

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

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

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

The Assassination of Shinzo Abe

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

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

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

"Calling a Stag a Horse" is a proverbial Chinese expression referring to an incident in the life of the ancient Imperial prime minister Zhao Gao (?–207 BCE). A tyrannical man, he declared that a stag was a horse and had those who objected it was a stag beheaded (Sima Qian 1993, 70; Zhang 2005, 112–15). "Calling a stag a horse," or turning the meaning of the words upside down for evil purposes, is often done today to discriminate against religious minorities (Chen 2022). When they become victims of crimes, it is suggested that it is their fault. The victims are called aggressors, and vice versa. It is reminiscent of an old strategy of certain lawyers who defend rapists. They invariably blame the raped woman, who perhaps did not dress modestly enough.

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

The Campaign Against the Unification Church and the "Cults"

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

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

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

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

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

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

As for the children protection directives, Leo Lewis, the authoritative Asia business editor of the *Financial Times* commented that “in its rush to enact something, Japan has skipped some extraordinarily nuanced theological questions and created potential trouble for a much larger circle of organizations and activities than it has bargained for” (Lewis 2023). In fact, the measures, which appear to be influenced by Sayuri Ogawa’s and other more or less apocryphal apostate stories, go beyond the alleged wrongdoings of the Unification Church.

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

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

Targeting the Jehovah’s Witnesses

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

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

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

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

The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Reaction

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

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

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

– Corporal Punishments

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

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

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

– Disfellowshipping and Shunning

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

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

– Birthdays and Socialization

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

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

– Blood Transfusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why Japan?

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

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

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

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

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

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