world, he claimed, Scientologists work in close connection with American embassies. In particular,

As soon as the Kyiv junta, which came to power as a result of a coup, where the prime minister is suspected of having links with Scientology, began to have problems, the director of the CIA arrived incognito in the capital of Ukraine and held secret meetings (Chernykh 2014).

Dvorkin and the Russian media have continued to this very day to claim that Scientologists "secretly influenced" or even organized Maidan. They have offered no evidence, except the claim that Yatsenyuk's sister Alina Steel, who lives in the United States, is "a Scientologist and possibly the head of the Scientology mission in Santa Barbara" (Chernykh 2014), as Dvorkin said. He noted that Scientology had stated that Yatsenyuk's sister was not a Scientologist. "Scientology refutes, Dvorkin objected, but it has never been known for its veracity" (Chernykh 2014).

Even Tony Ortega, one of the most extreme anti-Scientology activists in the United States, investigated the matter in February 2014 and explained that he had refused to join Dvorkin's campaign against Yatsenyuk because he found no evidence that Alina Steel was or had ever been a Scientologist. Ortega reported on February 27 that

Last night, we reached Alina Steel's daughter, Ulyana Biloskurska, 26, who assured us that the rumors about the family's Scientology involvement were completely untrue. "That's crap," she said. "We don't even know what Scientology is." Ulyana, who lives in California, said she had heard the allegation about her mother and uncle, and assured us

that neither of them have any involvement in Scientology. "We read about the rumor, but there's no truth to it," she says. "The only thing I know about Scientology is that Tom Cruise is in it" (Ortega 2014).

However, Dvorkin's website still reprinted an article in August 2014 calling Yatsenyuk "a follower of the Scientologists" (Sokolov 2014). By December 2014, he was promoted in the same website to "one of the leaders of Scientology in Ukraine" (Lanfrankova 2014). On October 25, 2022, even the Assistant Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Alexey Pavlov, wrote that "Yatsenyuk was a Hubbardist, a follower of the Church of Scientology" (Pavlov 2022).

By 2015, Dvorkin's website had found a way to answer widespread objections that, rather than a Scientologist, Yatsenyuk was known to be an active member of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in communion with the Vatican, called by the Orthodox "Uniate." The answer was that he had changed his affiliation from Scientology to the "Uniate" Church when he was exposed by Dvorkin, and at any rate the Uniates were themselves part of a "cult" almost as bad as Scientology. An article explained that the fact that Yatsenyuk was

An active practicing Scientologist was already known to all those interested. When this information was widely disseminated, Yatsenyuk promptly changed his religion to "Greek Catholic." However, for adherents of Lafayette Ron Hubbard [1911–1986], the founder of the cult of Dianetics and Scientology, such a public change in their ideals and commitment is one of the foundations of the doctrine: "all for the good of the organization." You should know that penetration into the power structures of any state, influence on this power in order to strengthen and expand Scientology structures on the territory of the state is one of the most important goals of the Hubbard organization. As early as the beginning of 2011, when there was no question of any Maidan, Scientology structures were actively infiltrating Ukrainian schools and universities, conducting active "enlightenment activities." Therefore, the "religious maneuvering" of Arseniy Yatsenyuk in the logic of Dianetics does not look like something surprising. And it is extremely difficult to understand whether he really cut off all ties with the "Hubbardists," or whether this is just a public gesture and nothing more. At the same time, it is important to understand that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is also one of the most active subjects of the Maidan policy and the revolution. A huge number of Greek Catholic priests took part in the Kyiv events either as missionaries, or directly as agitators and propagandists for the overthrow of the government. [...] Therefore, from a purely political point of view, Arseniy Yatsenyuk did not change his principles and ideology one iota, even if he really ceased to be an active Scientologist (Chausov 2015).

Dvorkin and other Russian anti-cultists have continued to this very day to explain the 2014 Maidan events and the anti-Russian feelings prevailing in Ukraine and inspiring the resistance to Putin's 2022 invasion as a result of a conspiracy where American and Ukrainian intelligence use "cults," including Scientology, Satanists, Uniates, Neo-Pagans, and Pentecostals, to instill in the Ukrainian population hate against Russia and sympathy for the European Union and the United States.

On June 24, 2022, Novopashin gave an interview to the *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, where he claimed that the conspiracy in Ukraine started well before 2014:

Cultist, primarily neo-Pentecostal, and neo-pagan organizations began to be created in Ukraine from the beginning of the 1990s, in which tens of thousands of Ukrainians were fraudulently involved (*Komsomolskaya Pravda* 2022).

"Plans had been prepared by Western and American experts who are pretty well versed in destructive activities." After a long preparation, in 2014 according to Novopashin, "thousands of members of the cults came to the square in the center of Kyiv," Maidan, and set in motion the events that made the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions necessary. Novopashin said that these were defensive moves, since Ukraine was infiltrating Russia with "cultist" terrorist cells, ready to kill, destroy. Ukrainians are even accused of "making cannibals out of children."

"Canned meat from a Lugansk separatist," "Shawarma of Russian children"—these are the dishes offered to Ukrainians in recent years. Culinary holidays are held in Ukrainian schools, children cook their own meals, and then come up with names for them. And the names are: jelly "Zhirinovsky's Brain" compote [referring to Russian ultra-nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky, 1946–2022], "Blood of Russian babies" and so on. Although in inventing the name, of course, Ukrainian school teachers helped them. They make cannibals out of children. Even if they are not such in fact, but this kind of impact on the psyche leaves a deep mark on it. And this is what is needed. Young Ukrainians are taught to see Russians as sub-humans, non-humans whom it is not even enough to kill. And then adults add fuel to the fire. A man in a white coat (I can't call him a doctor) publicly declares that Russian prisoners of war should be castrated. A seemingly prosperous Ukrainian girl writes on social networks that prisoners of war should be sold for organs. And she gets likes. The worst thing is that these are not just statements, this is a call to action (*Komsomolskaya Pravda* 2022).

Silantyev in a different interview added that, in addition to children, even “Russian cats” are at risk, since they are ritually sacrificed by Ukraine-directed “cultists” (*Interfax* 2022 b).

### *Two Main Targets: Scientology and the Jehovah's Witnesses*

Why does Scientology play a special role in these conspiracy theories? In fact, Scientology shares the dubious privilege of being the main target of Russian anti-cult conspiracy theory with the Jehovah's Witnesses. What they have in common is that they have their headquarters in the United States. Scientology seems perfect for the role: it is quintessentially American, and Tom Cruise, perhaps its most famous member, even repeatedly played the role of an American secret agent. However, even the peaceful Jehovah's Witnesses have been accused to prepare a coup against the Putin regime—in cooperation with Scientology, of course.

On October 11, 2022, Novopashin's website launched the “sensational revelation” (its own words) that a coup was being prepared by the Jehovah's Witnesses and other “cultists” (*Ansobor.ru* 2022b). The article was accompanied by a caricature where a Jehovah's Witness was depicted with a monster-like yellow face, big ears, an enormous nose, and the eyes replaced by small cameras identified as “made in USA.” The iconography was reminiscent of traditional Russian anti-Semitism, except that the Jehovah's Witnesses were targeted rather than the Jews.

The revelation comes from a famous Russian attorney, Alexander Korelov, the official lawyer of the anti-cult federation RATsIRS (FECRIS 2017) and an associate of Dvorkin and Novopashin. He was even invited at the Belgian Parliament in Brussels in 2017 by the European anti-cult federation FECRIS, where he shared the podium with Belgian MP André Frédéric and with the General Secretary of the French governmental anti-cult mission MIVILUDES (Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires, i.e., Inter-Ministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances), Anne Josso (FECRIS 2017). A text by Korelov continues to appear on FECRIS' official website to this very day (Korelov 2017).

The Jehovah's Witnesses were banned and “liquidated” in Russia in 2017. However, according to Korelov,

the extremist cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses did not cease to operate. As we expected, they went underground, holding their meetings in safe houses, receiving instructions from the American center through instant messengers, blogs, and so on. But lately the picture has changed. From the leading centers located in the United States, instructions are sent to the illegal divisions of the cult in our country through "closed" channels, which indicate an attempt by the cult to organize a coup d'état in Russia similar to the Maidan in the now former Ukraine (*Ansobor.ru* 2022b: all the following quotes in this paragraph are from that text).

In fact, Korelov claims,

in Russia, the Western intelligence services intend to repeat the already developed scheme, implemented in Kyiv in 2014. Its essence is this. To begin with, "peaceful protesters" are being taken out onto the streets, the backbone of which is primarily adherents of cults.

including Pentecostals, Neo-Pagans, and Scientologists. Then,

all kinds of dissatisfied elements, the mentally ill, drug addicts, criminals and just curious people are drawn to them. Everything seems to start peacefully, under pacifist slogans. Gradually, the crowd begins to "warm up" with specially trained provocateurs, as well as on social networks.

And finally, the government is reversed:

According to the information at our disposal, this is precisely what is being intensively prepared in the milieu of cults. Now we have absolutely certain data that Jehovah's Witnesses are turning from an extremist organization into a terrorist one. We warned about this already several years ago.

Korelov insists that

the leaders from the Brooklyn center [sic; in fact, the Jehovah's Witnesses sold their Brooklyn headquarters and moved to Warwick, New York, in 2016] are turning Russian adherents into cannon fodder to achieve their goals. Just like in Ukraine, the United States is fighting with the hands of Ukrainians and mercenaries, so in Russia they are ready to waste biomaterial they do not need in the form of adherents of this cult. The American leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses is made of people unencumbered by moral standards. They are ready for anything. At the same time, ideological support is being launched among American-sponsored religious scholars, who have already started talking about the need for a "rehabilitation" of the Jehovah's Witnesses

Now the Jehovah's Witnesses

"sleeping" extremist cells under the leadership of their center in the United States. And the fact that the Brooklyn [sic] center of this cult is under the complete control of the American secret services is no longer a secret.

Scientists and the Jehovah's Witnesses are described as

just puppet organizations in the hands of a behind-the-scenes puppeteer. This is an element of the socio-political structure of the United States, which they are trying to impose on the whole world. It is also obvious that all American cults are guided from a single center.

Korelov believes that "cults" and in fact the United States as a whole are

something vile, unworthy. Notice the stupidity of their leaders. The same Hubbard—the founder of Scientology—was a degenerate personality. What about the false prophecies of the Adventists? It clearly smacks of mental illness. Therefore, when mentioning American cults, you can twist your finger at your temple. The United States is the spiritual garbage dump of humanity. I have never taken their public-state matrix seriously. In their country there are no people capable of thinking globally, there is no knowledge of their own, everything is bought. Primitive, in a word. [...] The United States has a very vulnerable socio-political system that can be destroyed in a few months. You just need to know their vulnerabilities and be able to influence them.

If Russia has not destroyed the United States so far, Korelov explains, it is

because too abrupt changes mean hundreds of millions of people who die from wars and upheavals in all countries. I doubt that anyone is ready to take responsibility for such sacrifices. Everything must be progressive and carefully thought out. This is the art of politics.

Russia's patience, however, has limits.

Russia is not at war with Ukraine. Russia, in fact, is at war with the Satanists of the West FOR Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, to save people, to protect them from the arbitrariness of the United States and other pseudo-democratic states.

In Ukraine, he claims,

there are US bacteriological laboratories that spread the infections around the world, there are secret concentration camps where Ukrainians are tortured and killed, they organize the trade in Ukrainian children and much more. I have seen how the brainwashing technologies of the cults turn the people of the former Soviet republic into zombies. [...] The once flourishing Soviet republic of Ukraine has been turned into a Nazi hell by the American occupiers. I can say with absolute certainty that the United States is carrying out genocide of the population of Ukraine. They methodically send Ukrainians to their death under the pretext of confrontation with Russia, they shoot and hang, or corrupt Ukrainian children in towns and villages. It is scary to watch when our troops enter the villages, and there are dozens of hanged children

—hanged by "the United States and NATO," that is.



In another interview, published in the popular daily *Izvestia*, Korelov claimed that evidence that the Jehovah's Witnesses were preparing a coup had come from the remote Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, on the Arctic Circle, where reportedly mysterious men knocked at the residents' doors and asked "Where can I find the answer to the question about happiness?" Although the men did not identify themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses, Korelov claimed that the question exhibited their "handwriting," and confirmed that the Witnesses were active again and getting "ready for active protests, including physical resistance to representatives of law enforcement agencies." To the possible objection that there are not enough Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to organize a coup, Korelov answered that they had already enlisted the help of Pentecostals and Scientologists, and that the American and Ukrainian intelligence services, the real organizers of the coup, were also trying to involve "Indian Satanists" (by which the lawyer meant the followers of Indian spiritual master Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1923–2011, the founder of Sahaja Yoga and a frequent target of Russian anti-cultists) and even Islamic ultra-fundamentalists. "It is known for sure, Korelov said, that the Ukrainian special services and their [American] handlers considered the possibility of integrating religious fanatics to fight Russia. They dreamed of creating a crazy cocktail of 'Islamic' extremism and Ukrainian neo-Nazism" (Petrov 2022).

#### *Western Anti-Cultists' Support for Russian Conspiracy Claim*

There are several studies of how the international anti-cult federation FECRIS has consistently supported Dvorkin and other Russian anti-cultists (Berzano et al. 2022). FECRIS has publicly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine (FECRIS 2022), and has removed the names of its Russian affiliates from its website (Berzano et al. 2022, 27). However, it has not publicly disassociated itself from RATsIRS (which continues to claim to be part of FECRIS: *Ansobor.ru* 2022c), and according to public records Alexander Dvorkin is still a member of its Board.

Worse, as late as July 15, i.e., three months after the names of the Russian affiliates had been removed from FECRIS' website and while evidence of atrocities in Ukraine mounted, according to a Chinese governmental organization, Didier Pachoud, FECRIS' treasurer, hosted Silantyev in a

conference organized by his association (and FECRIS affiliate) Groupe d'Étude des Mouvements de Pensée en vue de la Protection de l'Individu (Group for the Study of Thought Movements for the Protection of the Individual, GEMPPI) (*TimesNewswire* 2022; Su 2022). This is the same Silantyev that told *Interfax* he was looking forward to "the upcoming parade of victory over Ukrainian Nazism" (*Interfax* 2022a). Perhaps the parade was delayed, and he had time to go to the FECRIS event instead.

In his statement about a CIA-Scientology conspiracy against Russia and in favor of Ukraine, Dvorkin claimed to be supported by "many experts" (Chernykh 2014). These are the Western anti-cultists who invited him and Silantyev to the West and were in turn invited to lecture against Scientology in Russia (Berzano et al. 2022).

FECRIS' support is in turn used in Russia to show that even Westerners agree with theories about evil conspiracies where Scientology, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the "US Intelligence" cooperate against Russian interests.

### *Conclusion*

These are not mere curiosities. Hundreds are in jail in Russia accused of being part of "cults" engaged in sabotage on behalf of Ukraine. More, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses, had been already detained before the war because their religion had been declared "extremist." Dvorkin, Novopashin, Korelov, and Silantyev are not unimportant figures. Although they are unleashed when needed and can be criticized when they become an embarrassment for the government, Dvorkin and Silantyev hold positions in the government, and were instrumental in having "extremist" religious organizations "liquidated," as it happened to the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017.

Korelov is well-known as a lawyer in Russia and, as mentioned earlier, has even spoken at the Belgian Parliament where he was invited as an expert on "cults." Silantyev and Novopashin spoke at an educational conference in Nizhny Novgorod on August 24, 2022, on how to deal with terrorism supported by Ukraine and the West. The audience included officers from the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, the National Anti-Terrorism Committee, the FSB, and the Main Directorate for Combating Extremism of the Ministry of

Internal Affairs of Russia. They were all exposed to conspiracy theories about sabotage perpetrated by “cultists,” including the elusive “Columbine Satanists” (*RIA Novosti* 2022). In the article of October 25, 2022 I already mentioned, the Assistant Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Alexey Pavlov, wrote that “denazification” is not enough in Ukraine and should now escalate to “desatanization,” as there is evidence that Satanism, particularly in the shape of LaVey’s Church of Satan, “has spread across Ukraine” thanks to the active “support from Ukrainian authorities” (Pavlov 2022).

In conclusion, I would like to address the question why such theories, notwithstanding their inherent absurdity, are taken seriously and believed in Russia. Answering the question requires a consideration of five different themes.

The first is that most Russians believe that their country is special and unique. I have discussed elsewhere how the myth of Russia as the “Third Rome” was created in Czarist times to support this claim to uniqueness, and has persisted to this day (Šorytė 2020).

Second, an old Russian tradition, and one very much influential on Putin and Patriarch Kirill, maintains that, because of its uniqueness, Russia is under constant threats and attacks by the West. Since at least the Great Schism that separated Orthodox and Catholics in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the West is described as more materialist, less spiritual, and always trying to challenge the legitimate role of Moscow as the only Third Rome. The speech Putin delivered on May 9, 2022, during the commemoration of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, is a textbook example of this attitude: the West created the war in Ukraine, the West hates us, the West even wants to deny that we were the main force in winning the war against Nazism (Putin 2022a).

Putin concluded another speech, the one before he signed the annexation of parts of Ukraine to the Russian Federation, with a quote from Russian émigré philosopher Ivan Ilyn (1883–1954), whom he called “a true patriot” (Putin 2022b). The speech also included a reference to the fact that the West is dominated by “a ‘religion in reverse’—pure Satanism” (Putin 2022b), which shows how Putin’s speechwriters, the ROC, and the anti-cultists play different roles but are part of the same propaganda machine.

It was not the first time that Putin quoted Ilyn, and he personally went to Switzerland to recover the body of the philosopher, who was buried there, to have

it reburied in the cemetery of the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow (Snyder 2018). There has been a discussion among Western scholars on how influential Ilyn actually is on Putin (for opposite views, see Snyder 2018 and Laruelle 2018), with some arguing that Ilyn is a more important reference for Patriarch Kirill than he is for the Russian President.

Be it as it may be, Ilyn supplies a third element, which is why he is quoted by both Kirill and Putin despite the fact that he called himself a Fascist and admired Benito Mussolini (1883–1945). What interests Putin in Ilyn's thought is not Fascism, but the idea that Holy Russia was under constant attack from the West. Ilyn explained that the three main tools of this attack were the Western idea of democracy, the justification of homosexuality, and "cults" (called in Russian "sects"). In his time, the "cults" Ilyn was afraid of were mostly Theosophy (whose main founder had been, ironically, a Russian, Madame Helena Blavatsky, 1831–1891) and Anthroposophy (Ljunggren 2014, 115–23), but the idea that there is a conspiracy of "cults" against Russia has been adopted by Putin himself (*Vzglyad* 2012).

The fourth theme is that "cults" do not enter Russia, or Ukraine to promote anti-Russian feelings, spontaneously but because of a conspiracy of the American intelligence services. This is the element introduced by Russian anti-cultists such as Dvorkin, with a little help from Western anti-cultists, who claim that as "experts" of Western "cults" they are in a position to confirm that what Dvorkin and others claim is true. In turn, anti-cultists such as Dvorkin, Korelov, or Silantyev are valuable to the Kremlin's propaganda because thanks to the FECRIS network they are invited in the West and are allowed to present Russian disinformation to audiences that other Russian operatives would not be able to reach.

The fifth theme is that most Russians, including those otherwise critical of the Soviet Union, are proud of its role in the Great Patriotic War against Nazism. The Great Patriotic War serves as a unifying myth for the populations of the immense Russian Federation. Putin and the Russian propaganda are aware of this, and they invariably accuse their opponents of being "Nazi." The invasion of Ukraine is constantly justified with the obviously false argument that Ukraine is dominated by Nazis and should be "denazified."

This is paradoxical, since those familiar with Ukraine know that, notwithstanding a Russian propaganda that puts an undue emphasis on the tiny

minority that supports another minority, those who collaborated with the Nazis, a large majority of Ukrainians also share the narrative on the Great Patriotic War, and are proud of the role Ukrainian soldiers played in the effort to defeat Germany. In fact, more than three million Ukrainians fought in the Red Army, and more than two million died. It has been estimated that at one stage in the war almost 40% of the Red Army consisted of Ukrainians (Vityk 2018).

Anti-cultists support Russian propaganda by claiming, as Novopashin said, that Nazism dominates Ukraine and “Nazism and Satanism are synonymous words” (*Komsomolskaya Pravda* 2022), then extending the equivalence to all “cults.” The United States are in turn accused of organizing and promoting Nazism in Ukraine (*Ansobor.ru* 2022b). Novopashin even advanced the strange claim that the “American” idea of international religious liberty was originally invented by Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) to spread “cults” in Russia and destroy the soul of the nation, the ROC (*Ansobor.ru* 2022d).

Perhaps to explain that such a theory is absurd, that American ideas of religious liberty have nothing to do with Hitler, that the ROC had already been largely destroyed by the Soviet regime when Hitler invaded Russia, is not even necessary. These articles are not written for a Western audience. They are part of domestic propaganda in Russia, where it is hoped that any reference to Hitler and the Nazis would trigger patriotic feelings and generate support for the war in Ukraine.

There is of course a risk to regard both the Russian anti-cult movement and Russian conspiracy theories about Scientology, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Satanism, or the “cults” as more important than they actually are. The aggression against Ukraine is a historical event—and a crime—of monumental importance, whose consequences will affect all of us for years and decades to come. Russian propaganda aimed at justifying the war Putin has waged on Ukraine since 2014 is in turn a massive phenomenon. Blaming the “cults,” and Scientology and the Jehovah’s Witnesses in particular, for the alleged American attempts to undermine the Russian Orthodox identity in Russia, conduct sabotage activities there, and excite anti-Russian feelings in Ukraine is just a part of a broader propaganda. It is not uninteresting, however, as it opens a window on the use of a traditional rhetoric of self-victimization, claiming that Russia is under siege by malevolent foreign enemies, to justify both the repression of religious minorities in the Russian Federation and wars of aggression about neighboring countries.

## References

- Ansobor.ru*. 2022a. “Задержаны сторонники мизантропической идеологии” (Supporters of Misanthropic Ideology Detained). September 6. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3DuFPEn>.
- Ansobor.ru*. 2022b. “Свидетели Иеговы готовят государственный переворот” (Jehovah's Witnesses Are Preparing a Coup). October 11. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3VZdmOh>.
- Ansobor.ru*. 2022c [last updated]. “РАЦИРС” (RATsIRS). Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3zePufH>.
- Ansobor.ru*. 2022d. “Протоиерей Александр Новопашин провел цикл бесед в Ленинградской области” (Archpriest Alexander Novopashin Held a Series of Talks in the Leningrad Region). October 14. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TP6lyd>.
- Baltics News*. 2021. “Pastor Ledyayev is Campaigning Against Vaccination with Conspiracy Theory Lies.” February 2. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3DvWRIJ>.
- BBC News*. 2014. “Ukraine crisis: Transcript of Leaked Nuland-Pyatt Call.” February 7. Accessed October 22, 2014. <https://bbc.in/2DKTmsR>.
- Berzano, Luigi, Boris Falikov, Willy Fautré, Liudmyla Filipovich, Massimo Introvigne, and Bernadette Rigal-Cellard. 2022. “Sympathy for the Devil: The Anti-Cult Federation FECRIS and Its Support for Russian and Chinese Repression of Religion.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 6(3):25–67. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2022.6.3.2.
- Chausov, Alexander. 2015. “Украину захватывают секты” (Ukraine Is Captured by Cults). *Vzglyad*, February 3. Accessed October 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TU2mjX>.
- Chernykh, Yevgeny. 2014. “Власть в Киеве захватили тоталитарные секты?” (Power in Kyiv Seized by Totalitarian Cults?). *Iriney.ru*, April 21. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TGzM5u>.
- FECRIS. 2017. “Cult Undue Influence and the Process of Radicalisation, a Question for Debate” [conference program]. Accessed October 23, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3D01we2>.
- FECRIS. 2022. “FECRIS Statement.” Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://www.fecris.org>.
- Goble, Paul. 2016. “An All Too Typical Political Precedent in Russia: Yarovaya Laws Hit Minority Faiths First.” *Religious Freedom Institute*, August 30. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3sqEYhx>.

- Interfax*. 2022a. “Пришло время сделать однозначный выбор” (It’s Time to Make a Clear Choice). March 18. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3ss4m6F>.
- Interfax*. 2022b. “Главные угрозы от террористов-мизантропов исходили с территории Украины” (The Main Threats from Misanthropic Terrorists Came from the Territory of Ukraine). September 5. Accessed October 23, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3gEsLn5>.
- Komsomolskaya Pravda*. 2022. “Протоиерей Александр Новопашин: «Для меня нацизм и сатанизм слова-синонимы»” (Archpriest Alexander Novopashin: “For me, Nazism and Satanism are synonymous words”). June 24. Accessed October 23, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3VYotqy>.
- Korelov, Alexander. 2017. “The Legal Forms of the Fight Against Extremist Cult Activity in the Russian Federation.” FECRIS website. Accessed October 23, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TAzWuO>.
- Kovalev, Alexey. 2022. “For Opposition to Putin’s War, Look to the Fringes of His Empire.” *Foreign Policy*, May 20. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3DubK7O>.
- Kravchenko, Maria. 2018. *Inventing Extremism: The Impact of Russian Anti-Extremism Policies on Freedom of Religion or Belief*. Washington DC: U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).
- Lanfrankova, Yana. 2014. “Откуда они взялись?” (Where Did They Come From?). *Iriney.ru*, December 26. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3N4HLH1>.
- Laruelle, Marlene. 2018. “In Search of Putin’s Philosopher.” *Riddle*, April 19. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3FdOaNW>.
- Ljunggren, Magnus. 2014. *Poetry and Psychiatry: Essays on Early Twentieth-Century Russian Symbolist Culture*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press.
- Nguyen, Tina. 2014. “Voice of Russia Accuses Ukrainian PM of Being Mind-Controlled by Scientology.” *Mediaite.com*, April 30. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3D5fj34>.
- Ortega, Tony. 2014. “Is Ukraine’s Proposed New Prime Minister a Scientologist? Says His Niece: “That’s crap.”” *The Underground Bunker*, February 27. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TWg9pJ>.
- Pavlov, Alexey. 2022. “Что варят в «ведьмином котле». На Украине набрали силу неоязыческие культы” (What is Cooked in the “Witch’s Cauldron”: Neo-Pagan Cults Gain Strength in Ukraine). *Argumenty i Fakty*, October 25. Accessed October 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TZc1oU>.
- Petrov, Ivan. 2022. “Плакат от страха: российских сектантов готовят к протестам” (Poster from Fear: Russian Cultists Are Being Prepared for

- Protests). *Izvestia*, October 9. Accessed October 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3W7lGvx>.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2022a. "Victory Day Speech." English translation. *Bloomberg*, May 9. <https://bloom.bg/3SDV2Hw>.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2022b. "Signing of Treaties on Accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia." September 30. English translation. Accessed October 24, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69465>.
- RIA Novosti*. 2022. "В Нижнем Новгороде начала работу антитеррористическая конференция" (Antiterrorism Conference Starts in Nizhny Novgorod). August 24. Accessed October 23, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3zgpxMO>.
- Rudenko, Yuliia, and Alia Shandra. 2021. "Russia's FSB Reports Detaining 106 Ukrainian 'Neo-Nazis' from the MKU, an Organization Only the FSB Knows About." *Euromaidan Press*, December 22. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3gMCzLT>.
- Russia 1*. 2014. "Злые духи майдана: мистика украинского погрома" (Evil Spirits of the Maidan: the Mysticism of the Ukrainian Pogrom). Transcript from the show "Live." March 17. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3DakDCd>.
- Sborov, Afanasy. 2022. "Посмотрели в глаза чудовищ" (Look Into the Eyes of Monsters). *Kommersant*, July 18. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3NbF8mO>.
- Security Council of the Russian Federation. 2022. "Эксперты Совета Безопасности России обсудили угрозы национальной безопасности, вызванные расширением влияния радикальных религиозных концепций на российское общество" (Experts of the Russian Security Council Discussed the Threats to National Security Caused by the Expansion of the Influence of Radical Religious Concepts on Russian Society). July 12. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3N7Q5FO>.
- Shatilova, Julia. 2014. "На Украине на фоне политического и финансового кризиса активизировались тоталитарные секты" (In Ukraine, Against the Background of the Political and Financial Crisis, Totalitarian Cults Have Become More Active). *Iriney.ru*. December 22. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3uQGR9v>.
- Snyder, Timothy. 2018. "Ivan Ilyin, Putin's Philosopher of Russian Fascism." *The New York Review of Books*, March 16. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3SDPfBC>.



- Sokolov, Nikolai. 2014. “Лаборатория для сект: на Украине открыли сатанинский храм” (Laboratory for Cults: A Satanic Temple Was Opened in Ukraine). *Iriney.ru*, August 17. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TZgasK>.
- Sokolov, Nikolai. 2022. “В ячейках секты, финансирующей неонацистов на Украине, прошли обыски” (Cells of Cult Funding Neo-Nazis in Ukraine Searched). *Vesti.ru*, August 15. Accessed August 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3Fi5EJ2>.
- Solovova, Tatyana. 2022. “В новосибирском отделении секты «Новое поколение» прошли обыски” (Searches were Conducted in the Novosibirsk Branch of the New Generation Cult). *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, August 15. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3N94QZ9>.
- Šorytė, Rosita. 2020. “Opposition to Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia: The Cultural Roots.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 4(6):11–24. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2020.4.6.2.
- Springe, Inga. 2016. “The Rise of Latvia’s Moral Guardians.” *Re: Baltica*, January 10. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3zjfkPE>.
- Srbinfo*. 2014. “ЦИА контролише Арсенија Јацењука помоћу сажентологије” (The CIA Controls Arseniy Yatsenyuk Through Scientology). 2014. April 30. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3DxRrGx>.
- Su, Shan. 2022. “2022年度邪教问题国际研究会关注法轮功”“全能神” (The 2022 International Research Conference on Cult Issues Focuses on “Falun Gong” and “Almighty God”). *China Anti-Xie-Jiao Association*, September 26. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TFWAlY>.
- TimesNewsWire*. 2022. “How Cults Affect Mental Health, Social Relations and Politics.” September 24. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3DwyOTE>.
- USCIRF (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom). 2020. “The Anti-cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union,” by Jason Morton. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3D9Ewtc>.
- Vdovik, Marina. 2022. “Александр Новопашин: «И я продолжаю свой бег». Интервью к юбилею” (Alexander Novopashin: “And I Keep Running.” Anniversary Interview). *4s-info.ru*, July 25. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3zfAPAQ>.
- Vityk, Ihor. 2018. “Українці у Другій світовій” (Ukrainians in the Second World War). Accessed October 25, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3gFnJGO>.
- Voice of Russia*. 2014. “Alexander Dvorkin Interview.” Transcript, April 28. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TQsVGk>.

- Voloshinskaya, Anastasia. 2022. "Колумбайн: интервью-беседа с религиоведом, доктором исторических наук, заведующим Лабораторией деструктологии Московского государственного лингвистического университета Романом Силантьевым" (Columbine: An Interview-Conversation with a Religious Scholar, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Head of the Laboratory of Destructology of the Moscow State Linguistic University Roman Silantyev). *Kuzbass Metropolis*, July 7. Accessed October 22, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3f3ym5Z>.
- Vzglyad*. 2012. "Путин: Тоталитарные секты растут как грибы" (Putin: Totalitarian Cults Are Growing Like Mushrooms). October 25. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3gCiBmF>.
- Whitaker, Justin. 2022. "Telo Tulku Rinpoche, Supreme Lama in Russian Republic of Kalmykia, Condemns War." *Buddhistdoor Global*, October 5. Accessed October 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3DvWc3B>.

## Research Notes

---

### The Assassination of Shinzo Abe and the Unification Church

Massimo Introvigne

*CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)*

maxintrovigne@gmail.com

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

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

#### *The Making of an Assassin*

“Calling a stag a horse” is a proverbial expression in Chinese (Zhang 2005, 112–15). Zhao Gao (?–207 BCE) was the corrupt prime minister of the second emperor of unified China, Ying Huhai or Qin Her Shi (231?–207 BCE), who reigned at the end of the third century BCE. Zhao planned to usurp the throne but needed to know who in the court would support him. So, he presented the emperor with a stag and called it a horse. When the emperor objected it was indeed a stag, he asked the courtiers to confirm it was a horse. Many did, as they

were afraid of Zhao. He had those who insisted the stag was a stag beheaded, and proceeded with his coup (Sima Qian 1993, 70).

“Calling a stag a horse,” or turning the meaning of the words upside down for evil purposes, is often done today to discriminate against religious minorities. When they become victims of crimes, it is suggested that it is their fault. The victims are called aggressors, and vice versa. It is reminiscent of an old strategy of shyster lawyers who defend rapists. They invariably blame the raped woman, who perhaps did not dress modestly enough.

On June 16, 2022, in South Korea a man killed his ex-wife and the wife of his ex-brother-in-law, seriously wounding the latter. Although personal reasons might have been his main motivation, he claimed he had committed the crime because the wife was a member of a new religious movement called Shincheonji. 24 hours before the crime, the assassin had consulted with the Heresy Research Center, an organization specialized in fighting groups it regards as heretic “cults.” The Center did not suggest that the man commit murder, but excited his hatred against Shincheonji. After the crime, the Center called a press conference claiming that the murderer was indeed the victim, and Shincheonji was responsible: had his wife not joined Shincheonji, they said, the poor man would not have had to spend the rest of his life in jail, a likely outcome of his case (Nam 2022).

On January 3, 2019, a teenager entered the premises of the Church of Scientology, of which his mother was a member, in Sydney, Australia, and fatally wounded a Scientologist with a knife (Duffin 2019). At trial, he was later recognized not criminally responsible as two experts pronounced him schizophrenic (Gerathy 2021), but real paranoids have real enemies. Although he had quarreled with his mother for different reasons, propaganda depicting Scientology as evil may also have excited his feeble mind. Again, anti-Scientologists told the media, without shedding a tear for the victim, that Scientology was to blame for having allegedly created hostility between mother and son.

Whatever one may think of Shincheonji or Scientology, these are egregious cases of turning the victims into perpetrators. The most spectacular case of this twisted logic of them all is the murder of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954–2022) on July 8, 2022, in Nara, Japan.

Let's consider five basic facts. First, the assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, was not and had never been a member of the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (I would use "Unification Church" and "Family Federation for World Peace and Unification" interchangeably in this text, although I am aware of the historical nuances and differences).

Second, his mother did join the Unification Church in 1998, and remains a member (uncredited information in this text derives from interviews with Japanese lawyers and members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in August 2022, and legal and other documents supplied by them; I also followed social media postings by both members and opponents of the Unification Church after July 8, and interacted with some of them). Yamagami's mother declared bankruptcy in 2002, a fact both Abe's killer and her brother-in-law blamed on the excessive donations she had made to the Church. After the brother-in-law complained, two Church members returned in installments 50% of the donations.

Third, Shinzo Abe was not a member of the Unification Church either. He participated through a video to a 2021 event, and send a message to another event in 2022, of the Universal Peace Federation, a NGO founded by the leaders of the Unification Church. So did Donald Trump, former European Commission presidents José Manuel Barroso and Romano Prodi, and dozens of other politicians of all persuasions (Amicarelli et al. 2022).

Fourth, his mother's bankruptcy, as he reported himself, caused Yamagami's hatred for the Unification Church. However, the bankruptcy occurred in 2002 and Yamagami killed Abe in 2022, twenty years later. What triggered Yamagami's killing frenzy in 2022, and not before? We know for a fact that Yamagami followed the hate campaigns against the Unification Church prevailing in Japan. He interacted on social media with fellow enemies of the Church. The day before killing Abe, Yamagami wrote a letter to Kazuhiro Yonemoto (Yamagami 2022). Although Yonemoto deserves credit for having opposed in the past the practice of kidnapping members of the Unification Church for the purposes of deprogramming or "de-converting" them, he remains an opponent of the Church. Yamagami interacted with the anti-Unification-Church milieu, and was exposed to the hate speech against the Church, which may easily have turned his weak head.

Fifth, before killing Abe, Yamagami had planned to assassinate Mrs. Hak Ja Han Moon, the leader of the Family Federation (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2022). He also tested his weapon by shooting at a building that had once been used as a Family Federation church (*The Japan Times* 2022a).

Yamagami hated the Church, and this hate was fueled by the hate speech of the anti-Unification-Church activists. To hide their responsibility, they blamed the Unification Church, which was clearly a victim, as if it were the perpetrator.

Twisting words has dire consequences. After calling a stag a horse, Zhao Gao had an ephemeral success but ended up causing the ruin of the Qin dynasty and being killed himself. Calling the victims perpetrators and the perpetrators victims has a similar destructive social potential—one those who manipulate the facts of the Abe assassination to advance their anti-Unification-Church agenda should perhaps pause to consider.

#### *Enter the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales*

After the assassination of Abe, all of a sudden even non-Japanese media became familiar with a group called the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales. The network, now including some 300 lawyers, was established in Japan in 1987 to combat the Unification Church, although it occasionally targeted other religious movements as well.

To avoid the possible criticism that the campaigns of the hostile lawyers had excited the feeble mind of the killer, the Network decided to strike preemptively. It held press conferences blaming the Unification Church for what happened, turning the perpetrator into the victim and vice versa.

Most international media bought the version of the Network, without investigating who exactly these lawyers are. They also ignored a precedent that once caught the international attention of human rights activists and even of the U.S. Department of State (see U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2010). From 1966 to 2015, some 4,300 adult members of the Unification Church were kidnapped at the instigation of their parents, locked in apartments, and submitted to “deprogramming” (Fautré 2012), a practice invented in the United States but declared illegal by courts of law there.

Members of religions their parents did not approve of were kidnapped, privately detained, and submitted to heavy physical and psychological pressures until they accepted to abandon their faith. Deprogramming had been forbidden in most democratic countries of the world, and only survived in Japan and South Korea.

Deprogramming in Japan also targeted the Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religions (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2010), and was particularly rough. A female member of the Unification Church accused a deprogrammer of having raped her for several months while he was trying to "deconvert" her (although she later became scared and withdrew the accusation). Having learned of the rape, years later her father committed suicide out of his shame for having hired the deprogrammer (Yoemoto 2008, 200–1).

Unification Church member Toru Goto was confined in apartments for more than twelve years in the unsuccessful attempt to deprogram him (Fautré 2012; I personally interviewed Goto as well). It was his case that led the Supreme Court in 2015 to declare the deprogramming illegal and grant significant damages to Goto (two Unification Church believers had won cases before him, but had received only small awards of damages). After this decision, the practice ceased, although in 2021 there was a new case, when parents detained a Unification Church member in their home rather than in an apartment, then claimed it was just a family affair.

The most visible lawyers of the Network, Hiroshi Yamaguchi (who represented Goto's main tormenter, Takashi Miyamura), Hiroshi Watanabe, and Masaki Kito, were involved in defending those accused of having acted as deprogrammers. Some attorneys in the Network relied on deprogrammers who sent to them their deprogrammed victims. They were then persuaded to sue the Unification Church, generating significant revenues for the lawyers.

Not all the Network's lawyers supported the kidnappings. According to my interviews, to his credit one of them, Yoshiro Ito, suggested in 1996 that the Network should cease its cooperation with Miyamura. As late as the 2021 case, however, a Network's lawyer, Yasuo Kawai, assisted the parents who tried to revive the illegal practice of deprogramming.

In the case of Yamaguchi, his enmity towards the Unification Church pre-dates the foundation of the Network. In 1979, Soviet KGB agent and top spy in Japan Stanislav Levchenko defected to the U.S. He testified that prominent Japanese politicians, mostly connected with the Socialist Party of Japan (SPJ), including the SPJ Chairman Seiichi Katsumata (1908–1989), were paid Soviet agents (Levchenko 1988). Although Levchenko's revelations were later confirmed by documents discovered in Russian archives after the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1983 (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2005, 300), the SPJ answered by denouncing a conspiracy organized by the CIA through the International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC), an organization connected with the Unification Church. IFVOC sued the SPJ. Yamaguchi represented the SPJ but lost the case, which was later settled with the SPJ paying two million yen to IFVOC as a settlement fee.

For some lawyers in the network the campaigns against the Unification Church were tools to protect deprogramming and the subsequent lawsuits by deprogrammed ex-members against the Church, both lucrative businesses. A not less lucrative venture is suing the Unification Church on behalf of donors persuaded by the lawyers that they can recover their donations. The Network's lawyers are keen to offer figures about these donations, but how much money they made as attorneys out of these cases is not disclosed.

They are also not above resorting to questionable tactics. In a case the Unification Church won against an ex-member at the Tokyo District Court on March 1, 2021, the judge found that the plaintiff had altered and backdated a personal notebook to fabricate evidence against the Unification Church (Tokyo District Court 2021).

We can conclude that the attorneys of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales are not knights in shining armor slaying the dragons of “cults,” as their own propaganda claims, which is too easily accepted by Japanese and international media. Although there are different positions among them on the issue of deprogramming, some prominent Network members defended violent kidnappers—and even Soviet spies—, submitted false documents fabricated by their clients to the judges, and spread against the Unification Church slanderous information they knew was not true.



*Donations and the Unification Church: Separating Facts from Fiction*

The Terror of the French Revolution killed some 30,000 priests, nuns, and lay Catholics. To excite the public opinion against the Catholic Church, the architects of the Terror used an argument they knew is always effective: money. Countless pamphlets, gazette articles, and caricatures showed greedy priests ruining families by soliciting extravagant donations (Dumont 1984, Escande 2008).

Communist propaganda learned and applied the lesson (Mayer 2000). When Mongolia was under a Communist regime, some 60,000 Buddhist monks were killed. The regime prepared it with a massive propaganda poster campaign, where monks were depicted as vampires sucking the blood of the Mongolian population by asking for heavy donations (Kaplonski 2014).

We are now witnessing the same propaganda at work against the Unification Church/Family Federation in Japan after the assassination of Shinzo Abe. The main argument used by the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales is that countless Japanese have been ruined by both donations and the purchase of worthless artifacts sold by the Unification Church at extravagant prices.

“Spiritual sales” is a label coined by anti-Unification-Church leftist media in Japan in the 1980s. A company called Happy World imported to Japan and sold vases and miniature pagodas. Some of those who bought them were connected to small new religions other than the Unification Church, and declared that these artifacts were imbued with a good spiritual energy. Not surprisingly, Happy World was happy about it, and raised the prices. The Unification Church did not sell the vases and pagodas, and had nothing to do with claims about their alleged mystical powers. However, those who operated Happy World were Unification Church members, and donated to the Church part of their profits. Thus, they were accused of “spiritual sales,” particularly after the hostile lawyers’ association was founded in 1987.

After 1987, the sales of vases and pagodas stopped, but other Unification Church members had businesses selling artworks, jewelry, and seals or stamps used in Japan to confirm signatures. These stamps were exquisitely crafted and made of expensive materials, but they were sold at prices higher than usual, also because it was claimed they brought good luck, a common claim for different

artifacts in Japan. Again, these items were not sold by the Unification Church but by members who then used part of their profits to donate to the Church.

In 2000, an existing law on door-to-door sales was significantly amended, and its name was changed to “Act on Specified Commercial Transactions.” It prohibited to “intimidate or disturb” prospective buyers in order to conclude a sale. Based on this law, members of the Unification Church who sold seals were detained, and eventually received suspended jail sentences. The then President of the Church in Japan acknowledged responsibility for not having instructed members about the new law and their duty to respect it. He resigned in 2009, and the Unification Church adopted a new policy counseling members whose businesses sold “lucky” artifacts, including stamps, to strictly comply with the 2000 law.

The hostile lawyers used the label “spiritual sales” also for donations to the Unification Church, a different matter. They claimed that the Church was “selling” eternal salvation, both for the living and their deceased loved ones, against donations. They managed to persuade some Japanese courts to establish the dubious principle that if the amount of donations was high, it should be presumed they had been obtained through “fraudulent or threatening” means, or “psychological techniques” depriving the donors of their “free will” (a notion dangerously close to the discredited and pseudo-scientific theory of brainwashing: see Richardson 1993, 2015; Introvigne 2022).

Tokens of appreciation given to the donors may also be maliciously confused with items sold through “spiritual sales.” In some Catholic organizations, those who make important donations receive a book or diploma autographed by the Pope. Obviously, they are not “buying” the diploma or the book for an extravagant price. The book or the diploma are just symbolic reminders that the Church is grateful for their donations.

The lawyers relied on a frequent fallacy of campaigns against the groups labeled as “cults.” They present as unique practices they have in common with mainline religions. The Catholic Church believes that many souls after death go to Purgatory, a temporary state between Heaven and Hell. Time in Purgatory can be shortened by their relatives and friends through prayers, Masses for which they pay a honorary to the priest—and donations. Indeed, one of the reasons Martin Luther (1483–1546) separated from the Church of Rome was his dislike for the Catholic doctrine of indulgences, which taught that monetary offerings may

automatically shorten time served in Purgatory (although Luther may have oversimplified the teachings of his arch-enemy Johann Tetzel, 1465–1519, for polemical purposes, as often happens in religious controversy: see Lenhart 1958). Buddhist orders have similar teachings, connecting donations with deceased relatives' better reincarnations and escape from the dreaded Cold Hells.

Hundreds of Protestant churches maintain the Biblical principle of tithing, and ask members to donate ten percent of their income. Tithing is suggested as a possibility, although it is not mandatory, in the Unification Church too, which also has specific practices such as donating for four years in multiples of thirty, acknowledging the collective responsibility of humankind for Judas' betrayal of Christ, whom he sold for thirty pieces of silver (Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity 1992 [1991]).

In its general principles, the Unification Church's theology of donations is surprisingly similar to its Catholic and Protestant counterparts. Japanese courts of law have started recognizing it, also because donors now sign notarized statements where they state that they are donating freely, understand all the implications, and will not sue the Unification Church in the future. In 2021, the Family Federation still lost one donation case but won two others (including Tokyo District Court 2021).

Ultimately, the problem is theological and philosophical. For a believer, donations may be deep spiritual experiences. For an atheist, or somebody who believes that groups such as the Unification Church are not "real" religions, no caution would be good enough, and no donation would ever be recognized as the fruit of a free and reasonable choice.

### *No Religious Liberty for the Politicians?*

On August 11–15, 2022, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), an organization formally independent from the Unification Church/Family Federation but created by its same founders, the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012) and his wife, held its Summit 2022 and Leadership Conference in Seoul, South Korea. Among those who were present and lectured—many others attended through videos—were prominent American politicians such as Mike Pompeo and Newt Gingrich. It was not a purely conservative gathering, as dozens

of cabinet ministers and others attended from all over the world, and from all sorts of political persuasions.

All mentioned their gratitude not only to the UPF but specifically to Reverend and Mrs. Moon for their work on behalf of world peace. They probably knew that in Japan media and some politicians were proposing purges and laws against politicians who attend UPF meetings, but they did not care.

The Japanese critics of the Unification Church published lists to name and shame Japanese politicians who had attended events of the UPF and other organizations connected with the Unification Church. They called for them to publicly disassociate themselves from these organizations, and even asked cabinet ministers to resign (one, economy minister Daishiro Yamagiwa, did resign on October 24).

Rumors were also spread in Japan and reported by international media without fact-checking. One was that Abe's grandfather, Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (1896–1987), invited the Unification Church to expand from Korea to Japan, hoping it could offer support to his conservative agenda. This claim is false. Korean missionaries brought the Unification Church to Japan in 1959, long before a Japanese member met Kishi in the mid-1960s. It is also false that, as some media claimed, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) “largely relies” on the votes and campaign volunteers of the Unification Church to win elections. The LDP has some 20 million voters and more than one million active members (*Nikkei.com* 2020). Unification Church devotees may only account for a small percentage of these. Finally, it is false that only LDP politicians attend events of Unification-Church-related organizations. The same hostile media listed MPs of other parties who also participated (*The Japan Times* 2022b).

What is true is that Abe and his grandfather Kishi expressed sympathy not so much for the Unification Church as a religion but for a church-related organization called International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC), which had emerged as the leading anti-communist organization in Japan. It is not surprising that it called for support for anti-communist politicians, and in turn politicians concerned with the Communist threat supported the IFVOC.

And why shouldn't they? Seen from any other democratic country, the Japanese controversy appears both surrealistic and dangerous. In Japan, the

Komeito party, the junior partner of the LDP in the current government coalition, was founded by members of the largest local Buddhist movement, Soka Gakkai. Although formally separated from Soka Gakkai since 1970, it maintains close relationships with the Buddhist movement (McLaughlin 2019). Other religious groups, including liberal left-wing Catholics, have emerged as vocal critics of the LDP and support its opponents. Indeed, there is a century-old tradition in Japan of “non-separation between religion and politics,” although it always had its critics too (Busacchi 2017).

In a democratic society, all citizens have a right to participate in political debate, support politicians of their choice, and campaign for one or another party. It would be deeply undemocratic to deny to religious believers a right recognized for all other citizens. As a Catholic, I am inspired by famous pages by Popes John Paul II (1920–2005) and Benedict XVI distinguishing between “secularity” as a healthy separation between church and state and “secularism” (see Introvigne 2012) but leaders of other religions have emphasized the same distinction as well. While secularity is a needed protection against any confusion between religious and political authorities of the type prevailing in Iran, secularism is an ideology that would forbid religious believers inspired by their faith to freely participate in politics, with the same rights and duties as all other citizens.

Excluding those who believe in God from political activism or office in the name of secularism makes them into second class citizens, deprived of their fundamental right of participating in the life and institutions of their country. Not less anti-democratic is excluding members of certain unpopular religions from politics. International institutions rightly censor Pakistan for preventing members of a religious minority called Ahmadiyya from voting and holding office (All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community 2020, 42–4).

Investigating and denouncing politicians who attend events of the Unification Church and its related organizations carries with it a simple message. In Japan both the freedom of citizens who happen to be believers to fully participate as believers in the democratic process, and the freedom of politicians to consult and cooperate with leaders and members of religions of their choice, are at risk.

In fact, some radical voices in the Japanese media ask precisely that politicians should be prevented from cooperating in any way not only with the Unification

Church but with any religion. This is not healthy separation of church and state. It is ideological, anti-democratic, discriminatory secularism. Defending the rights of politicians to attend events of the Unification Church, or any other religion, and to have religionists among their supporters and volunteers without risking their seats and careers, means defending at the same time the religious liberty of all religions—and of all Japanese citizens.

### *Hate Speech and Discrimination Against Unification Church Members in Japan*

Whoever has received a death threat knows it is not fun. At first, you dismiss it as just a bad joke but then a still small voice keeps telling you that the world is full of crazy guys and some of them may be dangerous. Every time you hear a suspicious noise at night, in a corner of your mind you wonder whether the crazy guy is finally coming to get you.

This is the experience of some members of the Unification Church/Family Federation in Japan after the Abe assassination, with anti-cult lawyers and media suggesting that “cults” such as the Unification Church should be publicly shamed and punished.

In 2011, I served as the Representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, of which the United States and Canada are also participating states) for combating racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance and discrimination. An important part of my portfolio were hate crimes and hate speech.

Not all those who listen to hate speech against religious minorities commit hate crimes, but some do. In Japan, the hate disseminated against the Unification Church lead to death threats against some of its members.

Articles by Japanese media reporting these incidents offered readers the possibility of posting comments. Some commented by adding more death threats. I hope the Japanese police are paying attention to these posts. We now know that Abe’s assassin started his career as a Unification Church hater by posting insults and threats on social media. We all know how the story ended.

Hate speech is, by its very nature, pervasive. Once it is disseminated through the media or the Internet, its effects can no longer be controlled. I collected reports of members of the Unification Church in Japan insulted in the streets,

ridiculed in the workplace, bullied in schools, even divorced by their spouses. We can only hope and pray that verbal violence will not escalate to physical violence and perhaps murder. Fatal effects of hate speech are not only a thing of the past. Every month, if not every week, Ahmadis are killed in Pakistan. They are members of a religious movement targeted by hate speech in the media and in sermons by preachers of the majority religion (All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community 2020).

Hate speech also prepares the ground for discrimination, i.e., for laws targeting members of a minority group and making them second class citizens. It is already happening with the Unification Church in Japan. Governmental committees have been organized to investigate “spiritual sales” and the possibility of dissolving the Unification Church/Family Federation, even if it is admitted that neither the church as such nor its legal representatives have been found guilty of any crime. While donations to religions are tax-exempt, as happens in every democratic country in the world, it is argued that donations to the Unification Church are not given to a “real” religion but to a fraudulent “cult,” and should be regarded as consideration paid for sales and taxed as such, while a new law should indemnify the “victims.”

The Japanese are not inventing anything. France, which has a bizarre official policy against “cults,” now hailed as a model by some in Japan, once argued that donations to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other groups it included in a list of “cults” were not gifts but payments for goods or services and should be taxed. The European Court of Human Rights did not buy it. It ruled that the redefinition of donations as payments for sales was just a tool used to discriminate against religious groups the French authorities did not like and labeled as “cults.” France had to give back the taxes the Jehovah’s Witnesses and two other religious movements had already paid, plus legal fees and damages (European Court of Human Rights 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

Japan is not part of the European Convention of Human Rights but has signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has parallel provisions in its article 18. In an official interpretation called General Comment no. 22, issued in 1993, the United Nations stated that “Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions.” The United Nations warned against “any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the

subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community” (United Nations Human Rights Committee 1993, no. 2).

It should be obvious to everybody that giving the authorities the power to decide which religions are good and which are bad or “cults,” tax the donations to the latter by declaring they are not real donations, and legally dissolve groups that have not committed any crime, threatens all religious groups. It transforms the institutions of allegedly secular states into latter-day inquisitions.

Some Japanese media object that the Unification Church is not a religion with “normal” beliefs but makes bizarre claims for its founder, Reverend Moon. But this is true for most religions. For instance, I also believe in a religion making grandiose claims for its founder. Its name is Christianity. As a Christian, I believe that a Jew executed two thousand years ago as a criminal is still alive today. I also believe that he was born of a virgin mother and resurrected the dead. Surely, this is more than any claim members of the Unification Church may make for Reverend Moon.

### *How to Create a Mob*

In 1895, French anthropologist Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) published what was to become an immensely influential book, *The Crowd* (Le Bon 1895, 1896). While not without its academic critics, it will be studied by Vladimir Il’ich Lenin (1870–1924), Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), and Benito Mussolini (1883–1945)—who all admitted they found in the book a source of inspiration (Reicher 1996). Le Bon established a new science, which he called the “psychology of the crowds.” However, most of the crowds he described were bent on socially destructive action, and in contemporary English would rather be called “mobs.”

Le Bon described three stages of the process creating a mob. The first is suggestion. He believed that citizens of modern societies are easily influenced and manipulated by the media and propaganda, a prophetic comment considering that he wrote well before television and the Internet. The second stage is contagion. In these days of epidemic, we are all well aware that a virus spreads invisibly but unstoppably. The same, Le Bon noted, happens with myths and disinformation, what we would today call fake news.



Le Bon's third stage was anonymity. Individuals in a mob may not know each other, yet they exhibit the same behavior and seem to be governed by a "group mind," which like a malignant spider at the center of an invisible web directs their actions. Acting anonymously, but knowing millions are doing what they do at the same time, those in a mob believe they do not have a personal responsibility, and experience an intoxicating feeling of invincibility.

Le Bon's book is surprisingly modern, and might have been written with contemporary social media in mind. Protected by anonymity, millions of self-styled warriors in mob-like cyberwars insult their targets believing they can escape liability, and feeling they are anonymous soldiers in an invincible army.

Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan is witnessing a textbook example of how a mob is created through suggestion, contagion, and anonymity. In the crime there is a culprit, Abe's killer, and there are victims, Abe himself and the Unification Church, whose leader the assassin also planned to kill. Yet, mob psychology works independently of logic and facts.

Mobs are not created spontaneously. The Unification Church in Japan has powerful opponents. As we have seen, they spread suggestion to the media, manipulating many into believing that, rather than a victim, the Church was somewhat responsible for Abe's death. Contagion spread the suggestion, and an anonymous mob was formed, in which individuals who did not know each other followed a group mind, insulted, threatened, and in some cases committed crimes, feeling protected by being part of a crowd or by hiding behind their phones or computers.

In the period from Abe's assassination to the end of August 2022, the Unification Church in Japan has documented more than 400 hate incidents against its churches, organizations, and individual members. But they continue, and the number is probably higher, since not all local incidents are necessarily reported to the headquarters.

Examining the documents of these cases makes for alarming reading. It shows how easily and quickly mobs are created today, with a technology that did not exist in Le Bon's time. Many of those who placed threatening phone calls, which were recorded, to the headquarters or branches of the Family Federation, started with sentences such as "I read the media" or "I watched TV." Through the typical process of mob psychology, they believed what they heard, persuaded that the

media by definition “tell the truth.” Not only did they believe they had become instant “experts” on the Unification Church, they also felt ready to “do something” and take the law into their own hands.

Because they had read it or heard it on TV, they believed they knew, and shouted at the phone or wrote on the Internet, that the Unification Church “killed Abe”—who was in fact killed by a fanatical opponent of that Church—, “uses brainwashing”—a notion discredited as pseudo-science long ago by mainline scholars of new religious movements (Richardson 1993, 2015; Introvigne 2022)—and “commits crimes.”

There is also a disturbing racist undertone in several phone calls and comments: “You are Koreans, go back to Korea,” “We know, Koreans are only interested in money,” “You are a Korean anti-Japanese group.” While the Unification Church was founded by Koreans, members in Japan are overwhelmingly Japanese.

Just as Le Bon predicted, anonymity and the toxic feeling of not being responsible, increasingly lead those in this mob to commit crimes. On July 17, somebody posted in an electronic bulletin board “Tomorrow morning I will come to your headquarters and kill all with a knife.” Death threats were received by Unification Church branches in Aichi, Hokkaido, and Osaka. In Nara, threats to kill the pastors reported to the police led to the precautionary closure of the local church.

In Tokyo, Nara, and Osaka, sound trucks cruised around the churches and shouted hostile slogans. Some were operated by right-wing extremists, who in Osaka on August 4 screamed “Korean anti-Japanese group, get out of Japan!”

In Aichi, on August 15, the church’s mailbox was painted black, and graffiti hailing Abe’s killer were spray-painted.

The suffering of individual members is also growing and alarming. On July 18, a female believer in Gunma Prefecture was physically assaulted by her son and reported to the hospital with a broken rib. On July 23 in Aichi, a husband entered the premises of the Unification Church and beat his wife there. On August 16, in Nagano, a believer was badly beaten by her husband because she refused to leave the Unification Church. In several cases, believers were threatened with divorce by spouses who are not members of the Church. In some cases, divorce proceedings have indeed started. A couple in Gunma Prefecture who lived with

their son and daughter-in-law was expelled by the latter's home on July 15, because they refused to leave the Unification Church. Many believers reported their spouses or other relatives had destroyed their Unification Church literature and in some cases even their cell phones, trying to prevent them from communicating with the Church.

To fully understand the danger of all this, we need to go back to Le Bon. One or two isolated incidents may be dismissed as minor, although it is always possible that death threats escalate into actual violence. One hundred or more incidents demonstrate that a mob of anonymous self-appointed vigilantes is now at work. They are unknown to each other but are all manipulated by the malignant spider at the center of the web—a spider that hates, slanders, discriminates, and may one day kill.

### *Conclusion: The Word “Cult,” A Tool for Discrimination*

On June 6, 2014, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Pope Francis in the Vatican. He offered him a replica of a Japanese 17th-century “secret mirror.” It looks like a normal mirror but, when inclined to intercept a ray from the sun, it reveals an image of Jesus Christ. Christians in Japan had to use the secret mirrors at that time since, if they were caught with a Christian image or symbol, they were executed. Abe apologized to the Catholic Church for the more than 5,000 Catholics who had been killed in Japan during the persecutions of the 16th and 17th centuries and beyond. Many of them were crucified (Respinti 2022).

As late as 1829, three women and three men were paraded through the streets of Osaka and crucified for being members of the “evil cult” of Christianity (perhaps they weren't) and for recruiting followers through the use of black magic (Miyazaki, Wildman Nakai, and Teeuwen 2020).

Abe's apology was commendable, but it would seem to refer to atrocities of a remote past. Or perhaps not. Scholars such as James T. Richardson and Wu Junqing have noted that not much has changed from the times when witches were burned in the West and “evil cults” were bloodily persecuted in Imperial China and Japan (Kilbourne and Richardson 1986; Wu 2016, 2017). The only difference is that black magic has been secularized into brainwashing, a pseudo-

scientific concept implying that “cults” now bewitch their followers through mysterious psychological techniques.

Ironically, while Abe apologized for the persecution of Christianity in Japan as an “evil cult” that used black magic, his assassination is being used to label the Unification Church/Family Federation as a “cult” that obtains donations through brainwashing, the modern version of black magic, and call for a crackdown on “cults” in general. Rather than blaming the assassin, and the hate campaigns against the Unification Church that may have excited him, the victims are put on trial in a spectacular reversal of both logic and fairness.

But what is a “cult”? A large majority of scholars of religions agree that there are no cults (Ashcraft 2018). “Cult” is just a label used to discriminate against groups that powerful lobbies, for whatever reasons, do not like. It was not always so. “Cult” and its functional equivalents in other languages derived from the Latin word “secta” such as the French “secte”—to be translated “cult” rather than “sect”—had a precise meaning in early-20th-century sociology. They indicated young religions, where most or all members had converted as adults rather than being born in the faith. The example used by the early sociologists was that Jesus and the apostles were part of a “cult” as none of them was born as a Christian; they were all converted Jews. After some centuries, those born Christians became the majority, and Christianity evolved from “cult” (or “secte” in French) to church. Most of the scholars who used this terminology were themselves Christians, and clearly for them the word “cult” had no negative implications.

However, during the course of the 20th century, with some older precedents, a new science, criminology, started using the word “cult” with a very different meaning. A “cult” was a religious group that systematically committed crimes or would likely commit crimes in the future. This meaning of “cult” was similar to the expression “evil cult” used to persecute and crucify Christians in Imperial Japan. It also created a confusion. A sociologist in the 1960s, asked whether Jesus and the apostles were part of a “cult,” should have answered yes based on traditional sociological categories but, since the criminological use of the term was conquering the media as well, would have risked to be misunderstood and accused of having labeled the first Christians as criminals (see Introvigne 2018, 2022).

For this reason, since at least the 1980s, international scholars of religion, led by British sociologist Eileen Barker, abandoned the word “cult” and adopted “new religious movements” for the newly established groups where most members were first generation converts (Barker 1984). They were aware of the use of “cult” by criminologists, and did not deny the existence of groups that routinely commit crimes in the name of religion, among “new” but also among “old” religious traditions—such as networks of pedophile Catholic priests or terrorists who use or misuse the name of Islam. Since the word “cult” would only create confusion, they adopted other expressions, which later included “criminal religious movements,” suggested by the undersigned (Introvigne 2018).

Criminal religious movements are groups that systematically commit or at least incite to the commission of common crimes such as physical violence, rape, child abuse, or murder. Since the late 1960s, activist “anti-cult” groups have appeared calling for the activities of “cults” to be limited. They defined them not as movements committing common crimes such as homicide or sexual abuse but as groups guilty of an imaginary crime, brainwashing. The word “brainwashing” was coined during the Cold War by the CIA to designate mysterious techniques allegedly used by the Chinese Maoists and the Soviets to turn almost instantly otherwise “normal” citizens into Communists. It was later applied to “cults.” By 1990, it had been debunked by religious scholars, as pseudo-science simply used to discriminate against certain groups, and rejected by courts of law, at least in the United States (for an overview, see Introvigne 2022).

The Abe assassination is now being used as a pretext for reviving the dead horse of brainwashing and of theories claiming that bad “cults,” unlike good “religions,” recruit members and donors through mental manipulation. Just as it happened during the European witch hunts and the Japanese persecution of Christians for which Abe apologized, accusations of black magic—of which brainwashing is only the secularized version—and of operating an “evil cult” lead to the dehumanization and persecution of, as well as discrimination against, those so accused. Today, they come for the Unification Church. Tomorrow, they may come for any religion that has among its enemies lobbies powerful enough to persuade the media it is a “cult.”

## References

- All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. 2020. *Suffocation of the Faithful: The Persecution of the Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan and the Rise of International Extremism*. London: All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community.
- Amicarelli, Alessandro, Willy Fautré, Holly Folk, Massimo Introvigne, Marco Respinti, Bernadette Rigal-Cellard, and Rosita Šorytė. 2022. “The Universal Peace Federation: Moon Front or Respected NGO?” *The Journal of CESNUR* 6(2):62–80. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2022.6.2.3.
- Andrew, Christopher M., and Vasili Mitrokhin. 2005. *The Mitrokhin Archive II: The KGB and the World*. London: Allen Lane.
- Ashcraft, W. Michael. 2018. *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*. London: Routledge.
- Barker, Eileen. 1984. *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Busacchi, Vinicio. 2017. “On Daisaku Ikeda’s Interpretation of the Concept of Ōbutsu Myōgō and Its Consequences for Political Science.” *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 8(11):35–41.
- Duffin, Perry. 2019. “Teen Charged Over Fatal Stabbing at Scientology Centre Was Visiting His Mother.” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 4. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3cxpNyY>.
- Dumont, Jean. 1984. *La Révolution française ou les prodiges du sacrilège*. Limoges: Criterion.
- Escande, Renaud, ed. 2008. *Le Livre noir de la Révolution française*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf.
- European Court of Human Rights. 2011. *Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah c. France*. June 30. Accessed August 21, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3e1pxZn>.
- European Court of Human Rights. 2013a. *Association des Chevaliers du Lotus d’Or c. France*. January 31. Accessed August 21, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3e8y8tl>.
- European Court of Human Rights. 2013b. *Église Évangélique Missionnaire et Salaün c. France*. January 31. Accessed August 21, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3pVqPrr>.
- Fautré, Willy. 2012. *Japan: Abduction and Deprivation of Freedom for the Purpose of Religious De-Conversion*. Brussels: Human Rights Without Frontiers.

- Gerathy, Sarah. 2021. "Teen Found Not Criminally Responsible Over Stabbing Death at Scientology Headquarters." *ABC News*, November 23. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://ab.co/3Kx8Zoj>.
- Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity. 1992. *信仰生活と献金* (Life of Faith and Offerings). 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Tokyo: Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity [1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1991].
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2012. "Pope Benedict XVI and Religious Liberty: Separating Fact from Fiction." *Annalis Universitatis Mariae Curie-Sklodowska* 19(2):25–33.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2018. "Xie Jiao as 'Criminal Religious Movements': A New Look at Cult Controversies in China and Around the World." *The Journal of CESNUR* 2(1):13–32. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2018.2.1.2.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022. *Brainwashing: Reality or Myth?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaplonski, Christopher. 2014. *The Lama Question: Violence, Sovereignty, and Exception in Early Socialist Mongolia*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kilbourne, Brock K., and James T. Richardson. 1986. "Cultphobia." *Thought: Fordham University Quarterly* 61(2):258–266.
- Le Bon, Gustave. 1895. *Psychologie des foules*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Le Bon, Gustave. 1896. *The Crowd: A Study in the Popular Mind*. English translation. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Lenhart, John M. 1958. "Luther and Tetzel's Preaching of Indulgences, 1516–1518." *Franciscan Studies* 18(1):82–8.
- Levchenko, Stanislav. 1988. *On the Wrong Side: My Life in the KGB*. Washington DC: Pergamon-Brassey's.
- Mainichi Shimbun. 2022. "宗教団体トップの襲撃難航「狙いを安倍氏に切り替えた」銃撃容疑者" (It Was Difficult to Attack the Leader of the Religious Group and "I Switched Target to Mr. Abe," Says Shooting Suspect). July 9. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3wEZkqa>.
- Mayer, Arno. 2000. *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McLaughlin, Levi. 2019. *Soka Gakkai's Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Miyazaki, Fumiko, Kate Wildman Nakai, and Mark Teeuwen, eds. 2020. *Christian Sorcerers on Trial: Records of the 1827 Osaka Incident*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nam, Seung-Hyun. 2022. "정읍 아내 살인사건 가해자 '신천지 때문에 가족이 망가졌다'" (The Perpetrator of the Jeongeup Wife Murder: "My Family Is Broken Because

- of Shincheonji”). *Nocutnews.co.kr*, July 22. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3pSuVAI>.
- Nikkei.com*. 2020. “自民党員7年ぶり減少 108万人、19年末時点” (LDP membership down for the first time in 7 years to 1.08 million, as of the end of 2019). March 2. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://s.nikkei.com/3cxqatm>.
- Reicher, Stephen. 1996. “‘The Crowd’ Century: Reconciling Practical Success with Theoretical Failure.” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 35(4):535–53.
- Respinti, Marco. 2022. “Abe Shinzo: The Day He Offered a Magic Mirror to the Pope.” *Bitter Winter*, July 23. Accessed August 27, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3RIZURu>.
- Richardson, James T. 1993. “A Social Psychological Critique of ‘Brainwashing’ Claims About Recruitment to New Religions.” In *The Handbook of Cults and Sects in America*, edited by David G. Bromley and Jeffrey K. Hadden, 75–97. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Richardson, James T. 2015. “Brainwashing and Mental Health.” In *Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, edited by Howard Freedman, 210–16. New York: Academic Press.
- Sima Qian. 1993. *Records of the Grand Historian of China: Qin Dynasty*. Translated by Burton Watson. Hong Kong and New York: Columbia University Press.
- The Japan Times*. 2022a. “Suspect Test-Fired Gun Used to Kill Abe near Unification Church Facility: Sources.” July 16. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3PZT6b4>.
- The Japan Times*. 2022b. “Over 100 Japan Lawmakers Had Links with Unification Church: Survey.” August 14. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3e7coxL>.
- Tokyo District Court. 2021. March 1. Judgment 2016 (wa) 21355. Copy in the archives of the author.
- United Nations Human Rights Committee. 1993. *CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)*. Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. “International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Japan.” Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3RnUICa>.
- Wu, Junqing. 2016. “Words and Concepts in Chinese Religious Denunciation: A Study of the Genealogy of Xiejiao.” *The Chinese Historical Review* 23(1):1–22.



- Wu, Junqing. 2017. *Mandarin and Heretics: The Constructions of “Heresy” in Chinese State Discourse*. Leiden: Brill.
- Yamagami, Tetsuya. 2022. “山上容疑者の手紙 [全文] ・書き込み = 安倍元首相銃撃” (Suspect Yamagami’s Letter [Full Text] and Notes = Former Prime Minister Abe’s Shooting). *The Headline*, July 18. Accessed August 26, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3AxQUBR>.
- Yoemoto, Kazuhiro. 2008. *我らの不快な隣人* (Our Unpleasant Neighborhoods). Tokyo: K.K. Joho Shuppan Center.
- Zhang, Longxi. 2005. *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

## Documents

---

### **The Abe Assassination Case: Supplemental Statement Submitted at the 136<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Human Rights Committee**

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté  
de Conscience (CAP-LC)

*A non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the UN ECOSOC*  
contact@coordiap.com

**ABSTRACT:** After the assassination on July 8, 2022, of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954–2022), and the subsequent attacks against the Unification Church/Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, the ECOSOC-accredited NGO CAP-LC filed a statement for the 136<sup>th</sup> session (October 10–November 4, 2022) of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which largely transcribed the research note by Massimo Introvigne published in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*. Since the situation continued to deteriorate, on October 13, 2022, CAP-LC filed a supplemental statement, updating the first one and showing that governmental actions in Japan now threatens the very existence of the Unification Church/Family Federation in that country.

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

The statement submitted by CAP-LC on the intolerance, discrimination, and persecution of the Unification Church/Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in Japan concerns an ongoing situation, whose evolution CAP-LC continues to monitor. Unfortunately, as compared to when we submitted our original statement, the situation is getting worse, and there are new elements we believe the Committee should also urgently consider.

### 1. The “Expert Committee” of the Consumer Affairs Agency

The Expert Committee of the Consumer Affairs Agency convened by the Minister of Consumer Affairs, Mr. Taro Kono, has now started its work (*Asahi Shimbun* 2022a). As mentioned in our submission, it is the cause of serious concern that one of the eight members of the committee is Mr. Masai Kito, a prominent member of the anti-Unification-Church National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales. He is also one of the attorneys who in the past have represented “deprogrammers” engaged in the illegal activity of kidnapping and detaining adult members of the Unification Church for the purpose of forcibly “de-converting” them from their religion (see our original submission).

The very existence of a governmental committee targeting one particular religion is incompatible with Article 18.1 ICCPR on freedom of religion or belief and Article 26 ICCPR on non-discrimination. The malevolence of the initiative is also underlined by the fact that, while including militant opponents of the Unification Church, the committee has no scholars of religion among its members.

Not surprisingly, considering its stated purposes and composition, the committee makes no mystery of its intention to target the Unification Church and to create a special discriminatory regime against it.

According to media reports, anti-cult attorney “Kito pointed out that in addition to the assessment by the Consumer Affairs Agency panel, an inter-ministry body led by the Justice Ministry was looking into how to deal with issues related to the Unification Church. ‘If it turns out that even such a body will face difficulties in tackling the issue, there will be a need to deal with the problem by naming a state minister who would go beyond ministerial boundaries and charged specifically with handling the matter,’ Kito said” (*Asahi Shimbun* 2022a).

The quote clearly indicates that opponents are using the committee as a tool to promote a “final solution” to the Unification Church issue, if necessary by appointing a state minister who will be in charge of a definitive crackdown.

The media also revealed how the committee plans to achieve its aim. First, the panel wants to “examine ways to order shady religious groups to dissolve” (*Asahi Shimbun* 2022b). The use of the adjective “shady” points to the arbitrariness and vagueness of such proposals. “Shady” means suspicious or dubious, categories

that can have no places in the laws. The Ministry of Education has clearly indicated to the Ministry of Consumer Affairs that neither the Unification Church/Family Federation as such nor any of its national leaders have been convicted of any crime. Looking for ways to dissolving the church just because some so-called experts regard it as “shady” is clearly not compatible with Japan’s religious liberty obligations under Article 18 ICCPR. It is rather reminiscent of the practice of totalitarian regimes arresting individuals or prohibiting organizations just because they are *suspected* of crimes.

In fact, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales has already called for an order of dissolution of the Unification Church/Family Federation (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 2022), which is supported by the main opposition party in the Parliament (*Nippon.com* 2022). A considerable lobbying effort, supported by some media, is being made by the Network to persuade the government to file a court case to have the Unification Church/Family Federation dissolved. A formal request to the Ministries of Culture and Justice, supported by one of the usual Network’s well-publicized press conferences, was filed on October 11 (*NHK World-Japan* 2022).

Second, the committee plans to propose amendments to the law to restrict “unjust donations to religious corporations.” Committee member Shiori Kanno explained that amending the laws on donations is necessary to distinguish “decent religious corporations” from those that are not “decent” (*Asahi Shimbun* 2022b). Based on its several decades of advocacy for freedom of religion or belief, CAP-LC has learned that invariably vague language opens the door to discrimination. According to what standards would Japanese authorities decide which religions are “decent” or otherwise? What exactly does it mean that a religion is “decent”? Are administrative authorities competent to pass judgement on religions?

In fact, the committee does suggest some standards, but these only exacerbate our concerns further. The panel chair called for laws that would “ban the heinous act of demanding donations” (*Asahi Shimbun* 2022b). This would indicate that only unsolicited donations would be permitted, which would of course be both absurd and incompatible with Article 18 ICCPR.

We also read that the committee plans to prohibit “demanding donations by playing on the spiritual fears of followers and demanding donations when an

individual is unable to make a rational decision” (*Asahi Shimbun* 2022b). Again, the notion of “rational decision” is vague. If the donor is mentally incapacitated, donations are already void under Japanese law. If the donors are mentally competent, calling their decision “irrational” either refers to the discredited and pseudo-scientific theory of brainwashing (Introvigne 2022; Richardson 1993, 2015), or is a case of begging the question by implying that all donations to a “non-decent” religion are by definition irrational, yet another violation of Article 18 ICCPR.

As for the “spiritual fears of followers,” the fear of losing eternal salvation is a constitutive part of monotheistic religions. Psalm 111 in the Jewish and Christian Bible teaches “initium sapientiae timor Domini,” which the prestigious Aberdeen University has adopted as its Latin motto. It means that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Muslim, Jews, and Christians certainly have a fear of going to Hell after they die. This fear is regarded as healthy, and even as “the beginning of wisdom” as it moves towards good deeds. Buddhists are also afraid that, if they misbehave in this life, they may have to spend time in the “cold hells” or experience reincarnations into lower animals. In all religions, among the good deeds to which devotees are led by “spiritual fear” are alms and donations to religious institutions. This is certainly not a unique feature of the Unification Church, and legislating against those who preach the healthiness of spiritual fear would mean legislating against most religions.

One question that is never asked is for what purposes the donations are used? The question is not irrelevant. Media and opponents imply that donations to the Unification Church simply make its leaders rich, a century-old stereotype of anti-religious controversy. In fact, money collected in Japan has also been used extensively for a variety of philanthropic purposes, including the construction, fitting out and maintenance of a hospital in Tokyo, relief for tsunami and earthquake victims in Japan and medical clinics in Africa, as well as a host of other charitable ventures.

The third tool used against the Unification Church is to claim that parents raising second-generation children in the church’s faith are guilty of “child abuse” (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 2022). As evidence, one case of a second-generation member who attributed a depression to the parents’ involvement in the Unification Church has been mentioned, together with instances where parents were allegedly so busy with church activities that they neglected their children.

Other Unification Church parents were accused of interfering in the romantic life of their daughters and sons (*The Mainichi* 2022).

“Child abuse” is a very specific legal category that refers to physical or sexual violence. Obviously, being too busy with their jobs or other activities, or trying to control the romantic relationships of their children, are frequent complaints sons and daughters raise against their parents—but, even when they have a factual basis, they do not amount to “child abuse.” The implication in the case of the Unification Church is that socializing children into a “non-decent” religion automatically amounts to “child abuse.” Clearly, this argument can be used against any unpopular religious minority, and acting upon it is a breach of Articles 18.1 and 26 ICCPR.

All these are indications that the committee’s real aim is to look for ways ostensibly compatible with a democracy to put the Unification Church out of business, even if it admits it has not committed any crime, and even if the proposed new legislation would end up restricting the religious liberty of all religions.

Other religions are becoming aware of this, and concerned about the fact that Japan threatens not to respect its ICCPR obligations towards religious liberty. We regard it as very significant that our first submission to this Human Rights Committee about the discrimination against the Unification Church in Japan has been presented to its readers by *AsiaNews*, the official news agency of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (*AsiaNews* 2022), which is evidence that our concerns are shared by official institutions and agencies of the Roman Catholic Church.

## *2. The Complaint Hotline*

We also mentioned in our submission that the Ministry of Consumer Affairs was launching a hotline on which citizens can complain about “spiritual sales” and other alleged objectionable practices on the part of the Unification Church. We pointed out that this creates a situation of discrimination prohibited by Articles 18.1 and 26 ICCPR. The hotline should have functioned until September 30, but its operation has been extended indefinitely.

We are now in a position to quote data from the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and the Ministry of Justice that prove the discriminatory nature of the hotline.

The following set of data refers to complaints about so-called “spiritual sales” received by the Ministry between 2012 and 2021, both in general and with specific reference to the Unification Church/Family Federation (Ministry of Consumer Affairs 2022).

Year	Spiritual Sales Complaints (Total)	Related to the Unification Church/Family Federation
2012	3268	229
2013	2875	150
2014	2533	101
2015	1848	88
2016	1483	77
2017	1425	57
2018	1559	61
2019	1312	57
2020	1177	33
2021	1441	27

The chart below shows the number of calls on the hotline from September 5 to 22, 2022. (Ministry of Justice 2022).

	Total Number of Calls September 5 to 22, 2022	Calls related to Unification Church September 5 to 22, 2022
All Complaints included	1952	1317
Complaints related to “money problems”	919	70%

There are two inescapable conclusions supported by all this data. The first is that only a small percentage of the “spiritual sales” complaints received by the Ministry concerned the Unification Church. In 2021, the percentage was 1.87%. We do maintain that “spiritual sales” is a polemical and dubious category. Yet, even accepting it, any discussion of the subject should take into account that in

2021 *more than 98% of the complaints* concerned groups other than the Unification Church/Family Federation. Singling out this church for the “spiritual sales” phenomenon is thus grossly discriminatory and unfair.

The second conclusion is that the measures the Unification Church took to make sure that its members understood the existing laws and complied with them, rather than being merely cosmetic as the opponents maintain, have been remarkably effective. Except in 2018, when numbers had already become small, the complaints concerning the Unification Church continuously decreased, from 229 in 2012 to less than 100 since 2015 and less than 30 in 2021.

Opponents can object that, on the contrary, the hotline instituted in September 2022 gathered a higher number of complaints. Not all those who called the hotline complained about the Unification Church/Family Federation. Others mentioned grievances about other groups. However, the hotline had been advertised as a specific anti-Unification-Church initiative, as confirmed by the fact that out of 1,952 complaints received from September 5 to 22, 1,317 were about the Unification Church. According to the Ministry’s website, 70% were about “money troubles,” and this should include the “spiritual sales” (Ministry of Justice 2022).

How was it possible that complaints about the Unification Church, which had constantly decreased from 2012 to 2021, a year when they were reduced to 27, suddenly grew to 1,317 (or 922, considering only the “money troubles”) in one single month of 2022? In fact, this is further evidence of the discriminatory practices of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and of the violation of Articles 18 and 26 ICCPR.

If undergraduate students conducted a survey and adopted the methodology for it being used by the hotline, they would rightly be ridiculed by their teachers. Not only does the hotline by definition create a self-selected sample but it is easily open to manipulation by the enemies of the Unification Church. Furthermore, there is no means to verify whether those who call the hotline are who they say they are, or whether their complaints are true, exaggerated or merely made up. If we take the Ministry’s data at face value, we see that 7.5% of those who called claimed to be members of the religious movement they criticized, 24% said they were ex-members, and the rest, i.e., the majority of the callers, identified themselves as relatives or friends or just concerned citizens. Also, 65% of the



complaints mentioned incidents that happened more than 10 years ago or did not specify a date.

But there is no reason to accept these data at face value. Anybody who wanted to slander the Unification Church or support calls for its dissolution might simply have organized a small army of trolls calling the hotline and reporting imaginary wrongdoings. This would not have been something new in the field of campaigns against “cults.” In 2020, the results of a Dutch survey conducted via the Internet, to which anybody could participate, about unreported cases of sexual abuse among the Jehovah’s Witnesses were quickly dismissed by scholars and politicians when it emerged that anti-cult websites both in the Netherlands and abroad had called their supporters to participate in the survey and create a majority of negative reports (Folk, Introvigne, and Melton 2020).

Assuming that some reports to the hotline were true, their proliferation in contradiction to pre-2022 Ministry data simply proves that, when the media and the government itself excite feelings of hostility against a minority, as happened after the assassination of Abe, some citizens react and start complaining about that group, which in turn perpetuates animosity and discrimination.

Accordingly, calls to the hotline do not prove anything, except that a witch hunt against the Unification Church, which is given no means in the course of the committee’s procedures to defend itself, is taking place in Japan, ignoring the fact that the Ministry’s own data prove that the number of complaints about “spiritual sales” in general overwhelmingly concerned groups other than the Unification Church, and that the latter had taken effective measures leading to a substantial decrease of the cases throughout the years.

### *3. Discrimination and Violence Against Unification Church/Family Federation Members*

We do acknowledge that the government of Japan is not directly responsible for the continuing acts of discrimination and violence against devotees of the Unification Church/Family Federation. However, we respectfully suggest that these incidents should be considered by the Human Rights Committee as poisonous fruits of the tree of slander and hate speech, for which the government

is responsible by virtue of its promotion of the “expert committee” and of the lawyers associated with the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales.

Indeed, the list of such incidents is impressive. Many have targeted the Women’s Federation for World Peace International (WFWP), an organization founded by the leader of the Unification Church/Family Federation, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, which is in general consultative status with ECOSOC at The United Nations. These incidents are particularly disturbing because they add a gender element and discriminate against a group whose aim is to promote women internationally, and whose good work has been repeatedly acknowledged by the United Nations.

Because of its connection with the Unification Church, the WFWP has been slandered in no less than 3,000 tweets since the Abe assassination. As a result, companies that had sponsored the WFWP in the past, withdrew their sponsorship, hotels and municipalities refused to rent halls for its events, and even Tokyo Flower, a company that for several years had supplied flowers to WFWP, has informed the organization that it will be denied its services in future. Some universities have asked their students not to participate in WFWP activities, and some women were abused by their husbands and threatened with divorce if they continued to be involved with WFWP.

The witnesses we interviewed feel strongly that the government is not effectively protecting their rights. One of the slanderers on social media is the same attorney Masai Kito who is a member of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs’ committee. According to the abused women of the WFWP, the attitude of the government suggests it has more sympathy for the slanderers and for those committing acts of discrimination than for the victims of such abuse.

#### *4. Conclusions*

Most unfortunately, every day the situation in Japan is becoming worse. The hysteria about the Unification Church/Family Federation is breaching the protective walls erected by the ICCPR to protect human rights and freedom of religion or belief in Japan. We reiterate our request that this matter be addressed with the utmost urgency.

## References

- Asahi Shimbun*. 2022a. “Panel Meets to Address Dubious Unification Church Activities.” August 30. Accessed October 9, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3eLwCOt>.
- Asahi Shimbun*. 2022b. “Agency Panel Agrees on Draft Proposal to Restrict Donations.” October 5. Accessed October 6, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TjksLQ>.
- AsiaNews*. 2022. “Unification Church Before the UN Claiming Persecution over Abe’s Killing.” October 6. Accessed October 10, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3yVnSvT>.
- Folk, Holly, Massimo Introvigne, and J. Gordon Melton. 2020. “Expert Opinion.” January 7. Accessed October 6, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3MPLOGP>.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022. *Brainwashing: Reality or Myth?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ministry of Consumer Affairs. 2022. “旧統一教会に関する消費生活相談の状況について” (On the Situation of Consumer Affairs Consultations Related to Former Unification Church). September 30. Accessed October 10, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3CPJPhi>.
- Ministry of Justice. 2022. “相談状況の分析(9月5日～22日)” (Analysis of Consultations [September 5-22]). September 30. Accessed October 10, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3ETdAjS>.
- NHK World-Japan*. 2022. “Lawyers Seek Court Order to Disband Former Unification Church.” October 11. Accessed October 11, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3zj1DAz>.
- Nippon.com*. 2022. “CDP to Urge Govt Action to Disband Unification Church.” September 14. Accessed October 10, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3CRwG7v>.
- Richardson, James T. 1993. “A Social Psychological Critique of ‘Brainwashing’ Claims About Recruitment to New Religions.” In *The Handbook of Cults and Sects in America*, edited by David G. Bromley and Jeffrey K. Hadden, 75–97. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Richardson, James T. 2015. “Brainwashing and Mental Health.” In *Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, edited by Howard Freedman, 210–16. New York: Academic Press.
- The Mainichi*. 2022. “Editorial: Measures Needed in Japan to Help Unification Church ‘2nd-Generation’ Followers.” October 6. Accessed October 10, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3F0vNMn>.
- Yomiuri Shinbun*. 2022. “Japan Lawyers’ Group Demands Dissolution Order Against Unification Church.” September 17. Accessed October 10, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3TjN1ZB>.

⊗ The Journal of CESNUR ⊗

---