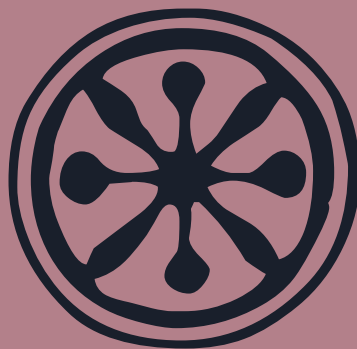

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**Preventive Diplomacy to Avoid Nuclear War: The Case of Daisaku Ikeda's
Private Diplomacy During the Cold War and Nichiren Buddhism's
Challenge to Contemporary International Crises**

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ABSTRACT: Nuclear weapons are a culmination of leading-edge technologies in human history. Humankind has never invented weapons capable of prevailing over them. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has elevated the risk that weapons of mass destruction may be used to a level not seen since the Cold War period. This paper explores a case of preventive diplomacy to avoid nuclear war: the late Daisaku Ikeda's private diplomacy and Soka Gakkai's campaigns against nuclear weapons. Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist lay association, has been modernizing Buddhism as a religion relevant for contemporary human societies through a worldwide action promoting peace, culture, and education over half a century. Their anti-nuclear-weapon activities are an embodiment of the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism, which was founded in 13th-century Japan, in the present days. Preventive diplomacy is a comparatively new concept, which was introduced after the Cold War. Ikeda conducted his private diplomacy to mitigate tensions between nuclear weapon states and to avoid their warfare since the 1960s. Soka Gakkai's historical case might present an ideal model of preventive diplomacy to avoid an apocalyptic nuclear war.

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

Extending my deepest condolences for the passing of Dr Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023),
Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa of the University of Buckingham,
Soka Gakkai 3rd President and Honorary President, on 15th November 2023.

Introduction

Nuclear weapons are a fruit of a huge number of emerging technologies and human knowledge. But they no longer are a new type of weapons: they have had

over eighty years history of their development, testing, and usage since when Albert Einstein (1879–1955) sent a letter about the “nuclear chain reaction” to US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945) in 1939. Because of the war in Ukraine started in 2022, the tension of threat and use of these weapons on the global stage has been heightening rapidly. In fact, a number of Russian tactical nuclear weapons have been deployed in Belarus, and Russia has also modernized 95% of its strategic nuclear weapons in 2023 (*Japan Times* 2023). Furthermore, President Vladimir Putin has revoked Russia’s ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT: Arms Control Association 2023).

This paper explores whether diplomacy is still feasible to prevent nuclear weapon issues by introducing the Japanese government’s and the G7’s initiatives in Hiroshima in 2023, Daisaku Ikeda’s private diplomacy, and Soka Gakkai’s anti-nuclear-weapon activities in relation with the USSR during the Cold War.

The Initiatives of Japanese Government and the G7 Hiroshima Summit of 2023

The G7 Hiroshima Summit in May 2023 was a well-organized conference, which started with the prayer of the leaders at the atomic bomb cenotaph and had a speech by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as its grand finale. Although the influence of G7 had relatively declined with former US President Donald Trump’s unilateralism and the rises of China and other developing countries in recent years, its participants were unified again by the need of confronting the crisis of Ukraine. It was also a conference where the Japanese presidency’s initial message was more comprehensively reflected in the discussions and the final statement, in comparison with the previous nine G7 Summits. It was about nuclear disarmament. All the G7 leaders including those of US, UK, and France, which are part of the P5 (the five Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council, together with Russia and China), visited Hiroshima and mentioned nuclear disarmament in the conference’s final statement. It can be a milestone in the political history of nuclear disarmament.

The Japanese government has been very keen on the topic under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, even though its country’s security depends on the US military and nuclear umbrella. Prior to the Summit, Kishida promoted his official statement “Hiroshima Action Plan,” turned to “the world without nuclear weapons” in his speech at the NPT (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear

Weapons) Review Conference 2022, and especially called for the improvement in transparency of the nuclear force. It was the first Japanese Prime Minister's attendance to such a conference in history. Kishida was born in Hiroshima and has been elected in that region to the Parliament. Both his grandfather and father were members of the Parliament and avid promoters of nuclear weapon abolition. He therefore makes nuclear disarmament his lifework.

At the beginning of his speech, Kishida mentioned that Russia threatened to use nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine and stated critically, "I seriously fear that the disaster of nuclear weapons can be repeated." His action plan consisted of five pillars: [1] calling for a shared recognition of the importance of continuing the record of non-use of nuclear weapons; [2] enhancing transparency; [3] maintaining the decreasing trend of the global nuclear stockpile; [4] securing nuclear non-proliferation and promote the peaceful uses of nuclear energy upon that basis; and [5] having Japan promote the accurate understanding on the realities of nuclear weapons use through encouraging visits to Hiroshima and Nagasaki by international leaders and others (Kishida 2022).

For improvement in transparency, he called for disclosing information on the production of fissile materials, such as highly enriched uranium, plutonium, etc., which can be converted to make nuclear weapons. China has never officially disclosed how many nuclear weapons they developed and possess. On the other hand, the G7 Hiroshima Summit's final statement "G7 Leaders' Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament" outlined five points corresponding to the Japanese government's Hiroshima Action Plan:

1. No use of nuclear weapons.
2. Reduction of the number of nuclear weapons.
3. Emphasizing the importance of transparency.
4. Banning the production of fissile material for use in the weapons or other nuclear explosive device: discussion for FMCT (Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty).
5. No nation should carry out any nuclear weapon test explosion or other nuclear explosion: discussion for CTBT (Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty), etc.

However, both the Hiroshima Action Plan and the G7 Summit statement deeply disappointed many civil society organizations (CSOs) in Japan, which have

been promoting anti-nuclear weapons activities and campaigns, such as the groups of *hibakusha*, the victims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki 1945 bombings. Neither document discussed the TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons), which is the symbol and new hope of the CSOs and legally prohibits all countries, even the P5, to possess nuclear arms. These countries have refused to sign the TPNW.

The Japanese government even under Kishida has been insisting that with the severe global and regional (especially Northeast Asian) security situation, the TPNW's ideas are not realistic. Kishida's political stance is to promote nuclear disarmament only under the NPT regime, not through other ways. This position was common to the other G7 states. However, since the ratification of the NPT in 1970, the number of nuclear weapon states has been increasing and there have been several serious nuclear crises. The CSOs suspect that the nuclear deterrence theory merely encourages other countries to develop and possess nuclear weapons and has been increasing regional and global tensions. However, the deterrence theory is still the fundamental principle of the G7 Summit member countries. Their final statement in Hiroshima focused on the NPT regime but did not refer to the TPNW. Therefore, it can be said that diplomacy for nuclear disarmament at political level is still limited, even under a strongly motivated national leader like Kishida.

Ikeda's Philosophy of Science and the Ukrainian Crisis

Although modern science brought about bright sides, such as great improvement in the lives of human beings and material abundance, it also produced advanced weapons represented by nuclear arms and severe environmental problems. Ikeda described the essence of science and nuclear weapons in accordance with the *Lotus Sutra*:

Science and religion are in complementary relations in nature (Ikeda 1988–2022, VII, 587).

Science in essence tends to quantify everything; and soulless technology spurs on the commodification of human beings. Nuclear weapons symbolize the devilish nature of power. They are like the incarnation of the devil king. "Devil" means robber of life; the exact opposite of "Buddha," one who restores and invigorates life... I have described atomic weapons as the embodiment of darkness. But they could also be described as the

incarnation of mistrust in, and hatred toward, human beings... The philosopher Max Picard [1888–1965] argued that the atomic bomb is a symbol of a “disintegrating” world. Picard wrote, “The very force which holds the atoms together as they form a world is now being used to explode that world. It is by no means accidental that the atom bomb was invented in the day and age which lives and which dies by disintegrating everything.” The devilish nature of power functions to disintegrate and divide. It cuts people off from the universe, alienates them from other people, divides one country from another, and severs people’s bonds with nature. On the other hand, compassion unifies (Ikeda 2011, 57–8).

Knowledge alone cannot give rise to value. It is only when knowledge is guided by wisdom that value is created (Ikeda 2005).

Prior to the G7 Hiroshima Summit, Ikeda issued a statement to the G7 leaders and called for no first use of nuclear weapons (Ikeda 2023b). As he had already stated on January 11, 2023 (Ikeda 2023a),

As I have long asserted, if we consider nuclear weapons solely from the perspective of national security, we risk overlooking critically important issues. In my forty annual peace proposals issued since 1983, I have argued that the inhumane nature of nuclear weapons must be the pivotal focus of any discourse or deliberation. I have also stressed the need to face squarely the irrationality of nuclear weapons with their capacity to destroy and render illegible all evidence of our individual lives and our shared undertakings as societies and civilizations. A further point I would like to emphasize is what might be called the negative gravitational pull inherent in nuclear weapons. By this I mean the way in which escalating tensions around possible nuclear weapons use creates a sense of urgency and crisis that holds people in its grip as a kind of gravitational force, stripping them of their capacity to halt a further intensification of the conflict (Ikeda 2023a).

Regarding the Ukrainian crisis, Ikeda called for ceasing fire immediately and gaining the consensus of the concerned countries based on international humanitarian law and international human rights law at the United Nations and suggested no first use of nuclear weapons (Ikeda 2023a).

The situation in Ukraine brought a serious refugee crisis, too. As of the end of 2023, about six million Ukrainian refugees were displaced (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2024),

And yet the crisis continues. It has not only heightened tensions across Europe but also seriously impacted many other countries in the form of constrained food supplies, spiking energy prices and disrupted financial markets. These developments have increased the desperation of great numbers of people worldwide already afflicted by extreme weather events caused by climate change and the suffering and death resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial that we find a breakthrough in order to prevent any

further worsening of the conditions facing people worldwide, to say nothing of the Ukrainian people who are compelled to live with inadequate and uncertain supplies of electricity amidst a deepening winter and intensifying military conflict. I therefore call for the urgent holding of a meeting, under UN auspices, among the foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine, and other key countries in order to reach an agreement on a cessation of hostilities. I also urge that earnest discussions be undertaken toward a summit that would bring together the heads of all concerned states in order to find a path to the restoration of peace... Recalling the commitment to protect life and dignity that undergirds International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, I urge all parties to bring about the earliest possible end to the present conflict (Ikeda 2023a).

Respecting human life is a core teaching of Buddhism. In 1280, Nichiren (1222–1282) had already underlined his “life first” philosophy as “Whether one has wealth or not, no treasure exceed the one called life” (Nichiren 2006, 1125).

Regarding the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons, Ikeda insisted that it would mitigate the tensions between the concerned countries. He reiterated in his G7 statement that the nuclear deterrence theory only raises fears and tensions, and mutual mistrust may bring the worst-case scenario of an actual use of nuclear weapons. Ikeda mentioned his efforts aimed at preventing a nuclear crisis during the Cold War. He said that the NPT and the TPNW have common aims and should be in a complementary relation to prevent a nuclear war:

Together with calling for the earliest possible resolution to the Ukraine crisis, I wish to stress the crucial importance of implementing measures to prevent the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons, both in the current crisis and all future conflicts... There is already a basis from which to start: that is, the joint statement issued last January by the leaders of the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China in which they affirm that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”... The pledge of No First Use is a measure that nuclear-weapon states can take even while maintaining for the present their current nuclear arsenals; nor does it mean that the threat of some 13,000 nuclear warheads existing in the world today would quickly dissipate. However, what I would like to stress is that should this policy take root among nuclear-armed states, it will create an opening for removing the climate of mutual fear. This, in turn, can enable the world to change course—away from nuclear buildup premised on deterrence and to ward nuclear disarmament to avert catastrophe... The spirit and sense of purpose that prevailed at the time of the birth of the NPT is resonant with and complementary to the ideals that motivated the drafting and adoption of the TPNW. I strongly call for all parties to explore and expand ways to link the efforts made on the basis of these two treaties, drawing forth their synergistic effects toward a world free from nuclear weapons (Ikeda 2023a).

Stopping Escalating Cycles of Mistrust: Ikeda's Private Diplomacy with the USSR and Soka Gakkai's Activities During the Cold War

As a critical case of private diplomacy to prevent the use of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, this paper explores Ikeda's approach to the USSR. In 1956, Japan normalized its diplomatic relations with the USSR. Originally, establishing a bilateral peace treaty was envisioned at the same time, but the Northern Territories, which the Soviets attacked and occupied (even after the Japanese surrender) having unilaterally broken the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact of 1941, remained an insoluble issue. The northernmost territories that Japan asked to be returned became an enormous obstacle on which both sides failed to concede, leaving the issue under continuous deliberation after the normalization. Japan did invade China and neighboring states, but in the case of the USSR it was Japan that was invaded.

Yet, the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact of 1941 mandated that

Article 1: Both Contracting Parties undertake to maintain peaceful and friendly relations between them and mutually respect the territorial integrity and inviolability of the other Contracting Party.

Article 2: Should one of the Contracting Parties become the object of hostilities on the part of one or several third powers, the other Contracting Party will observe neutrality throughout the duration of the conflict ("Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact April 13, 1941" 1941).

As the consequence of the Japanese-Soviet conflict during the Second World War, 600,000 Japanese military personnel were sent to Siberia, where approximately ten per cent of them died. The USSR unilaterally incorporated the Northern Territories in February 1946, and forcefully evacuated approximately 17,000 Japanese from the islands. The Japanese government held that the Northern Territories, unlike the different case of the Senkaku Islands, were a territorial issue between Japan and the USSR.

On October 19, 1956, a "Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration" mentioned in its

Article 9: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Japan agree to continue, after the restoration of normal diplomatic relations between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Japan, negotiations for the conclusion of a Peace Treaty. In this connexion, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, desiring to meet the wishes of Japan and taking into consideration the interests of the Japanese State, agrees to transfer to Japan the Habomai Islands and the island of Shikotan, the actual transfer of these islands

to Japan to take place after the conclusion of a Peace Treaty between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Japan (United Nations 1957, 116).

Since then, however, due to the Northern Territories' issue no Peace Treaty has been signed with Russia. No USSR leader had visited Japan until Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022) in 1991, due more to political tensions caused by territorial issues than to ideological confrontation.

The Japanese government continued at all times to pick the Northern Territories' issue as its priority for discussion. This was a typical case of the inductive diplomatic approach of the Japanese government in achieving the objective of signing a peace treaty through repeated deliberations.

Ivan Kovalenko (1919–2005), the Director of the Japan Section, International Affairs Division of the Communist Party of the USSR, feared that the existing power balance between the US, USSR, China, and Japan would shift, leaving the USSR isolated as a result of Richard Nixon's (1913–1994) visit to China in 1972, and the ensuing normalization of China–Japan relations (Editing Committee of “In the Footsteps of Daisaku Ikeda” 2007, 138). He regarded Ikeda with alarm for having had a hand in achieving the normalization, and so he began investigating the Soka Gakkai.

Kovalenko had originally enrolled in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the Far Eastern Federal University of Vladivostok to study Japan. After graduation he served in the military and was involved in the psychological operations in the battle of Khalkhin Gol, in 1939. Following the Second World War, he served as the editor-in-chief of *Nippon Shimbun* (Japanese Newspaper) for the Japanese prisoners interned in Siberia. He was responsible for manipulating the Japanese prisoners to turn pro-Soviet and served as the main agent responsible for Soviet policy regarding Japan.

Kovalenko suspected Ikeda of being pro-China and against the USSR (Editing Committee of “In the Footsteps of Daisaku Ikeda” 2007, 139). Ikeda had called for diplomatic normalization between Japan and China in 1968 and had strongly promoted the friendship between the two countries. However, Ikeda did not support the propaganda of China or any other country, including the USSR. So, trying to categorize Ikeda as either pro-China or pro-USSR was not appropriate. One can say that he became a “close friend” or an “expert” of each country he visited. In his private diplomacy, he embraced dialogue with all sorts of people and political leaders “to awaken their Buddha natures.” Soka Gakkai explains that

all individuals have Buddha natures and

The title “Buddha” means “awakened one” and refers to the state of life—rich with wisdom, compassion, courage, and confidence—of a fully awakened individual (SGI-USA Study Department 2021).

In Nichiren Buddhism, becoming a Buddha is a philosophical endeavor. It is not simply joining a Buddhist school or becoming a monk. *Kosen-rufu*, “the process of spreading the principles of Nichiren Buddhism throughout society for the lasting peace and happiness of all people” (Tay 2022), was described by Ikeda as

an unceasing struggle against the negative forces that prevent humanity from achieving peace and happiness. By bravely responding to and triumphing over the challenges they present, we can elevate the life state of humankind (Ikeda 2022).

Ikeda also expected Soka Gakkai’s young members to play the role of a bridge connecting countries at the levels of promoting peace, culture, and education, but did not instruct them to support the governments’ policies in the same countries. Also, Ikeda and Soka Gakkai never cooperated with riots or violent movements against governments. In the 1960s in Japan, many college students, who were strongly influenced by the anti-Vietnam-War movement, China’s Cultural Revolution, and the May 1968 events in France, joined violent campaigns and activities on campuses against their universities and the Japanese government. Some of Soka Gakkai’s Student Division members, who were attending colleges in Japan, were also influenced by these campaigns, but Ikeda strongly disagreed with their attitude and condemned violent actions in any case. He shared his idea of reforming the society peacefully with the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism.

There is no need to conceive of a revolution based solely on such historical examples as the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution. It is superficial to think that a new society can be built following the same methods of past revolutions, and it is simply unrealistic to imagine that society can be reformed by waving sticks or using violence of any form. The image of a revolutionary as someone who employs such tactics is completely antiquated. And, personally, I do not wish to see a single young person do harm!... I think that the most important issue raised by the student-led All Campus Joint Struggle Committees is how to surmount the egoism of those in power, as well as that in our own lives. In other words, they are searching for a sure way to triumph over the devilish nature inherent in power and human life (Ikeda 2007, 18–9).

In December 1973, under Soviet guidance, A.L. Jarocinski, a member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and Maksim Pavlovič Kim (1908–1996), a

historian and an associate member of the same Academy, visited Ikeda at Soka University, which he had established in Tokyo in 1971. This was a visit made to a Japanese educational organization by members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences at a time when Japanese-Soviet political exchanges were difficult.

Ikeda was prepared for their visit and asked them to convey the following requests to Alexei Kosygin (1904–1980), the USSR's Prime Minister: “the establishment of a United Nations for Education,” “establishment of a cultural exchange association between Japanese and Soviet students,” “establishment of an Oriental Philosophy Faculty in Moscow State University,” an “Academic Exchange Agreement with Soka University,” “establishment of a food agency of the United Nations (for the resolution of food issues),” and the “freezing of nuclear tests.” Jarocinski replied that these were wonderful suggestions but since they were not experts, earnestly asked Ikeda to visit Moscow. This was the first invitation Ikeda received from the USSR (Editing Committee of “In the Footsteps of Daisaku Ikeda” 2007, 140).

On September 8, 1974, at the invitation of Moscow State University, Ikeda set foot for the first time in the USSR. The date, September 8, was the day when Ikeda's Soka Gakkai mentor, Josei Toda (1900–1958), issued the “Declaration Calling for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons” in 1957. It is clear that Ikeda visited the USSR with the “Declaration” in mind and with the determination to achieve nuclear weapon abolition. Coincidentally, Ikeda's “Recommendation on Normalization of Japan-China Relations” made in 1968 was on that very date, September 8.

At the time of Ikeda's visit to the USSR there was no doubt that the Academy of Sciences and Moscow State University were following the directions of the Soviet government and the Communist Party. The USSR embassies in various countries served as the bases for their intelligence. It is assumed the same for China at the time. In fact, Ikeda's invitation came from the Moscow State University after some unsuccessful decision-making discussions between the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR as to which institution should host the visitor (Editing Committee of “In the Footsteps of Daisaku Ikeda” 2007, 143).

Kovalenko had much to do with the decision. This can be confirmed from his following report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

1. Mr. Ikeda is a leader of Japan's largest 10 million-member Buddhist organization.
2. The Soka Gakkai has a large mass media.
3. We cannot be disinterested in knowing how the Soka Gakkai evaluates the USSR foreign policy.
4. Mr. Ikeda's views are in concert with us as regards the co-existence of the US and USSR (Editing Committee of "In the Footsteps of Daisaku Ikeda" 2007, 144).

The reference made in item 2 to "a large mass media" was to the Soka Gakkai's newspaper, *Seikyo Shimbun*, which has a nominal subscription of 5.5 million. For these reasons, Kovalenko preferred that the invitation be issued from Moscow State University to dilute any political appearance (Editing Committee of "In the Footsteps of Daisaku Ikeda" 2007, 144). Kovalenko also arranged Ikeda's meeting with Kosygin. What he had in mind was that a top-level meeting between Kosygin and Ikeda would foreclose any criticism by members of the Communist Party Central Committee, as was usually the case. In 1994, Kovalenko recalled the situation in 1974:

It was learned that at first the leaders of the Soviet Communist Party did not welcome the visit of President Ikeda of the Soka Gakkai to the Soviet Union. This was because the leadership did not have the correct information concerning the Soka Gakkai. The Party's Central Committee had a long discussion concerning the Soka Gakkai and President Ikeda. There were arguments particularly at the Party's international department. Some maintained that no appropriate information was available about the character of Soka Gakkai and President Ikeda. The invitation could wait until we did further studies. The majority was of the opinion that the invitation should wait until after studies had been made about the objectives of the Soka Gakkai, the personality of President Ikeda as well as their social orientations. I was the only member of the International Department who did not go along with the opinion of the majority. I constantly insisted that President Ikeda must visit the Soviet Union and maintained that he should have top-level meetings and receive a national welcome. In the end my opinion won, and the Party bureaucrats were defeated. A special decision was made that he would have a national welcome. It was also decided that the Ikeda-Kosygin meeting should take place at the Kremlin Palace. However, it was decided that the invitation would be issued not from the Party's central authorities, but from the Moscow State University after weighing up another candidate, the Federation of Foreign Cultural Exchange Organizations. At the meeting with Premier Kosygin, President Ikeda who was the chief of the visiting delegation, shared his thoughts on politics and philosophy as well as the activities of Soka Gakkai that had a membership in excess of ten million. Kosygin was surprised at this and lost no time in stating that contacts between Soka Gakkai and the Soviet social organizations could

build productive and cooperative relations that could contribute to meaningful Soviet-Japan relations (Kovalenko 1994, 20–1).

During his ten-day stay in the USSR, Ikeda held talks with a number of top leaders in education, culture and politics, including the President of Moscow State University, the Minister in charge of Middle and High School Education (Minister for Secondary Education), the First Deputy Minister of Culture, the Chairman of the USSR Supreme National Conference, the Deputy Governor of the Academy of Sciences, the First Mayor of Moscow, the Chairman of the USSR Federation of Foreign Cultural Exchange Organizations, the Mayor of Leningrad, the Deputy President of Leningrad University, and the President of the Theologian Academy. He also met the novelist Mikhail Sholokhov (1905–1984), the winner of the 1965 Nobel Prize in Literature. Ikeda's central topics were nuclear disarmament and the need to avoid a confrontation between the USSR and China. Kosygin gave Ikeda his word that he was not thinking of isolating China:

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

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

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

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

Ikeda sent the Japanese media his recollections of their dialogue, including Kosygin's words on nuclear weapon abolition, on which he spent most of the time.

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

Kovalenko explained that Kosygin instructed him to maintain close relations with Ikeda after the dialogue (Kovalenko 1996, 334). In 1979, Ikeda published an

article in the Japanese media entitled “A Cultivated Man, Prime Minister Kosygin,” concerning the talks he had with the Soviet premier in 1974 and 1975:

The last two meetings I had with Prime Minister Kosygin exceeded two hours and during that time he was consistent in his conviction regarding nuclear disarmament. In fact, it was stronger during our second meeting. I recall Kosygin saying with passion, “There are enough nuclear arms to destroy the whole world. There is no guarantee that something horrible will not happen with someone like [Adolf] Hitler [1889–1945] appearing. Sooner or later, there is no doubt that humankind will decide on nuclear disarmament” (Ikeda 1979).

Vladimir Tropin, who was then the Vice President of Moscow State University, wrote in his book, written in Japanese, *In Search of a Spiritual Silk Road*, referring to Ikeda’s written report to Japanese media, that

Kosygin was a realist politician who clearly recognized that nuclear deterrence would not totally save the world from nuclear destruction (Tropin 2010, 64–5).

Ikeda visited Beijing in December 1974, three months after his visit to the USSR, and informed Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) and Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) about what Kosygin had told him (Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University 2002). It could be surmised that this was important information for the Chinese at a time of aggravated Chinese-Soviet relations.

A month later, in December 1974, Ikeda met with Henry Kissinger (1923–2023) at the Office of the Secretary at the US Department of State in Washington. While what they discussed was not made public, it can be assumed that Ikeda told Kissinger about his visits to China and the USSR as well as his cherished opinions regarding nuclear disarmament and peace. These would have been valuable information to the US regarding the situation concerning China and the USSR. As for the Japanese government, without Ikeda’s initiative Japan would have been left behind diplomatically when the US made a sudden visit to China, bypassing Japan. Kissinger entrusted Ikeda with an apology to the Japanese government for his discourtesy due to the need (of the US Administration) to keep the visit a diplomatic secret (Sato 2007, 204–9). After his return to Japan, Ikeda communicated the message to Eisaku Sato (1901–1975), the then Prime Minister (1964–72). Sato expressed his relief saying that those words had saved the honor of the Japanese government (Sato 2007, 209). The significance of Ikeda’s private diplomacy during 1974 and 1975 was that it involved bringing together four countries, the US, the USSR, China, and Japan.

Ikeda visited the USSR again in 1975 to have his second dialogue with Kosygin. He went again in 1981 to talk with Chairman of the Council of Ministers (1980–85) Nikolai Tikhonov (1905–1997), in 1987 for a second talk with Tikhonov, and on 27 July 1990 for a dialogue with Mikhail Gorbachev (Tropin 2010, 79–80). During his meeting in 1981 with Tikhonov, Ikeda proposed a summit between the US, China, Japan, and the USSR. Ikeda believed that humankind wished for the earliest possible US-USSR summit meeting to take place not in Washington or Moscow but in a neutral third place such as Switzerland. However, at that time no summit leader was willing to go along with his views (Tropin 2010, 89–94).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was globally criticized and the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games that took place a year before Ikeda's meeting with Tikhonov were boycotted by nearly fifty countries including the US, Japan, and China. While the whole world vehemently criticized the USSR, Ikeda visited the country with two hundred Soka Gakkai members, Soka University staff and students in 1981 for cultural exchanges. His purpose was to make both Japanese and Russian citizens come to get to know each other more. For example, an exhibition of Japanese dolls (traditional crafts) was held to introduce Japanese culture and arts (Sato 2007; Tropin 2010). Ikeda must have believed that at times when political tension is at the highest it was important to bring people together through cultural exchange, and for the leaders to talk to each other. In his first meeting with Kosygin in 1974, Ikeda called for mutual understanding between Japan and the USSR at the grass-root level through cultural exchanges. He believed that the mutual mistrust would only escalate into increasing tension, which finally would lead to warfare.

The February 1990's version of *Our Northern Territories*, published by the Japanese MOFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)'s Ministerial Secretariat of Public Relations for domestic purposes, listed Soka Gakkai President Ikeda's visits to the USSR in 1974 and 1975 twice in its chronological table of Japan-Soviet Relations following the normalization of relations (MOFA 1990, 102–5). This shows that the MOFA too had to recognize the importance of Ikeda's visit to the USSR. However, the references to Ikeda's visits to the USSR were deleted from the 2013 version of the same *Our Northern Territories* (MOFA 2013, 60). Further, there was no description of exchanges conducted by other civil society organizations with the USSR or Russia. This is proof that the government does

not recognize the significance of civilian diplomacy due to its strong belief that negotiation between states remains the sole prerogative of state diplomacy.

The Japanese government remained persistent in its attitude to the Northern Territories issue, so that fierce exchanges continued between Japan and the USSR. The exchanges that took place in 1970 between Haruki Mori (1911–1988), the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, and A.P. Okonishnikov, the USSR Chargé d’Affairs ad interim to Japan, spells out clearly the assertions of both parties regarding the Northern Territories issue. Comparing these views it was clear that there was a marked difference on the Northern Territories issue between the Japanese and Soviet governments. The Japanese government gave this issue the greatest priority in bilateral relations and as the most important issue, it assumed no compromise in diplomatic negotiations. Without the resolution of this issue, it would not negotiate regarding a peace treaty. The Soviet government on the other hand regarded the Return of the Northern Territories Campaign conducted by the Japanese government and political publicity as hostile activities against the USSR, and not a territorial issue. It appears it could not understand why “an individual issue” should be an obstacle to having negotiations on the most important inter-states issue such as concluding a peace treaty (MOFA 1990).

The rigidity between the two camps gradually began to loosen as Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the Soviet leadership in 1985. His “New Thinking” in diplomacy and his powerful support for nuclear disarmament opened a dialogue with the Western countries. They also brought about a great change in the situation of Northeast Asia. In his inauguration speech as the Soviet Communist Party Secretary General on March 11, 1985, he clearly stated his intention of improving the relations between China and the USSR. He met with Li Peng (1928–2019), the Vice Prime Minister of China (1983–87) in Moscow and communicated the intention of the Soviet government to seek improvement in Chinese-Soviet relations (Nakazawa 2004, 190–91).

In May 1989, Gorbachev visited China, providing an opportunity for improving Chinese-Soviet relations. Also, on 30 September 1990 at lightning speed he established relations with the Republic of Korea, which was politically in the Western camp. Gorbachev did not visit Seoul, however.

With regard to nuclear disarmament, Gorbachev released on January 25, 1986, a public statement as Soviet Secretary General stating that he would aim

for the total abolition of nuclear weapons by the 21st century (Shultz 1986). He stated that the 20th century had presented humankind with the gift of nuclear energy, but this enormous benefit could well become a means of destruction, and asked the West whether the antithesis can be resolved rationally. Specifically, he posited that the development of space weapons would be an extremely dangerous act. For these reasons he believed it was more rational to start by abolishing nuclear weapons (Nakazawa 2004, 205–6).

Since Gorbachev repeatedly used the term “rationally” in his declaration, it can be interpreted that he was espousing nuclear weapon abolition from a moral point of view. At that time, however, countries in the Western camp, including the Japanese government, merely registered this declaration as propaganda (Nakazawa 2004, 205). By contrast, on January 27 of the same year Ikeda sent an article to the Novosti Press Agency in support of Gorbachev’s statement and included his wishes. Ikeda expressed his opposition to the militarization of space and stated that dependence on “faith in deterrence” rooted in mutual distrust could only result in an arms race contrary to advancing negotiation for disarmament, and that the US-Soviet Summit meeting should work to dispel mutual distrust (Nakazawa 2004, 207). The Novosti Press Agency was established in 1941 as the Soviet Information Bureau and reorganized in 1961 as a national press agency. Since it could be considered the substantial information bureau for the Soviet government, one can assume that Ikeda’s message had surely reached the Soviet leadership.

The US-Soviet summit meeting between Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) in 1986 in Reykjavik, Iceland, and the signing of the 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty are both famous events. In the month following the Reykjavik Summit, Gorbachev visited India on November 27, 1987, and with Rajiv Gandhi (1944–1991), the Prime Minister of India (1984–89), jointly signed the “Delhi Declaration on the Principles of a Nuclear Weapons Free and Non-Violent World” (Kundu 2011). The Declaration established ten items, including: making peaceful co-existence the universal norm of international relations, recognizing human life as the highest value, making non-violence the foundation of activities of human community, and uniting under the common principles of disarmament and development regardless of religion and race. With regard to nuclear disarmament, the need was recognized for establishing agreements on six items, including: total nuclear abolition by the end

of the 20th century, suspension of deploying nuclear weapons in space, total prohibition of nuclear tests, prohibition of development and manufacture of new weapon of mass destructions, prohibition of the use and stockpiling of chemical weapons, and reducing the levels of conventional weapons and military forces.

The nuclear weapon abolition referred to in the Declaration reflects the Mahatma Gandhi's (1879–1947) spirit of non-violence, and as such it shows Gorbachev's opening to a sense of morality and spirituality in addition to his merely political approach to the subject. This ideology belongs neither to Marxism nor Leninism; it was Gorbachev's manifestation of his personal feelings, beyond political bargaining on nuclear weapon reduction aimed at relaxation of Cold War tension.

In his Vladivostok speech on July 28, 1986, Gorbachev spoke in favor of Japan's Three Non-Nuclear Principles and the Peace Constitution. However, he pointed out that Japan, a country that should show leadership in advancing nuclear disarmament and peace, was not doing so because it was under the US military and nuclear umbrella. His declaration read as an indirect comment aimed at the US, but it could also be understood to voice his regret that Japan as the only country that was bombed with nuclear weapons had an important mission to bring about world peace but was not able to perform it:

We support a change to having better relations with Japan as it has become a country with first class significance. The country that was the first victim of the US nuclear weapons has in a short period made a great advance in the fields of industry, trade, education, science, and technology to receive our admiration. The enviable success that Japan enjoys is not due merely to the concentration, discipline, and energy of the people of Japan but to the Three Non-Nuclear Principles on which its foreign policy is publicly built. However, attention must be paid to the recent reality that these principles along with the Peace article of the Japanese Constitution are increasingly and markedly ignored... Since the latter half of the 1970s, the US has enlarged its military power in the Pacific and under the pressure of the US, three military states of Washington, Tokyo and Seoul are in the process of being formed... Of the three nuclear weapons states of this region, two states, China and the Soviet Union have the obligation of non-first use of nuclear weapons; however, the US deploys nuclear weapons delivery systems and nuclear warheads on the Korean peninsula, which is one of the regions' critical areas, and has deployed on Japanese territory nuclear weapons delivery vehicles (MOFA 1987, 403–4).

Starting on 25 May 1987 the Soka Gakkai produced an anti-nuclear-weapon exhibition, "Nuclear Arms: Threat to Our World," which took place at Moscow City Allied Artists Hall on Kuznetsky Most Street in the heart of Moscow

(Tobisawa 2018), under the co-sponsorship of the UN Disarmament Bureau, the UN Public Relations Bureau, the Soviet Peace Protection Committee, and Soka Gakkai. Also, supporting organizations included the Soviet Ministry of High and Middle Special Education, the Soviet Foreign Friendship Cultural Exchange Association, the Soviet Women's Committee, the Soviet National Youth Committee, Hiroshima City, and Nagasaki City. 70,000 people visited the exhibition. According to the Soka Gakkai Office of International Affairs, a great deal of complex effort went into the preparation of the exhibition. Unfortunately, no materials survive from which to learn of the efforts concerned. There was a statement from the First Deputy Chairman of the Soviet Supreme Council, Pyotr Demichev (1917–2010), who was present at the opening of the exhibition: “This is totally in line with our present aim of nuclear abolition.” He implied that the Soviet government was aware that the exhibition was in line with Gorbachev's policy of nuclear abolition (Tobisawa 2018).

According to the Soka Gakkai Office of International Affairs, the Soviet government had consistently said, “We do not wish war. Ours is a country that aims for peace,” and that it was forced to possess nuclear weapons because the US did. The Soviet representatives whom Ikeda met all without exception expressed the same thoughts. On the other hand, it may be said that cooperating in the opening of the anti-nuclear exhibition provided the Soviet government with a political opportunity to be able to profess that it was a peaceful country. On this question, the Soka Gakkai had a different view recognizing, namely, that it was generally accepted at the time in the world of international politics that the USSR was for disarmament and worked in close cooperation with Prvoslav Davinić, a Yugoslavian national, who was the head of the World Disarmament Campaign Office of the UN Disarmament Bureau. Davinić was involved as well in the opening of the Moscow anti-nuclear exhibition.

Compared with the same exhibition in China, the difference was that in Moscow the UN Disarmament Bureau was listed among the co-sponsoring organizations. Even if this proved to be a case of sheer political utility, according to the Soka Gakkai Office of International Affairs, Ikeda had no qualms about being used. He intended to do his best above and beyond the expectation of the Soviets and inspire them by showing the real current of peace. In his opening speech at the exhibition, he challenged the audience to agree that we all have an anti-nuclear obligation.

Japan is the one and only country on which nuclear bombs were dropped. I personally believe that as a Japanese person, a pacifist, and as a Buddhist I have the obligation, the mission, responsibility, and the right to share throughout the world our harrowing and cruel experiences (*Seikyo Shimbun* 1987a).

The exhibition displayed for the first time in the USSR valuable material about the atomic weapons. A panel at the exhibition explained in detail the causes and effects of a nuclear war, including epidemic diseases, leukemia, and starvation (*Seikyo Shimbun* 1987a). No content of the exhibition was changed because it was displayed in the USSR. On the contrary, new exhibits were added including an explanation on the assumed radiation exposure if and when a nuclear bomb would be dropped on Moscow, the history of the US-USSR disarmament negotiations, and expected climatic changes of the planet engulfed in a “nuclear winter.” There was even a panel encouraging the peaceful use of military budgets (*Seikyo Shimbun* 1987a).

The initiator of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), Bernard Lown (1921–2021), was also a welcome guest and in his meeting with Ikeda shared his thoughts after viewing the exhibition, stating that citizens’ diplomacy or something of that kind was needed to initiate a movement for nuclear abolition.

You know, the problem is that the facts (of atomic bombings and devastation caused) are forgotten by all except the Japanese people... in that sense, it is of great significance that the exhibition has been shown around the world. One can never overemphasize the importance of educating humankind. In fact, *TIME* (magazine) referring to the dialogue between President Ikeda and Professor Arnold J. Toynbee [1889–1975] wrote, “The passion of the Soka Gakkai Honorary President has created an anti-war united force of people to people.” I believe this is really an important point. In the end, unless we engage people there will be no political change. The IPPNW too aims at reaching out to make people participate. The key is how we will change their mindsets. It is not enough for doctors to give their patients medicine to restore their health. The role of doctors is to help patients change their way of life. Doctors must help patients understand what will really help them. In that sense, unless we have hundreds of people embark on a new diplomacy, we will not be able to really resolve global issues (*Seikyo Shimbun* 1987a [message of Bernard Lown to the exhibition]).

At the time Gorbachev was out of the country, visiting Romania. Ikeda attended the opening ceremony of his anti-nuclear-weapon exhibition and on the following day, 26 May 1987, met Nikolai Ryzhkov (1929–2024), Soviet Prime Minister (1985–91) at the Kremlin for one hour and twenty minutes (*Seikyo Shimbun*

1987b). Ryzhkov gave Ikeda Gorbachev's message welcoming him to the USSR and praised Soka Gakkai's peace activities. The rest of the time was spent with Ikeda raising six questions and Ryzhkov answering them. Those were nuclear disarmament and peace, Japanese-Soviet relations and the role of Japan in the Asia and Pacific region, the prospects of the USSR-US summit meeting, participation at the Seoul Olympic Games, the agenda of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee General Meeting in June of that year (1987), and expectations for the youth of the next generation. Valentina Tereshkova, the Chair of the Soviet Foreign Friendship Cultural Exchange Association, and Ivan Kovalenko, now Head of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, were also at the meeting.

From Ryzhkov's statements that were made public, one senses a somewhat cautious attitude towards Soka Gakkai from the position of a Communist state that denies religion, but one can feel a sense of trust for allowing the anti-nuclear exhibition to take place.

This time, Soka Gakkai Honorary President Ikeda visited the Soviet Union with a noble mission, the exhibition "Threat of Nuclear Weapons to Our World"... The significance of this event is not limited to the exhibition itself, but in bringing the message against nuclear weapons. It is most important and most necessary. The exhibition theme and that it is taking place is most timely and is received with great welcome, and we are satisfied... To be honest, it is not difficult to understand that we do not fully identify with the philosophy of Soka Gakkai. This is because we are unbelievers. However, in our relations as humans and also with regard to international activities, there are great meanings in studying the thinking and philosophy of the Soka Gakkai. I have not read all the Soka Gakkai Honorary President Ikeda's Annual Peace Proposals but that is what I feel. I read his words in this book (collection of Annual Peace Proposals) that he wishes "to work to achieve peace for all humankind." While it is difficult to evaluate his standing with this single sentence, I believe it speaks of the essence of the activities of Soka Gakkai and of its President.

[On disarmament issues:] Today, simply the number of missiles should not affect humankind. It's because humankind can be destroyed even with one tenth or one hundredth of the missiles we already have. What is truly needed now, is a new approach and philosophy for our humankind to survive. What we need is a new approach to the relations between states. This is the very thinking that lies at the basis of the comprehensive disarmament proposal made by Secretary General Gorbachev since last year. It was also the basis of his statement at the International Forum that took place in Moscow early this year. We must consider the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, give thought to the positions of the victimized Japanese people, and exert efforts so that this terrible disaster will not be repeated. As the only atom-bombed country, Japan must

become a country that will sound a huge warning to all humankind. If nuclear war takes place today, the disastrous scene will be a thousand times that of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (*Seikyo Shimbun* 1987b).

These statements of Ryzhkov can be said to be consistent with Gorbachev's diplomatic philosophy, "New Thinking." With regard to Japanese-Soviet relations, he recognized the important role and presence of Japan in the Asia-Pacific region and emphasized that the USSR should build good neighborly relations, including economic cooperation, with its geographic neighbor Japan. He did not, however, fail to put in his speech conditions with regard to Japan-US relations and the Northern Territories issue.

Soviet-Japan relations including economic issues, while not satisfactory at present, are important from the perspective of all mankind. Japan could not be disinterested in the nature of its neighboring countries. For this reason, we must build the basis for co-existence. We have no intention of giving a warning as regards Japan-US relations. I do not believe the Japan-US linkage necessarily hinders normalization of the Soviet-Japanese relations. Recently, there are intensified Japan-US economic relations; what it teaches us is that a propensity to have special relations with a single country is not wise in international relations. I believe that Japan needs comprehensive friendly relations. As regards Soviet-Japanese relations, there are issues regarding Shibomai, Hakotan, Kunashiri, and Etorofu (the Northern Territories issue). What is important there is whether there is a political will to see progress in Soviet-Japanese relations (*Seikyo Shimbun* 1987b).

In December 1987, immediately following the signing of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Gorbachev government sent a special envoy, Anatoly L. Adamishin, the Soviet Foreign Minister, to Japan to provide an ex post facto explanation. Adamishin presented the explanation to the Japanese government, and he also visited Ikeda to explain the contents of the Treaty (Nakazawa 2004, 218). This would indicate that the Gorbachev government considered Ikeda at least as important as the Japanese government with respect to nuclear policy.

The Japanese government failed to grasp the overall situation following the easing of East-West tensions by continuing to set their priority on the single issue of the Northern Territories. As the Soviet-Western-nations relations improved, the Japanese government made it its top foreign policy priority to realize the historic first ever visit to Japan of the Soviet leader and to open a way for drastic improvement of bilateral relations towards normalization (MOFA 1991).

With that in mind, the Japanese government held seven meetings between the

Japanese and Soviet foreign ministers after the January 1986 visit to Japan of Eduard Shevardnadze (1928–2014), the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR (1985–90). Also, starting with Shevardnadze’s second visit to Japan in 1988, there were seven meetings of the Peace Treaty working group. In May 1989, the Japanese government proposed, while working on the priority issue of a peace treaty that included the “territorial issues,” to expand overall Japanese-Soviet relations including other areas, economic assistance in particular. Japan welcomed an economic mission from the USSR, which was suffering from a fiscal crisis at the time, shared Japan’s know-how in economic development and, as part of the humanitarian assistance, provided 2.6-billion-yen worth of medical devices to the region suffering from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster and a 1 billion yen worth grant in food and medical goods as well as 100 million dollars credit in food for the purposes of humanitarian assistance (MOFA 1991). It was clear that they were provided with the objective of gaining an immediate return of the Northern Territories. The Soviet government, suffering from a fiscal crisis, naturally accepted the support but the road map concerning the progress of negotiations of a peace treaty and resolution of the Northern Territories issue remained obscure.

In July 1990, the Japanese government dispatched to the USSR Yoshio Sakurauchi (1912–2003), the Speaker of the House of Representatives of Japan, to finalize the agreement on Gorbachev’s visit to Japan. On July 25, Sakurauchi and the Japanese government mission met Gorbachev, but since the visiting group demanded an immediate return of the Northern Territories from the start, Gorbachev answered angrily, “We can call them our Southern Territories,” and cut short the meeting (Sato 2010, 118). The meeting lasted seven minutes. Masaru Sato, former chief analyst of the Intelligence and Analysis Service of the MOFA, reckoned the seven-minute meeting was reduced to about three and half minutes because of the need for interpretation, which meant a mere one minute and forty-five seconds per person (Sato 2007, 206).

Two days later, on July 27, 1990, Gorbachev held talks with Ikeda. The talks lasted for one hour and thirty minutes (Ikeda 2002, 36). It was customary in those days for the Soviet government to decide prior to meeting with its President, how much time would be allowed, whether ten, fifteen, or thirty minutes, and communicate this to prospective visitors (Ikeda 2002, 36). From the beginning, the time allocated was one hour and thirty minutes. In the talks,

Gorbachev replied to Ikeda's request for his visit to Japan: "Sometime around cherry blossoms the next year." In other words, Gorbachev told Ikeda that he would visit Japan in the spring of 1991. It is well known that indeed the visit was made in April 1991. On July 28, the day after the event, the Japanese media, including the main newspapers, reported on the first page the meeting between Ikeda and Gorbachev and the Soviet leader's intention to visit Japan.

Sato explained the meaning of the talks held between Ikeda and Gorbachev. According to him, the Soviet government was initially prepared to announce Gorbachev's visit to Japan during the talks with Sakurauchi, but that was changed to the talks with Ikeda. Ikeda referred to the conversation in his own notes:

I did some homework for the talks. This is because the situation was very fluid, whether or not the President's visit to Japan would be realized. Two days before my visit, negotiations with the Japanese Parliamentary delegation were not successful and the question of his visit to Japan had been returned to a blank sheet... I said, "We want you to come with your lady Raisa during the most beautiful season, in spring when cherry blossoms are out or in autumn when our maples are in full color." When I told him that we greatly awaited his visit, the President said: "Up to now there were just too many stereotyped dialogues. If we start to work in collaboration, things will be resolved eventually. It will do no good to continue to refer to 'preconditions' or 'final warnings.'" I said to him, "I believe now is the chance for you to visit Japan." He expressed himself definitely and said: "I will definitely realize my visit to Japan. It is not normal not to have dialogue with Japan. If possible, I would like to visit Japan in the spring." In this way, the historical visit to Japan by the highest leader of the Soviet Union became a reality (Ikeda 2002, 48-9).

According to Sato, there was no overstatement in the memorandum. This was the moment when the Japanese government's Soviet diplomacy depended on Ikeda (Sato 2010, 118-19). He went on to say that Ikeda, who did not refer to the Northern Territories issue, was the best contact person as far as the Soviet government was concerned (Sato 2010, 119). In fact, the MOFA was afraid that a possible breakdown of Sakurauchi's talks with Gorbachev, with the resultant failure of the Soviet leader's visit to Japan, would lead to a collapse of bilateral relations. It urgently asked Ikeda to request Gorbachev to visit Japan in their meeting (Sato 2007, 206). Ikeda accepted the request saying that he "would act as a man of culture because that is what he is." Sato took note of Ikeda's comments that he would act as a man of culture and said that Ikeda was able to contribute to Japan's national interest because in this capacity he kept a certain distance from politics (Sato 2007, 206). Sato commented that it was true that with threats from terrorism and conflicts with Communist countries it was

difficult to find compromises among governments, but cultural and educational exchanges could provide answers. The following are his thoughts on the subject.

President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai have steadily promoted international exchanges in many ways including through the Soka Universities... the (Japanese) diplomats have not been able to make good use of the networks created by President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai. Even today the diplomats fail to read signals sent from abroad... Soka Gakkai enjoys a solid presence in Japan as a religious, social, and cultural organization with a network encompassing the elites and the grassroots. No diplomacy can ignore these facts (Sato 2007, 205).

Ikeda and Gorbachev's meeting is evidence of how citizens' multiple and steady cultural exchanges at the grassroots level can provide the key to relaxing tension between states. It is not a sufficient explanation for Sato to point out that the Soviet government informed Ikeda of Gorbachev's visit to Japan because the Soka Gakkai leader did not refer to the Northern Territories issue. The meeting was made possible due to educational and cultural factors. Present at the meeting were Gorbachev's government staff and advisors including Chingiz Aitmatov (1928–2008), a writer and member of the Soviet Presidential Conference (Advisory Board), Anatoly A. Logunov (1926–2015), President of Moscow State University, Gennady Yagozin, Chairman of the Soviet State Education Council, Anatoly Chernyaev (1921–2017), Principal Foreign Policy Advisor to President Gorbachev, Karen Brutents (1924–2017), the First Deputy Chief of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR, and a journalist called Dunaev, member of the editorial committee of the Novosti Press Agency (Nakazawa 2004, 247). They were supporters of the "New Thinking" and perestroika and the central brains of Gorbachev's government.

Ikeda published with Logunov their dialogue entitled *The Third Rainbow Bridge* in 1987 in Japanese. It was translated and published in Russian in 1998, and in Chinese in 1990. The dialogue covered the authors sharing their common thoughts on peace and education coming from different regimes and religious views. At the time he met and talked with Gorbachev, Ikeda was preparing for the joint publication of a Dialogue with Aitmatov, *Ode to the Grand Spirit*. The book was published in Japanese in 1991, in German in 1992 and in Russian in 1994. The dialogue covered poetry and literature. Ikeda also had a dialogue with Yagozin when he was the Minister in charge of Soviet High and Middle School Education. Ikeda was a long-standing friend of Dunaev since his first visit to the

USSR in 1975 (Ikeda 2002, 40–1).

Gorbachev had graduated from Moscow State University from which Ikeda received an Honorary Doctorate in 1975, when Logunov was President of the University. Since Moscow State University and Soka University have academic agreements with an active exchange of students, Ikeda's meeting with Gorbachev was a friendly one, unlike a formal courtesy call. It is reasonable to suggest that the degree of trusting relations was different from the outset between private diplomacy based on cultural and educational exchange, which Ikeda had nurtured over fifteen years, and government diplomacy. Also, the Soviet side regarded Ikeda not as a political agent but as a man of culture from the beginning. In 2014, in his "Message for the 40th Anniversary of Ikeda 's Visit to the USSR," Gorbachev called Ikeda "a philosopher who has a keen intellect, a humanist, and a man of letters" (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2014).

After the Cold War, Gorbachev and Ikeda jointly published *Moral Lessons of the Twentieth Century* in Japanese in 1996 and in eleven languages including English in 2005, covering their thoughts on life and philosophy (Gorbachev and Ikeda 2005). Political diplomacy tends to end when issues are discussed and overcome. Cultural exchanges, however, continue at the citizens' level with further exchanges of personnel and information. Cultural relations are apt to continue behind the scenes even when political relations cease. In that sense, cultural relations could be said to be firmer than their political counterparts. In this case, Gorbachev's choice to communicate an important decision of the USSR to Ikeda rather than to a representative of the Japanese government underscored that cultural exchange can at times represent high politics. Gorbachev's April 1991 visit to Japan signified the end of the Cold War in Northeast Asia, as it was the first visit to the region by a supreme leader of the USSR.

A question can be asked today: what is the lesson of Ikeda's private diplomacy and Soka Gakkai's actions during the Cold War for the current Ukraine crisis? There are two key points: mitigating tensions by making dialogues with top-class political and social leaders of the concerned countries and promoting cultural and educational exchanges at the grassroots level. In fact, what civil society organizations, including religious organizations, can do is limited after countries have started wars and intensified battles. Meeting with political leaders directly is rather difficult as they may often lose their composure. However, civil society organizations or their individual members can still promote grassroots level

exchanges. One of the most important points is to avoid isolating citizens in their countries, and to anchor their minds to peaceful human exchanges. Especially in the case when political diplomacy and negotiations are deadlocked, such private diplomacy or activity are useful to maintain a dialogue with the concerned countries.

Conclusion

Nuclear weapons are one of the most spectacular inventions of science in human history. Although human beings created the worst weapons ever, which can blow all of them off the map in just a second, these weapons have now existed for nearly eighty years. With the Ukrainian crisis, the fear that nuclear weapons can actually be used has spread as never before since the end of Cold War.

The Japanese government has been taking initiatives for nuclear disarmament under Prime Minister Kishida, who was born in and has been elected in Hiroshima, since 2021. Japan has also greatly enhanced the consciousness of its allied powers, especially G7 member countries. The G7 Summit in Japan was held in Hiroshima in 2023 and all its leaders, including those of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, which are authorized to possess nuclear weapons under the NPT regime, visited the memorial site where the US atomic bomb was dropped in 1945. The Summit also reinforced a sense of unity in support of Ukraine by receiving its President Zelenskyy. Kishida's proposal for nuclear disarmament called "Hiroshima Action Plan," which he officially announced at the NPT Review Conference in August 2022, became a base of the G7 Hiroshima Summit's final statement. The Action Plan called for five points including enhancing transparency. However, both the Action Plan and the G7's final statement were based on the NPT concept and nuclear deterrence theory and did not mention the TPNW because the nuclear weapon states and their allied powers, including Japan, think the TPNW is not realistic.

The TPNW legally prohibits all countries from possessing nuclear weapons. The five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council (P5) are legally authorized to possess nuclear weapons under the NPT. The G7 Hiroshima Summit was one of the most successful conferences in the Summit's history. However, it can be said that the governments' diplomacy on nuclear disarmament is still less effective when it comes to mitigating tensions between concerned

countries and to stopping the escalation cycles of worldwide nuclear arms race in the post-Cold War era. On the other hand, anti-nuclear weapon civil society organizations and groups of *hibakusha*, whose aim is the total abolition of nuclear weapons, think that the nuclear deterrence theory rather raises the tensions and the fears that the weapons may be used.

Daisaku Ikeda of Soka Gakkai examined the nature of nuclear weapons in accordance with Nichiren Buddhism. In his dialogue with Anatoly Logunov, a Russian Scientist and the former Rector of Moscow State University, Ikeda firstly explained the merits and demerits of science and argued that science and religion are basically in a complementary relation. Ikeda underlined that wisdom, not knowledge only, is needed to use science rightly. He regarded nuclear weapons as the worst thing human beings ever invented when they use science wrongly. Under Buddhist teachings, he called the weapons as the symbol of “devilish nature of power” and a “robber of life.” Ikeda made statements to the G7 Hiroshima Summit and on the Ukrainian Crisis and suggested that the P5 adopt the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons and agree to a cease fire in Ukraine based on international humanitarian laws and human right laws. The aim of these proposals was to mitigate fears that the weapons may be used and to stop the catastrophic loss of human lives in the war. Ikeda also believed that the original ideas of the NPT and the TPNW are consistent rather than adversarial.

The Cold War ended without the use of nuclear weapons, despite the fact that the nuclear race reached the peak and there were several crises such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. In Northeast Asia, Ikeda greatly contributed to mitigate the tensions between Japan, China, United States, and the USSR with his private diplomacy based on Nichiren Buddhism. He and Soka Gakkai did not support any propaganda, but strongly promoted mutual understanding at the grassroots level through cultural and educational exchanges. Ikeda's private diplomacy dramatically improved the relations between Japan, China, the USSR, and the United States. The Japanese government finally depended on him to invite Gorbachev to Japan in 1991. In fact, the USSR's Supreme Leader's visit to Japan was the event that terminated the Cold War in Northeast Asia.

With his private diplomacy, Ikeda played a role of messenger of the national leaders' intentions and connected citizens through cultural and educational exchanges. His private diplomacy succeeded in persuading the leaders to avoid the most negative and worst choices, and in making citizens feel much closer both

in the East and the West. In accordance with Nichiren Buddhism, it can be said that Ikeda tried to awake the Buddha nature of each leader and individual. Becoming a “Buddha” originally means an awakened person who is rich with wisdom, compassion, courage, and confidence. It does not mean becoming a monk or a member of a Buddhist school. In that sense, Ikeda and Soka Gakkai have revived the original teachings of Buddhism, which are philosophical, universal, and for all people in the world even though they are not Buddhists and have tried to return religion to its proper position in society. This was one of the reasons why Ikeda called for restoring diplomatic channels with China and the USSR, which were Communist countries that prohibited or oppressed religion.

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The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT: Not to be confused with the Sunni-derivative Ahmadiyya community, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) is a Shia-derivative new religious movement that emerged in the chaotic post-Saddam-Hussein Iraq. In 1999, Ahmed al-Hassan, a civil engineer born in 1968 in Basra, claimed to have physically met the Twelfth Imam, who had entrusted him with a special mission. Severely persecuted, his followers divided into various rival groups. The one with the largest international following, despite persecution and discrimination in various countries, is the AROPL, which recognizes al-Hassan as the Yamani, the first Mahdi and the precursor of the Qaim/Riser from the Family of Muhammad, or the second Mahdi, an eschatological figure mentioned in Islamic prophecies as the one who rises and restores justice in the world during the end times. The AROPL identifies its leader, the Egyptian American Abdullah Hashem, as the Qaim/Riser. Headquartered in the United Kingdom, the AROPL is sometimes referred to as the “Black Banners,” in opposition to its main competitor among those who recognize the prophetic mission of al-Hassan, the “White Banners” whose headquarters are in Najaf, Iraq.

KEYWORDS: Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, AROPL, Ahmed al-Hassan. Abdullah Hashem, Black Banners.

Introduction

The date was May 24, 2023. At the usually quiet border of Kapikule between Türkiye and Bulgaria screams were heard, as the Turkish police was threatening and beating 104 women, men, and children standing in line to cross the Bulgarian frontier. They were not Turkish citizens. They had reached Türkiye

fleeing different Muslim majority countries where they had been persecuted for their religious beliefs. They hoped to find salvation in the European Union, of which Bulgaria is a member state (Fautré 2023).

Gunshots were fired. People protested police brutality, some showing their bloody faces after the beatings. Happily, some reporters, alerted by the refugees' co-religionists in the West, were able to get there. The story spread throughout the world, reaching the United Nations in New York (United Nations 2023).

Who were these desperate people? Why was their life in danger? It took time even for the international human rights organizations that received their appeals for help to understand. The fact was, they were part of a religious organization called the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light. All human rights organizations throughout the world were familiar with the Ahmadiyya community, which is heavily discriminated against and persecuted in Pakistan. The similarity in the names caused some confusion. In fact, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) has nothing to do with the Ahmadiyya community. The latter is a Sunni-derivative religious movement, while the AROPL is a Shia-derivative group. Their theology and history are different.

Nor can the AROPL be considered a sect of Islam. Scholars of religion distinguish between the “emic” point of view of the devotees and the “etic” (not to be confused with “ethic”) perspective of the outside scholarly observers (Harris 1983; Pike 1999). The emic point of view of the AROPL members is that they represent the true Islam, in fact the true universal religion. From the etic perspective of scholars, they are part of a new religion, as different from what is normally called Islam as Christianity is different from Judaism. There would be no Christianity without Judaism, yet Christianity is a different religion from Judaism. There would be no AROPL without Shia Islam, yet the AROPL is a different and autonomous religion.

In March 2024 we, together with other scholars from different countries, from Australia to Lithuania, were invited to a conference and field trip in the United Kingdom, where the AROPL has its universal headquarters, to listen to presentations by devotees and discuss with them. We then had a meeting with the leader of the religion. In this article, we present the history and main beliefs of the AROPL and try to explain why it has been persecuted, not only in regions with a Muslim majority but even in such an unlikely country as Sweden.

Ahmed al-Hassan's Movement

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light finds its roots in Twelver Shia Islam. Twelver Shiites (which include more than 80% of present-day Shiites) believe that the legitimate successors of Prophet Muhammad (570–632), whose authority was denied and bloodily suppressed by the Sunnis, were the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali (600–661) and his descendants who, with him, are honored as the Twelve Imams. They also believe that the Twelfth Imam, Mohammed ibn al-Hassan al-Askari (b. 868), who “disappeared” as a child in the year 874, was not killed by the Sunnis as some secular historians claim but went into a state of “occultation” from which he will emerge in the end times. Many Muslims also expect that, when the appropriate time will come, the world will be ruled on behalf of God by an eschatological figure known as the Imam al-Mahdi, in short, the Mahdi. Some believe he will be preceded by yet another eschatological figure, the Yamani, just as Jesus was preceded by John the Baptist.

During the history of the Shia, several individuals claimed they had met the Twelfth Imam and had been appointed by him as his vicegerents or envoys, thus generating a variety of new religious movements. Several claimants to the role of the Mahdi, both Shia and Sunni, also appeared (see e.g., Clarke 1995; Warburg 2003). Scholars assume that in times and places of political crisis and chaos new religions are more likely to emerge. In 1999, in the chaotic post-Saddam-Hussein (1937–2006) Iraq, Ahmed al-Hassan, a civil engineer born in 1968 in Basra, claimed to have physically met the Twelfth Imam, who had entrusted him with the special mission to proclaim publicly that he, al-Hassan, was the prophesied Yamani and to call people to pledge allegiance to the Imam al-Mahdi (Hashem 2022; we also rely on interviews with members of the AROPL conducted in the UK in March 2024).

For al-Hassan's followers, the main evidence that he really received a mission from the Twelfth Imam is in his teachings and in the fact that his role and even his name can be found in Prophet Muhammad's last Will, a text whose very existence is denied by (most) Sunnis but is attested and discussed in several traditional Shiite sources. Both Sunni and Shia sources confirm the intent of the Prophet Muhammad to write a will on a night referred to as “the calamity of Thursday” that would be a safety from misguidance before he died the subsequent Monday. While other Muslims dispute its authenticity, for the AROPL Muhammad's will as

preserved in Shiite sources is both genuine and all-important (The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light 2024). It is the only recorded will by Muhammad in all Islamic sources.

Since 2002, al-Hassan publicly denounced the Shia establishment in both Iran and Iraq led by scholars and Great Ayatollahs such as Ali Khamenei and Ali al-Sistani as morally and politically corrupt. For al-Hassan, these were “non-working scholars,” leading the Muslims astray. As a result, al-Hassan and his disciples were severely persecuted (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2023a). The Shia establishment pushed the Iraqi security forces to raid the homes, arrest and attack the followers of al-Hassan and accused them of being involved in riots, including (under the name “Soldiers of Heaven”) in the so-called “Battle of Najaf” of 2007, with which al-Hassan himself denied any connection.

Many of al-Hassan’s followers were innocently killed, arrested without just cause, and jailed without due process. The Shia militias and those representing the Shia establishment were looking for al-Hassan, wanting to kill him as a heretic. Al-Hassan was lastly seen and photographed in Iraq in 2007, after which he went into hiding. Reportedly, he visited several countries and lived for a time in Sudan, while his followers in Iraq and internationally divided into different conflicting factions.

The early teachings of al-Hassan were somewhat enigmatic and open to different interpretations by his disciples. Some, with basis in al-Hassan’s own early texts, believed he was himself the Qaim, the “Riser from the Family of Muhammad,” an eschatological figure mentioned in Islamic prophecies as the one who rises and restores justice in the world during the end times and is the first in a series of Mahdis (divinely appointed guides) who rule an end-times Divine Just State. On the other hand, there are followers who testify that from the beginning of his public ministry, al-Hassan declared himself to be the prophesied Yamani. The Yamani, which means the “right-hand,” is a major prophesied eschatological figure whose role is to pave the way for the Qaim/Riser. The Yamani can also be called “the first Mahdi” and the Qaim “the second Mahdi,” but it is the Qaim who is the center of the new covenant with God.

After al-Hassan went into hiding in 2007, an Iraqi faction known as “the White Banners” or “the Office of Najaf,” started transmitting, including via a Facebook page, messages allegedly coming from him that were suspiciously different from his previous teachings. A split happened in the movement between

those who maintained that the White Banners were still “authentic,” and that al-Hassan was communicating with them, and those who denounced the post-2007 messages as forged. The latter believed that the White Banners had no genuine communication with al-Hassan. They were led by Abdullah Hashem, an Egyptian American disciple of al-Hassan. Hashem claimed that the White Banners / Office of Najaf was controlled and manipulated by the Iraqi government, that al-Hassan was not with them, and that they had fabricated his voice and the Facebook page.

In contrast with the White Banners, headquartered in Iraq, the group led by Hashem and currently headquartered in the UK, is known as the “Black Banners.” This creates another possible confusion, as both the “White Banners” and the “Black Banners,” i.e., the AROPL, recognize and venerate the figure of al-Hassan, although they interpret his role and mission differently. To complicate the situation even further, there are other minor groups claiming a relationship with the teachings of al-Hassan as well. The White Banners / Office of Najaf “excommunicated” Hashem in 2015 and again through a “Declaration of Disassociation” on April 18, 2023, which also targeted other groups (Najaf Office 2023). The AROPL is distinguished by the fact that it has the largest international following, while the White Banners are mostly Iraqis.

It is also important, when one hears of riots, political statements, and other problems in Iraq that involve “followers of Ahmed al-Hassan” to understand from whose group they originate. Unfortunately, Wikipedia and other generalist (and easily manipulated) sources do not help in this respect.

The Mission of Abdullah Hashem

The AROPL’s *raison-d’être* is to proclaim to the world the teaching and mission of one of al-Hassan’s followers, Abdullah Hashem, “Aba al-Sadiq,” a U.S. citizen with an Egyptian father and an American mother. In 2015, at age 32, Abdullah Hashem revealed that Ahmed al-Hassan had instructed him to “raise the Black Banners of the East” and inform the world about the appearance of Imam al-Mahdi, the eschatological figure announced in Islamic prophecies who will rule the world in the end times. He claimed that he, Hashem, was the promised Qaim or Riser of the Family of Muhammad.

The date, 2015, was important. Hashem and his followers referred to an old prophecy that they applied to the death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia (1924–2015). This prophecy, which circulated widely amongst the Shiites, indicated that the Imam al-Mahdi should appear after the death of a King of Hejaz (i.e., Saudi Arabia) called Abdullah, identified by certain signs. According to Shia sources, Prophet Muhammad prophesied that

Hejaz will be ruled by a man whose name is the name of an animal, if you see him from far, you will think he is cross-eyed, and if you come close to him, you do not see anything (wrong) in his eyes. He will be succeeded by a brother of his, named Abdullah... Whoever guarantees for me the death of Abdullah, I guarantee for him the Riser/Qaim (see Hashem 2022, 498).

The AROPL notes that King Fahd of Saudi Arabia (1921–2005) had both the name of an animal (Fahd meaning “leopard”) and the eye problem described in the prophecy. He died in 2005 and was succeeded by his brother Abdullah, who died in turn on January 23, 2015. Abdullah Hashem advanced his claims immediately after this event (Hashem 2022, 498–99).

Other prophecies indicated that the Mahdi will be from Egypt and will reveal himself at age 32. Abdullah Hashem was 32 in 2015 and his father is Egyptian. This is connected with early Muslim texts about a “Companion of Egypt,” similarities between the early Egyptian religion (which later, the AROPL believes, became corrupted) and Islamic monotheism, and references to Egypt in different prophecies (Hashem 2022, 536). When we visited the headquarters of AROPL, we noted the presence of symbols of the ancient Egyptian religion.

The already mentioned “Will of Prophet Muhammad” names both “Ahmed” and “Abdullah” as rulers in the end times, which the AROPL believe are references to Ahmed al-Hassan and Abdullah Hashem.

The AROPL claims that al-Hassan himself told Hashem that the latter was the Riser, the Qaim of the Family of Muhammad. He fulfilled the three criteria to be recognized as a divinely appointed messenger. The first is being mentioned in the previous messenger’s will, in this case Muhammad’s last will. The second is demonstrating God-given knowledge in all the great matters pertaining to salvation. The third is calling for a return to the original order based on the supremacy of God rather than the supremacy of people (The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light 2024, 6). These criteria, it is claimed, also authenticated al-Hassan’s role as the Yamani.

Hashem reports he has met and has been taught by al-Hassan for years through personal, physical encounters, although they also occasionally came together in dreams and visions. Dreams are important in Hashem's worldview, although they require discernment as they are of diverse types and not all of them come from good spirits (Hashem 2022, 284–95). Hashem states that he originally believed that the Riser/Qaim was al-Hassan. When we met him in the UK, he told us how he was surprised when al-Hassan told and demonstrated to him that he, Hashem, was the Riser/Qaim and al-Hassan was the Yamani. At this stage, Hashem said, he could no longer deny his own call without denying al-Hassan at the same time, which would of course have been unconceivable.

The Main Teachings of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light

Hashem's claims and revelations are collected in the book *The Goal of the Wise*, translated into English in 2022. An outside observer would discern here diverse sources: Twelver Shiism, various esoteric "hyper-Shiite" traditions of Islam including Alawism, Christian Gnosticism, Western esotericism, and what scholars of the latter refer to as "conspirituality" (Ward and Voas 2011; Aspren and Dyrendal 2015), the meeting of esoteric ideas and what are commonly called conspiracy theories.

Hashem's theology follows a scheme that some scholars would call "dispensationalist." God entered into six covenants with humanity, centered respectively on Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. Al-Hassan as the Yamani inaugurated the seventh covenant leading to the rise of the Riser/Qaim. With a typical dispensationalist twist, the book explains that the rules of each covenant were God-given and valid at that time but were superseded by the following covenant and not all of them remained in force. Each covenant was breached by humans, thus causing a punishment by God, and ultimately requiring a new covenant.

Hashem also reveals esoteric interpretations of the previous covenants, with precedents both in Islamic and Western esotericism. We learn for example that the tree in the Garden of Eden whose forbidden fruit Adam (not Eve) tried to eat was not a physical tree but Fatimah (ca. 605–632), the daughter of Muhammad and wife of Ali, in a precedent incarnation. Her beauty attracted Adam who tried,

unsuccessfully, to have a sexual relation with her: this was the “original sin” (Hashem 2022, 4).

We also learn that when Jesus distributed his “body” to his disciples in the Holy Communion what he really gave to them was his semen, a theory with several precedents in Western esotericism (Pasi 2008) but rejected as offensive and scandalous by many Muslims and Christians. Hashem does not in any way suggest that these rituals should be practiced today; in fact, he categorically denies that this should be the case. They are just part of his reconstruction of the history of Christianity, as is his theory that Christians, who insist Jesus was crucified, and Muslims, who believe he was not, are both right. The crucified body was Jesus’, but the soul was of Simon of Cyrene, with whom Jesus had exchanged souls, “jumping” to other bodies in which the disciples met him and marrying Mary Magdalene before the attempted crucifixion. Prophet Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, was their son (implying that the dates of his birth and death were much earlier than historians, who mention the years 216–274, believe: Hashem 2022, 402).

From this, we can understand that Hashem—who, we should remember, always presents his teachings as coming from lengthy dialogues with al-Hassan—is part of the esoteric tradition of Islam believing in reincarnation (including of humans into animals and even rocks and stones) and karma, and also in the possible transmigration of souls either before or after death from one body to another. This means that a soul can enter the body of an adult who is alive, not only of an infant at birth. Some souls can also be present in two bodies at the same time.

Islamic traditions indicate that in human history the number of prophets is 124,000 and the number of “messengers” (a higher function) is 313. Ahmed al-Hassan revealed that many of the 124,000 are unknown prophets who carried divine messages to their nations and others are well-known names such as Zeus, Socrates (470–399 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), King Cyrus II of Persia (600–530 BCE), Krishna, Buddha (6th–5th century BCE), Confucius (ca. 551–479 BCE), Lao-Tze (6th–5th century BCE), and Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE). In the present new dispensation, many believers are the reincarnations of prophets, messengers, and even angels, whose souls entered them after their conversion, which means that some of the 313 are now with the Riser/Qaim and others will come. This is the phenomenon of the Raj’a, the Great Return (Hashem

2022, 142), and the headquarters in the UK display the portraits of many current believers represented as the reincarnations of previous prophets and messengers. It is also true, however, that “good souls” can leave a person in case of unruly behavior or apostasy. We normally do not remember our previous incarnations, although these memories are stored in the soul and there are ways of retrieving them.

Between one incarnation and the next, the souls dwell in a Purgatory-like space called Samarat. When the number of their incarnations is completed, they are judged and go to Heaven, which is in an inaccessible location on Earth, or Hell, which is in the Sun, although there is also a worse possible destination for the vilest souls. It is known as the Great Terror (Hashem 2022, 253).

A significant role in the sacred history presented by Hashem is played by Iblis, the devil, who according to the gnostic theology of the AROPL created the physical bodies of humans (hence their imperfections) while relatives of Prophet Muhammad, including Ali, created their souls, acting as the “hands” of God. Hashem’s system is creationist, in the sense that he regards Charles Darwin’s (1809–1882) theory of evolution as false. However, he believes that there were numerous races before Adam, which came to earth from other planets and were not fully human. Some of their descendants are still on earth, and this is also the truth behind stories about Bigfoot or the Yeti.

Iblis’ sexual relationship with Eve generated Cain. From that time, the descendants of Iblis and Cain continuously opposed in history the mission of the prophets. The “conspirituality” of Hashem’s teachings emerge in his discussion of the Freemasons and the Illuminati, a theme he has in common with several contemporary Western and non-Western esoteric movements. While it expresses sympathy for the American people, *The Goal of the Wise* denounces the evil U.S. government controlled by the Illuminati. Again with precedents in other forms of “conspirituality,” *The Goal of the Wise* claims that George Washington (1732–1799) was in reality Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830, but the dates are disputed by the AROPL), the Bavarian founder of the Illuminati who had moved to the United States (the two shared a certain physical likelihood: Hashem 2022, 414–15). He also claims that the second President Bush, George W., is the grandson of the British magus Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), who was the (unacknowledged) real father of the president’s mother, and wife of another president, Barbara Bush (1925–2018: Hashem 2022, 422–23).

The typical “conspirituality” theme of the evil extraterrestrials and of children of human beings and aliens active on Earth is also present in *The Goal of the Wise*. There are, however, also extraterrestrials, and spirits from other dimensions such as the jinn of the Muslim tradition, who are not evil—or not entirely. Controlling the jinn is connected with magic, a science in which King Solomon (10th century BCE) once excelled. The Qaim today is the owner of Solomon’s ring and controls legions of jinn (Hashem 2022, 221). Some jinn appear as stones that are in fact living beings, such as the Sulaimani stones, found in the bellies of serpents according to Islamic esoteric traditions (Hashem 2022, 226). Magic is a science like others and is not forbidden; only black magic is.

In accordance with Alawite and other forms of Muslim esotericism (Bar-Asher and Kofsky 2002, 192), a theory is presented that the stars “are people” and are related to certain persons on earth, each of whom both “is” and “has” a star. The Riser/Qaim “is,” in this sense, Planet Mars, while Iblis “is” Sirius, a star Hashem claims is worshiped by Freemasons (Hashem 2022, 137).

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light and Esotericism

What kind of religion is this? Once again, scholars have an etic outsider view, which complements (and respects) the emic insider view of the believers. For them, the AROPL is simply the truth revealed by God in the new covenant. The scholars’ method, however, is normally comparative.

That it uses this word or not, the AROPL is an esoteric religion, where themes of both esoteric Islam and Western esotericism are present. *The Goal of the Wise* reveals many hidden mysteries that only those in touch with higher powers can know and unveil, and alludes to others, which is typical of esotericism.

It is also a millenarian religion. It believes that wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters, epidemics, and the climate change confirm that we are living in the end times. AROPL devotees also claim that al-Hassan, Hashem’s mentor, had predicted several of the most recent disasters, including COVID-19, for which he also offered a remedy he would have made public, if just the Shiite ayatollahs in Iraq and Iran had publicly asked for it. We met a medical doctor (and son of an eminent British cardiologist) who is a member of the community and claims to have used the “Imam’s remedy” for COVID-19 with success.

American scholar Catherine Wessinger distinguishes between “catastrophic” and “progressive” forms of millennialism (Wessinger 1988). While catastrophic millennialism waits for a final disaster that would end the world as we know it, progressive millennialism examines the signs of the times and expects a great transformation that will not necessarily be the end of everything. Also, progressive millennialism does not believe that the transformation will be the simple consequence of cosmic forces humans cannot control. We have a role to play in preparing it.

A good example of a movement that was both esoteric and believed in a progressive form of millennialism is the Theosophical Society, established in New York in 1875 around the charismatic figure of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). There are certain similarities between the Theosophical Society and the AROPL. Both believe that a teacher appointed by higher powers will appear at the appropriate time. Both reinterpret the teachings of existing religions and believe in reincarnation. Both see the evolution of humanity as an upward spiral. Both include in their history of human evolutions “unknown prophets” and accept messengers of God from many different traditions. Both believe that a new call to enlightenment will appear “in the West.” And both share the idea that seven is an important number (for the AROPL, its Call is the seventh covenant) and even the respective six-pointed star symbols are somewhat similar.

Obviously, there are also significant differences. The AROPL is firmly rooted in the monotheism of the Abrahamic faiths, while the Theosophical Society is pantheistic and privileges the approach of the East Asian religions where there is no concept of a personal God. Since we are all part of a fundamental unity, for the Theosophical Society there is no punishment for breaking the covenants with God, although individuals will pay for their mistakes through the law of karma and reincarnation.

We are not arguing that the AROPL is part of the larger family of religious movements with roots in the Theosophical Society. It is not. We are suggesting, however, two interpretive tools that may be useful to study the AROPL from the point of view of outsider scholars: esotericism and progressive millennialism. Although there have been historical exceptions, it is also the case that progressive millennialists, including those esoterically oriented such as the Theosophists, build peaceful movements that regard the theme of promoting justice and world peace as crucial—and work for it (Wessinger 1998, 2011).

The Divine Just State

To his devotees, Abdullah Hashem is the Qaim, the “Riser of the Family of Muhammad,” the figure prophesied to emerge in the end times to bring peace and justice to the world. Some of his claims are indeed bold, and may be controversial, including “earned infallibility,” especially as it relates to guiding other human beings toward God.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Pope is infallible, a theory non-Catholic Christians tend to find provocative and offensive. Yet, in fact Catholic theology maintains that the Popes’ statements are infallible in such a limited number of matters that infallibility is attributed to their declarations only a few times each century. As we read in its sacred scripture, *The Goal of the Wise*, the AROPL does appreciate the Catholic idea that God operates through an “infallible” vicegerent, as Simon Peter was when he was appointed by Jesus. However, the AROPL also maintains that, just as Shia Islam, Roman Catholicism “got infiltrated” and “appointed vicegerents that are not infallible and not from God” (Hashem 2022, 407–8). Hashem, however, as the Qaim/Riser is from God, and is infallible.

Hashem teaches that even prophets made mistakes, as only God is infallible by nature. However, Jesus and Muhammad made only minor occasional mistakes and Muhammad, his daughter Fatimah, and the Twelve Imams can be called inherently infallible, while the Twelve Mahdis, including the Qaim/Riser, are in the category of “earned infallibility” (Hashem 2022, 332–33). This does not mean that the covenant of Muhammad is still in force, and at any rate we do not know the integrality of his teachings, as the Quran that we have today is incomplete and corrupted. Hashem even refers to the traditional story according to which Muhammad’s wife Aisha (614–678) reported that part of the Quran manuscript was accidentally eaten by a goat and lost forever (Hashem 2022, 367).

As a result, ninety-nine per cent of what Islam currently teaches is wrong: “Ninety-nine percent of religion is wrong, not ninety-nine percent of all religions, ninety-nine percent of each religion, even Islam” (Hashem 2022, 110). *The Goal of the Wise* proclaims that

The Islam that the Riser/Qaim brings shall be almost entirely different from the Islam that Mohammed... came with and the Islam that is currently practiced today. Essentially, it is a new religion (Hashem 2022, 113).

Today's mosques and mausoleums are lavishly constructed and are empty of guidance and will therefore one day be destroyed, including Mecca's Great Mosque—which, at any rate, hosts a false Kaaba: the genuine Kaaba is in Petra, Jordan (Hashem 2022, 114).

The use of the lunar calendar, Friday prayers, the prohibition of alcohol, and the mandatory hijab for women, which was never a divine commandment in any of God's covenants, are believed to be teachings that have been distorted, all of which will be corrected in the seventh covenant. Ramadan will be observed in December, according to a revelation of al-Hassan. Homosexuality is not encouraged but, unlike in the current Islamic societies, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light welcomes LGBT people and asks that they be treated with respect. Understandably, these positions do not endear Hashem's movement to other branches of Islam, both Sunni and Shia.

As a progressive millenarian movement, the AROPL announces the future institution of the Divine Just State, which will not be a Western-style democracy but will be ruled by twelve Mahdis (whose succession will not necessarily follow a family lineage), of which the Qaim/Riser is the second, based on their appointment by God rather than of their popular election. It will be more similar to Plato's (427–348 BCE) ideal political order ruled by a philosopher-king.

While realizing that this may open them to criticism, AROPL devotees do not hide their criticism of democracy, which goes back to Plato. They only insist that as part of a peaceful movement they respect the existing governments and do not call for the overthrow of them. However, as Plato, they believe that democracy leads to the emergence of demagogues and “poets,” whom they regard as idle false prophets incarnated today in the “non-working scholars” who rule Shia Islam and persecute the AROPL. They insist that, while non-democratic, the Divine Just State will guarantee freedom of religion, as people of different faiths will be allowed to live there, practice their faiths, and follow their religions' rules. The twelve Mahdis will progressively expand and consolidate the Divine Just State, which originally will not encompass the whole Planet Earth. It will be a millennial kingdom where there will be no death due to illness or old age, although life will still end in some cases due to accidents or murders.

Today, believers in the UK have gathered around the Qaim/Riser and form a community that is a germ and an announcement of the Divine Just State. As the first Christians and the first Muslims did, the believers share all their properties in common under the stewardship of the Qaim/Riser, keeping only what is needed for subsistence as private property, and follow his directions. This utopian community plans to give testimony to the truth through its high morals and good manners. “Religion is good treatment of others, and whoever doesn’t treat others well has no religion” (Hashem 2022, 362). We saw no evidence that this precept is not sincerely believed and practiced.

*Persecution and Discrimination**

[*Note: Rosita Šorytė contributed to this session of the article.]

AROPL members have stories of persecution to tell about Iraq, Iran, Malaysia, Algeria, Jordan. The group was even harassed and compelled to leave Sweden, a country normally reputed for its friendly attitude to religious liberty.

That the AROPL devotees are persecuted in Muslim countries is tragic but, unfortunately, predictable. As mentioned earlier, they teach that all religions, including Islam, although originally admirable, have been corrupted and are today “99% wrong.” They insist that the real Kaaba is not in Mecca, fixed times for prayer are not necessary, Ramadan is in December, headscarves are not mandatory for women, alcohol can be freely if moderately drunk, LGBTQ people should not be judged or persecuted, and all prophets made mistakes. In short, they believe that we have entered a seventh and final covenant between humanity and God, where the teachings and jurisprudence of the sixth covenant, stipulated with Muhammad, are no longer in force. Their movement was born in a Shiite context, yet they teach that the present Shia leadership in both Iraq and Iran is made up of “non-working scholars” who lead believers astray with false doctrines.

For much less, people are executed in several Islamic countries, and the situation only got worse when the AROPL’s sacred text, *The Goal of the Wise*, was released in 2022, with all the claims mainline Islam regards as heretic presented boldly and explicitly. In Iran, the AROPL is regarded as a “deviant religion” and is accused of “denigrating Islam,” an offense punishable with the death penalty (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2023a). The Iranian government has even produced a slanderous documentary about them, and

dozens of devotees have been arrested. Some were taken to the notorious Evin Prison, and two were forcibly sent to mental institutions.

There are similar problems in Iraq and Azerbaijan, but the situation is not better in countries with a Sunni majority. In Malaysia, the main problem was the AROPL's support of the movement for LGBTQ rights. In fact, the AROPL was the only religious group brave enough to organize a public protest in solidarity with the repressed LGBTQ community in Malaysia. It happened in Kuala Lumpur in July 2023. Eight AROPL devotees were arrested and badly mistreated by the police, as two of them who had escaped to the UK told us during our visit to their community in the UK (personal interviews, March 2024).

In Algeria, the local AROPL community, where twenty-two persons lived communally, was raided. Three members were imprisoned and fifteen put under house arrest. The women were falsely accused of prostitution. Eighteen members were charged with “denigrating Islam.” In 2022, three received one-year prison sentences, while the remaining defendants were sentenced to six months in prison (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2023b).

The AROPL case in Algeria, however, also proves that international protests on behalf of religious liberty are not always in vain. After international human rights watchdogs publicly complained, charges were dropped, although AROPL believers in Algeria remain under a fatwa declaring them heretic and are not allowed to gather or worship together.

We have already mentioned the dramatic story of 104 AROPL refugees—women, men, children, elderly devotees—blocked and beaten by the Turkish police at the Kapikule border with Bulgaria that they were trying to cross to seek asylum in the European Union. They were put under threat of being deported to their countries of origin, where they would have been at risk of being arrested, tortured, and even killed. The fact that Türkiye itself considers the AROPL members heretic, particularly because of their theory that even prophets committed mistakes, certainly played a role in the incident.

Here again an international mobilization saved them. Thanks in particular to Willy Fautré of Human Rights Without Frontiers, who also mobilized the United Nations ECOSOC-accredited NGO CAP-Liberté de conscience and its President, Thierry Valle, the case was picked up by some Western media. United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of association and peaceful assembly,

Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, met with AROPL members during his official visit to Algeria, on September 24, 2023 (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2023c).

On July 4, 2023, three United Nations Special Rapporteurs, together with other United Nations officials, had already published a joint statement where they stated that the AROPL refugees faced serious risks if deported and that the obligation not to send back asylum seekers to countries where they may be persecuted or killed is “absolute and non-derogable.” The Rapporteurs were Nazila Ghanea, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Felipe González Morales, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; and Fernand de Varennes, Special Rapporteur on minority issues. Priya Gopalan, Chair-Rapporteur of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, also signed the statement (United Nations 2023).

Less understandable is why the AROPL was harassed in Sweden, where some seventy members, including the leader of the religion, had settled in a farm called Bergslagsgården in Sävsjön near Hällefors, after they had spent some time in Germany. Between 2019 and 2022 a series of raids and inspections under various pretexts targeted the community. Some AROPL devotees were British citizens, but after Brexit they were denied a residence permit. The police raids instilled fear in the peaceful community, and the businesses they legally operated were disrupted. The police authorities explicitly said that the aim of their action was to get rid of the AROPL (*Sverige S Radio* 2023), a result they eventually achieved as by 2023 all members had left Sweden (Fautré 2024).

Why this happened in a country generally respectful of human rights remains somewhat mysterious. As all religions, the AROPL does have disgruntled ex-members and the word “cult” was used by the police and the media. It is possible that the usual anti-cult organizations were at work, but there is no evidence that this was the case. Iraqi immigrants to Sweden who adhere to a conservative brand of Islam and other Islamic radicals certainly bad-mouthed the AROPL, but the local police are not supposed to crack down on heretics.

Unless they received false information from foreign countries, perhaps the police were just concerned about possible trouble between the AROPL and Muslim fundamentalists in Sweden. They believed the easiest solution was to compel the AROPL believers to leave the country. However, this would hardly be compatible with Sweden’s human rights tradition. In democratic countries, those

persecuted by radicals who accuse them of heresy should be protected, not harassed by the police.

Another strange story happened in Thailand. AROPL believer Hadee Laepankaeo, his wife Sunee Satanga, and their daughter Nadia were among the 104 blocked when they tried to cross the border from Türkiye into Bulgaria. They are now in Poland. Since the AROPL believes in a Divine Just State and proclaims that the allegiance should be ultimately directed to God and his vicegerent only, in Thailand its members are accused of *lèse-majesté* and of denying the authority of the King. The fact that before joining the AROPL Laepankaeo was politically active in a movement criticizing the prerogatives and power of the King of Thailand probably played against him as well (Fautré and Foreman 2024).

On December 30, 2022, after he had given a speech promoting the newly released *The Goal of the Wise*, Laepankaeo was taken outside of his home by security agents and beaten, resulting in injuries including the loss of a tooth. He was subsequently detained for two days, and on January 23, 2023, escaped to Türkiye. Thirteen other members who had remained in Thailand were arrested while participating in a peaceful march of protest in Had Yai, Songkhla Province, South Thailand, on May 14, 2023. While the strict application of *lèse-majesté* laws offers the legal ground to persecute the AROPL in Thailand, in fact conservative Shia clerics are those who incite the government to crack down on the group (Fautré and Foreman 2024).

It is not surprising that a religion that makes claims mainline Islam regards as heretic and openly criticizes the Islamic authorities and scholars is persecuted in Muslim countries, although one would expect a different treatment in Sweden and perhaps in Thailand as well. However, the recent story of the AROPL is one of persecution but also of resilience. All those we interviewed are not giving up. The AROPL mostly spreads its religion through the Internet with state-of-the-art equipment. They also have among their members professional journalists. In the Turkish case, they were dispatched to where the incident was happening and were able to report firsthand. News and images were then distributed through the satellite TV, YouTube, and social media channels of the AROPL, which reached a global audience. Human rights organizations and, as we have seen, the United Nations themselves, were also able to help. Despite attempts to suppress it, and

severe persecution in some countries, AROPL has proved capable of resisting and even growing, particularly through its skilled use of new technologies.

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Does Religiously Motivated Shunning of (Former) Fellow Believers Constitute a Violation of Article 8 European Convention on Human Rights?

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ABSTRACT: The right to respect for private and family life guaranteed by Article 8 European Convention on Human Rights may function both as a counter-right and as a supportive right to freedom of religion enshrined in Article 9 (in conjunction with Article 11) European Convention on Human Rights in cases of religiously motivated social distancing or shunning. The article discusses the complex tripolar human rights situation, which involves the rights of the religious community, of the affected (former) believer, and of his/her family members. It examines how far the various rights play a role, interact, and either restrict or enhance each other when social distancing or shunning takes place. In this context, it particularly considers the situation of minors.

KEYWORDS: Excommunication, Disfellowshipping, Shunning, Social Distancing, Corporative Freedom of Religion, Right to Respect for Private and Family Life, Right to a Fair Trial, Right to Leave a Religion, Contact Rights of Children.

I. Introduction

It is a characteristic of religious communities first, to establish a religious doctrine, including a code of conduct that is determined by the commandments of faith and addressed to ministers and lay congregants; second, to define ecclesiastical authorities; and third, to set membership rules (see General Comment No. 22 to Article 18 ICCPR, para. 4). These aspects belong to the religious communities' autonomy, which is an expression of collective or corporative freedom of religion guaranteed by Article 9 in conjunction with Article 11 European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR; see ECtHR, GC, 26 October 2000, no. 30985/96, *Hasan and Chaush v. Bulgaria*, para. 78; 16 December 2004, no. 39023/97, *Supreme Holy Council of the Muslim*

Community v. Bulgaria, paras. 81–6; 22 January 2009, no. 412/03, *Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church [Metropolitan Inokentiy] and Others v. Bulgaria*, para. 103; 15 September 2009, no. 798/05, *Miroļubovs and Others v. Latvia*, para. 77; Mückl 2013; Weber 2010).

The right of religious communities to determine membership includes the right to set out the conditions under which membership and associated participation rights are lost and the right to establish and implement procedures for deciding on the loss of membership. Accordingly, the European Court of Human Rights concluded in *Svyato-Mykhaylivska Parafiya v. Ukraine* that

religious associations are free to determine at their own discretion the manner in which new members are admitted and existing members excluded. The internal structure of a religious organization and the regulations governing its membership must be seen as a means by which such organizations are able to express their beliefs and maintain their religious traditions. The Court points out that the right to freedom of religion excludes any discretion on the part of the State to determine whether the means used to express religious beliefs are legitimate (no. 77703/01, 14 June 2007, para. 150).

Conversely, the European Court of Human Rights emphasized that Article 9 ECHR does not give (former) members a right to remain in a religious community if that community decides that the individual engaged in serious religious misconduct and, therefore, that individual is deemed to have lost membership or is disfellowshipped (von Ungern-Sternberg 2015, para. 16).

The Court explained in *Miroļubovs and Others v. Latvia*:

The principle of autonomy [...] prohibits the State from obliging a religious community to admit new members or exclude others [...]. Similarly, Article 9 of the Convention does not guarantee any right to dissent within a religious organization; in the event of a doctrinal or organizational disagreement between a religious community and its member, the latter's freedom of religion is exercised through the ability to freely leave the community in question (para. 80d, translation from French; see already European Commission on Human Rights, no. 12345/86, 8 September 1988, *Karlsson v. Sweden*; no. 20402/92, 12 October 1994, *Spetz and Others v. Sweden*; no. 27008/95, 17 May 1995, *Williamson v. United Kingdom*; Bielefeldt, Ghana, and Wiener 2016, 72–3).

This indicates that individual freedom of religion does not play a role in doctrinal or organizational disputes within religious communities. It cannot be used by (former) members as a means to enforce religious beliefs against the religiously motivated self-determination of the relevant community or the commandments of

its religious authorities. Religion practiced within the framework of a religious community is addressed as a collective phenomenon vis-à-vis the individual members. The individual right to freedom of religion becomes relevant when the religious practice and observance of members conflict with state laws or the rights of third persons. This improved position of the collective aspects of freedom of religion within religious communities has historical reasons:

Religious communities were (and to some extent still are) regarded by the state as a threat to a far greater extent than individuals with fundamental beliefs that deviate from what is generally accepted; this has to do with their group formation, which is not least associated with particular ways of life. They are therefore also particularly worthy of protection (Classen 2003, 27–8 [translation]).

Consequently, persons who invoke their freedom of religion toward a certain religious community must be outsiders. Dissenting members of a religious community who question essential parts of the religious doctrine and do not manage to convince their religious authorities by using possible paths provided by the religious community for the settlement of doctrinal disputes have usually either to accept the doctrinal rules of that religious community (at least in appearance) or to leave the religious community in the long run (see European Commission on Human Rights, no. 7374/76, 8 March 1976, *X. v. Denmark*). Against this background, the European Court of Human Rights stressed the individual right to freely leave a religious community. This right corresponds to the freedom of the individual to change his/her religion or belief, which is explicitly mentioned in Article 9 para. 1 half-sentence 2 ECHR.

Religious communities have the right to decide the consequences that exclusion from membership in, and voluntary leaving of, their organization have. This includes the loss of spiritual ministries and privileges as well as that of access to (certain) religious activities and services. For instance, a religious community may not allow excommunicated persons to enter their houses of worship or take part in religious ceremonies. They may refuse to administer sacraments to excommunicated persons, to give blessings on the occasion of weddings of former members, or to deliver religious speeches at funerals in case the deceased had left the community.

Moreover, religious communities may issue religious commandments or recommendations on how their members should behave toward excommunicated persons. Such a code of conduct may stipulate that members should not partake

in religious activities with the excommunicated former fellow believers or that they should even limit their contact with such persons to the bare minimum. The reasons for such measures must result from the respective religious doctrine. Therefore, it can be argued that religious communities benefit from a broad type of margin of appreciation on the basis of their religious self-determination. For example, religious communities may decide that congregants should abstain from practices considered “unclean” so as to keep the congregation of believers pure, that faithful believers should not be influenced by sinful thoughts and practices, and that the excommunicated individual should be made to reflect on his/her course, to repent, and to come back (see Pel 2023, sub 2). Furthermore, religious communities may claim that the change of status of the person who will be excommunicated protects members, since they are taught to support fellow believers financially, physically, and emotionally when they are in need, and this rule could only apply in the long run if all members fulfill their obligation in this charitable work and can trust that they also will be helped if they fall into need.

The limits of this margin of appreciation are in that regard determined by the theological concept of the community in service and by the relevant rules of the religious code of conduct, the extent of their binding effect, and the practice to deal with misconduct. Furthermore, it plays a role whether religious worship is defined as a matter that essentially only takes place in the church room or in other kinds of meeting rooms, or as one that permeates and influences the whole life. The more the concept of the community approaches that of a family, a brotherhood, or a religious order, and the more intensively the religious rules affect the life and lifestyle of the individual members, the easier it is for a religious community to make it plausible that, according to its faith, disfellowshipping measures must be accompanied by rules of social distancing and to insist that freedom of religion can be claimed for such commandment or behavior.

However, it has recently been argued in literature that religiously motivated social distancing from former members of a religious community, negatively connoted as “shunning,” violates the rights of the affected persons and is therefore illegal (see Grendele, Flax, and Bapir-Tardy 2023; for a criticism, see Introvigne and Richardson 2023). Moreover, some state authorities took the view that disfellowshipping and subsequent social distancing violated the rights of the excommunicated persons. Such practice was contrary to the members’ right to free withdrawal from a religious community, since they had to fear that they would

no longer be allowed to have contact with family and friends in the religious community. Particularly, it was argued without further explanation that shunning violated the rights of children. Therefore, a religious community in which social distancing was practiced must not only be excluded from public funding but also be deregistered (see on a case in Norway *Introvigne* 2024; and Pinto de Albuquerque 2023, sub III).

Against this background, it should be examined whether religiously motivated shunning really violates human rights guarantees. The verdict that a human rights violation is taking place can only be reached after a thorough investigation and consideration of the rights and legally protected interests involved. That is particularly true in situations where the opposing parties are non-state actors, namely religious communities without the status of state churches, former members of these religious communities and their family members, (former) friends and former fellow believers. Constellations of third-party effects of fundamental rights and human rights, which are primarily addressed toward the state, always require that conflicting positions are examined, weighed, and balanced, whereby state authorities and state courts must assume a neutral and impartial role (see ECtHR, GC, 10 November 2005, no. 44774/98, *Leyla Şahin v. Turkey*, paras. 107–8).

A core right in the context of religiously motivated social distancing is the right to respect for private and family life laid down in Article 8 ECHR. This right can be seen as the excommunicated person's counter-right to the religious community's freedom of religion. Furthermore, it plays a role with regard to the mutual relationship between that person and his/her family members and even beyond. Finally, it covers aspects of the upbringing, education, and training of children and of corresponding parental responsibilities (see ECtHR, GC, 8 April 2021, no. 47621/13, *Vavříčka and Others v. Czech Republic*, paras. 287–88; GC, 10 December 2021, no. 15379/16, *Abdi Ibrahim v. Norway*, para. 145; 30 June 2022, no. 61657/16, *Paparrigopoulos v. Greece*, para. 40). Thus, it includes the rights of children, so that they can be treated in this context.

II. Article 8 ECHR and Its Multi-Relational Contents

1. Right to Respect for Private Life

Article 8 ECHR is construed as a relational human rights provision that refers to interaction between individuals. This is not only true with regard to the right to respect for family life but also with regard to the right to respect for private life. That notion includes, but is not limited to, an inner bubble in which individuals live their own personal lives as they choose, and exclude the outside world (ECtHR, GC, 25 September 2018, no. 76639/11, *Denisov v. Ukraine*, para. 96). Anyway, even if it were limited in such a way, to define personal identity within, and by means of a delimitation from, a certain subsystem of society or the social system in general. and to exclude the outside world from the inner bubble of self-experience and self-development, qualify as a determination of the relationship to other people (see ECtHR, 24 February 1998, no. 153/1996/772/973, *Botta v. Italy*, para. 32).

Besides, the aspect of the right to respect for private life encompasses the right of the individual to approach others in order to establish and develop relationships with them and with the outside world, which the European Court of Human Rights has described as the right to a “private social life” (GC, 5 September 2017, no. 61496/08, *Bărbulescu v. Romania*, para. 70). However, the Court stressed in that context that private life did not as a rule come into play in situations where somebody does not enjoy “family life” within the meaning of Article 8 ECHR in relation to a particular third person and where the latter does not share the wish for contact (28 May 2020, no. 17895/14, *Evers v. Germany*, para. 54). There is no human right to contact or even friendship with another person from outside the family, which could be invoked against the will of that person. If such an unfounded claim is made, there is not even a conflict of rights to be solved.

Finally, the concept of private life according to Article 8 ECHR covers the physical, psychological, and moral integrity of a person (ECtHR, GC, 24 January 2017, no. 25358, *Paradiso and Campanelli v. Italy*, para. 159; GC, 25 June 2019, no. 41720/13, *Nicolae Virgiliu Tănase v. Romania*, para. 126; 26 March 1985, no. 8978/80, *X. and Y. v. the Netherlands*, para. 22). Case-law in that regard concerned primarily (deficits in) the national legal frameworks affording

protection against acts of physical violence by private individuals (see GC, 12 November 2013, no. 5786/08, *Söderman v. Sweden*, para. 80; GC, 28 October 1998, no. 87/1997/871/1083, *Osman v. United Kingdom*, para. 128; 14 October 2010, no. 55164/08, *A. v. Croatia*, para. 60; 5 March 2009, no. 38478/05, *Sandra Janković v. Croatia*, para. 45; 12 June 2008, no. 71127/01, *Bevacqua and S. v. Bulgaria*, para. 65). Thus, a third person is causing physical harm to somebody (either the right bearer or someone else), which may have an adverse impact also on the psychological integrity and well-being of the right bearer (see ECtHR, 9 November 2021, no. 31549/18, *Špadijer v. Montenegro*, paras. 81–2).

In other cases, the European Court of Human Rights sometimes determined the applicability of the right to respect for private life by a severity test. This happened, for instance, in cases concerning a non-justified attack on a person's reputation, dismissal, demotion, non-admission to a profession, or other similarly unfavorable measures (see *Denisov v. Ukraine*, paras. 110–12). The Court examined, in line with its consequence-based approach to Article 8 ECHR, whether the circumstances of the relevant case attain a level of seriousness or severity resulting in significant impairment of the affected person's ability to enjoy his/her private life. It particularly referred to the intensity and duration of the nuisance or prejudice and its physical or mental effects on the individual's health or quality of life (see 9 June 2005, no. 55723/00, *Fadeyeva v. Russia*, para. 69; GC, 29 March 2016, no. 56925/08, *Bédat v. Switzerland*, para. 72; 14 January 2020, no. 41288/15, *Beizaras and Levickas v. Lithuania*, para. 109; 21 September 2010, no. 34147/06, *Polanco Torres and Movilla Polanco v. Spain*, para. 40).

2. Right to Respect for Family Life

According to the view of the European Court of Human Rights, the core ingredient of the right to respect for family life is the right to life together so that family relationships may develop normally (13 June 1979, no. 6833/74, *Marckx v. Belgium*, para. 31) and members of the family may enjoy each other's company (24 March 1988, no. 10465/83, *Olsson v. Sweden [No. 1]*, para. 59). Thus, the right to respect for family life, unlike the right to respect for private life, can form

a legal basis for a claim to regular contact with a particular third person, if that person belongs to the family.

The concept of family life is an autonomous concept under the European Convention on Human Rights. Whether or not “family life” exists is essentially a question of fact depending on the real existence in practice of close family ties (*Paradiso and Campanelli v. Italy*, para. 140). The Court emphasized in its case-law that even a biological kinship between a natural parent and a child alone, without further legal or factual elements indicating the existence of a close personal relationship, was insufficient to attract the protection of Article 8 ECHR. As a rule, “family life” requires cohabitation. Exceptionally, other facts can also serve to demonstrate that a relationship has sufficient constancy to create de facto family ties (21 July 2022, no. 2303/19, *Katsikeros v. Greece*, para. 43; 1 June 2004, no. 45582/99, *L. v. the Netherlands*, para. 36).

Moreover, the Court has considered that intended family life may, also exceptionally, fall within the ambit of Article 8 ECHR, namely in cases where the fact that a family life has not yet been fully established was not attributable to the right bearer. This is of particular importance with regard to the potential relationship that may develop between a child born out of wedlock and his/her natural father (see 8 July 2014, No. 29176/13, *D. and Others v. Belgium*, para. 49; 22 June 2004, no. 78028/01, *Pini and Others v. Romania*, para. 143). Relevant factors that determine the existence in practice of close personal ties in these cases include the nature of the relationship between the natural parents and a demonstrable interest in, and commitment from, the father to the child both before and after the birth (*Katsikeros v. Greece*, para. 44).

After all, the European Court of Human Rights does not exclusively focus on biological kinship for the notion of family, but stresses that in case of absence of any biological tie there must be a durable and stable de facto family or personal tie with strong emotional bonds (see *Paradiso and Campanelli v. Italy*, paras. 156-157; 18 May 2021, no. 71552/17, *Valdís Fjölnisdóttir and Others v. Iceland*, para. 59; 24 March 2022, nos. 29775/17 and 29693/19, *C. E. and Others v. France*, para. 49). On the other side, the Court generally does not take a broad approach to the biological family. For instance, it argued that a person’s intention to develop a previously non-existent “family life” with her nephew by becoming his legal tutor lay outside the scope of “family life” as protected by Article 8 ECHR (17 April 2018, no. 6878/14, *Lazoriva v. Ukraine*, para. 65).

Consequently, religious communities, even very small ones, generally cannot constitute as such a “family” in the sense of the human rights provision. In the case of religious orders, it does not seem to be absolutely excluded that family-tie-like emotional bonds exist, but then at least a cohabitation in a monastery or similar establishment appears to be necessary.

As mentioned, the right to respect for family life particularly protects the rights and interests of children. Accordingly, the European Court of Human Rights has stressed the link between Article 8 ECHR and both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (see GC, 6 July 2010, no. 41615/07, *Neulinger and Shuruk v. Switzerland*, para. 132; GC, 26 November 2013, no. 27853/09, *X. v. Latvia*, para. 93). It is well-established in the Court’s case-law that

in all decisions concerning children their best interests are of paramount importance. [...] It follows that there is an obligation on States to place the best interests of the child, and also those of children as a group, at the centre of all decisions affecting their health and development (*Vavříčka and Others v. Czech Republic*, paras. 287–88; see also *Neulinger and Shuruk v. Switzerland*, para. 135; *X. v. Latvia*, para. 96).

The best interests of the child are not least protected by contact rights. A fundamental element of family life is the mutual enjoyment by parent and child of each other’s company (see ECtHR, 26 March 2013, no. 21794/08, *Zorica Jovanović v. Serbia*, para. 68; 5 April 2005, no. 71099/01, *Monory v. Romania and Hungary*, para. 70; 26 February 2002, no. 446544/99, *Kutzner v. Germany*, para. 58; 19 September 2000, no. 40031/98, *Gnahoré v. France*, para. 50; *Olsson v. Sweden [No. 1]*, para. 59). Correspondingly, Article 9 para. 3 Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 24 para. 3 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union explicitly stipulate that every child shall have the right to maintain on a regular basis a personal relationship and direct contact with his/her parents, unless that is contrary to his/her interests.

The European Court of Human Rights explained that the child’s interest in this context comprised two limbs:

On the one hand, it dictates that the child’s ties with its family must be maintained, except in cases where the family has proved particularly unfit. It follows that family ties may only be severed in very exceptional circumstances and that everything must be done to preserve personal relations and, if and where appropriate, to “rebuild” the family [...]. On the other hand, it is clearly also in the child’s interest to ensure its development in a sound environment, and a parent cannot be entitled under Article 8 [ECHR] to have

such measures taken as would harm the child's health and development (*Neulinger and Shuruk v. Switzerland*, para. 136; see also GC, 13 June 2000, no. 25735/94, *Elsholz v. Germany*, para. 50; 4 April 2006, no. 8153/04, *Maršálek v. Czech Republic*, para. 71).

Thus, contact rights within the family are not absolute. They must be balanced in each individual case with the (possibly conflicting) interests of the child. The child's best interests may, depending on their nature and seriousness, override those of the parents. However, the parents' interests, especially in having regular contact with their child, remain a factor when balancing the various interests at stake (*Neulinger and Shuruk v. Switzerland*, para. 134; *Abdi Ibrahim v. Norway*, para. 145; GC, 8 July 2003, no. 30943/96, *Sahin v. Germany*, para. 66). The European Court of Human Rights stressed that the assessment of the child's best interests and their balancing with conflicting rights and interests of the parents were a complex task. The child's best interest, from a personal development perspective, depended on a variety of individual circumstances, in particular his/her age and level of maturity, the presence or absence of his/her parents and his/her environment and experiences (*Neulinger and Shuruk v. Switzerland*, para. 138; see also United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2008, 23–4 and 68–9).

The Court stated that the protection by the right to respect for family life was not limited to the ties between parents and children but also included the ties between grandparents and grandchildren, since these relatives may play a considerable part in family life (*Marckx v. Belgium*, para. 45; *Evers v. Germany*, para. 54; 9 June 1998, no. 40/1997/824/1030, *Bronda v. Italy*, para. 51). However, the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren was different in nature and degree from the relationship between parents and children and thus by its very nature called for a lesser degree of protection. The right to respect for family life of grandparents in relation to their grandchildren primarily entailed the right to maintain a normal grandparent-grandchild relationship through contact between them (25 November 2014, no. 10140/13, *Vesna Kruškić and Others v. Croatia*, para. 111; 8 February 2022, no. 19938/20, *Q. and R. v. Slovenia*, para. 94; 16 April 2015, no. 53565/13, *Mitovi v. Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, para. 58). Furthermore, the Court considered that contact between grandparents and grandchildren normally takes place with the agreement of the person who has parental responsibility, which means that access of a grandparent

to his/her grandchild is normally at the discretion of the child's parents (*Vesna Kruškić and Others v. Croatia*, para. 112).

Finally, the European Court of Human Rights held that family life can also exist between siblings (18 February 1991, no. 12313/86, *Moustaquim v. Belgium*, para. 36; 6 April 2010, no. 4694/03, *Mustafa and Armağan Akin v. Turkey*, para. 19). It recognized the relationship between adults and their parents and siblings as constituting family life protected under Article 8 ECHR even in cases where the adult did not live with his/her parents or siblings (24 April 1996, no. 22070/93, *Boughanemi v. France*, para. 35) and the adult had formed a separate household and family (*Moustaquim v. Belgium*, paras. 35 and 45–6; 26 September 1997, no. 123/1996/742/941, *Boujaïdi v. France*, para. 33). However, the Court has stated that family ties between adults and their parents or siblings attract lesser or even no protection unless there is evidence of further elements of dependency, involving more than the normal emotional ties (see GC, 9 October 2003, no. 484321/99, *Slivenko v. Latvia*, para. 97; 20 December 2011, no. 622/10, *A. H. Khan v. United Kingdom*, para. 32; 17 February 2009, no. 27319/07, *Onur v. United Kingdom*, para. 45; 15 July 2003, no. 52206/96, *Mokrani v. France*, para. 33; 10 July 2003, no. 53441/99, *Benhebba v. France*, para. 36). Furthermore, the Court held that relationships with more distant relatives fall short of family life and can therefore only play a role in the context of private life (2 June 2005, no. 77785/01, *Znamenskaya v. Russia*, para. 27).

Anyway, in the case of contact rights claimed by an individual adult against another adult on the basis of family life can be countered by the latter at least with his/her right to respect for private life, if he/she does not want to maintain contact with the person making such a claim. Besides, counter-rights can result from other human rights guarantees, namely the right to freedom of religion according to Article 9 ECHR.

Lastly, it has to be mentioned that the right to respect for private and family life in Article 8 ECHR may itself include aspects also guaranteed by Article 9 ECHR, since religious beliefs and privacy as well as family life can be closely interrelated (see ECtHR, 20 July 2021, no. 12886/16, *Polat v. Austria*, para. 91). As such, both human rights guarantees together can strengthen a legally protected interest. For instance, the European Court of Human Rights held in *Abdi Ibrahim*

v. Norway that a child should be given the chance to develop and maintain ties to his/her cultural and religious origins. Therefore, the right to respect for family life under Article 8 ECHR should be interpreted and applied in the light of Article 9 ECHR (para. 142).

Furthermore, the right to respect for family life also covers the aspect of religious education. This aspect is explicitly guaranteed by Article 2 Protocol 1 to the European Convention of Human Rights, which gives parents the right to secure education and training according to their own religious convictions. General Comment No. 22 to Article 18 ICCPR even states that the liberty of parents and guardians to ensure religious and moral education cannot be restricted (para. 8). This authoritative interpretation given by the United Nations Human Rights Committee gives the right of parents to religious education of their children a particularly heavy weight and thus a very strong protection, at least as long as their children are not religiously mature.

In the following, these general findings on the multi-relational contents of Article 8 ECHR shall be applied to the shunning context. Special focus will be given to the relationship between the religious community and the excommunicated or disfellowshipped former member and to the relationship between family members and former fellow believers and the excommunicated or disfellowshipped person. The relevant human rights relations will be clarified and analyzed, and it will be examined the extent to which potential infringements affect core areas of protection. Thereafter, a thorough weighing and balancing of all human rights concerned will lead to a reliable conclusion.

III. Relationship Between the Religious Community and the Excommunicated Former Member

The relationship between the religious community and the (former) member is molded by the community's strong right to freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR. The religious community has the right to decide that membership of the individual person terminates. As explained, the (former) member cannot invoke his/her own freedom of religion against the religious community with the aim to stay in the latter. His/her freedom of religion within the internal sphere of organized religion is limited to the right to freely leave the religious community.

1. Right to a Fair Trial

Whether an excommunicated or disfellowshipped person can assert rights other than freedom of religion to remain in a religious community has not yet been clarified at the ECHR level. The right to a fair trial under Article 6 ECHR and the previously discussed right to respect for private life under Article 8 ECHR may be considered. However, the right to a fair trial is provided for cases regarding the determination of civil rights and obligations and of criminal charges against a person. This means that the right to a fair trial is related to the claim of other rights recognized under domestic law (see ECtHR, GC, 3 April 2012, no. 37575/04, *Boulois v. Luxembourg*, para. 90; *Denisov v. Ukraine*, para. 44) or to the defense of such rights, in the criminal context particularly habeas corpus. Furthermore, Article 6 ECHR covers cases concerning the right to access to a national court or tribunal (see ECtHR, GC, 15 March 2022, no. 43572/18, *Grzęda v. Poland*, paras. 289–94) as well as cases that have been brought to, or have been examined by, a national court or tribunal (see ECtHR, 21 June 2007, nos. 2191/03, 3104/03, 16094/03 and 24486/03, *Pridatchenko and Others v. Russia*, para. 47).

Therefore, if there is no substantial right recognized in the national legal sphere that can be claimed by a member of a religious community to prevent him/her from being excluded by the community, then there is also no applicability of Article 6 ECHR regarding the procedure in which the exclusion is decided upon. The procedural right follows the substantial right. According to the determinations of Article 9 ECHR that must be recognized by the domestic law of the Contracting States, there is no individual religious freedom within a religious community except the right to freely leave the latter. This exclusion of an individual claim puts aside with procedural rights. Similarly, the European Court of Human Rights argued that membership of and exclusion from a political party or association are not covered by Article 6 ECHR (4 April 2017, no. 38458/15, *Lovrić v. Croatia*, para. 55).

Furthermore, Article 6 ECHR only refers to procedural requirements. It does not guarantee that a defined process has a particular substantial outcome. It also “does not guarantee any particular content for ‘civil rights or obligations’ in the substance law of the Contracting States” (*Grzęda v. Poland*, para. 258). Thus, even if there were procedural defects in a religious community’s decision-making

process to exclude a member, this would not create a substantive right to remain in the community.

Finally, the right to a fair trial only finds application with regard to procedures that take place before a court or tribunal in the sense of Article 6 ECHR. Such a court or tribunal must fulfill a judicial function within the Contracting State and must be established by state law (see ECtHR, GC, 1 December 2020, no. 26374/18, *Guðmundur Andri Ástráðsson v. Iceland*, paras. 219–30). A decision-making body within a non-state religious community that decides on the basis of theological considerations is not a court or tribunal according to this definition.

Additionally, the exclusion or disfellowshipping of a member by his/her religious community does not qualify as a criminal charge according to Article 6 ECHR, since such charge starts with the official notification given to an individual by the competent state authority of an allegation that he/she has committed a criminal offence (see ECtHR, GC, 13 September 2016, no. 50541/18, 50571/08, 50573/08 and 40351/09, *Ibrahim and Others v. United Kingdom*, para. 249; GC, 12 May 2017, no. 21980/04, *Simeonovi v. Bulgaria*, para. 110; 27 February 1980, no. 6903/75, *Deweert v. Belgium*, para 46; 15 July 1982, no. 8130/78, *Eckle v. Germany*, para. 73). An exclusion or disfellowshipping procedure run by a state religious community in a secular state does not qualify as criminal procedure. Although it is possible that in such proceedings investigations are conducted into a matter that may also be the subject of a public prosecutor's investigation, these proceedings do not form a part of the latter.

Against this background, courts in Europe generally do not examine and decide about cases that concern proceedings within religious communities. For example, the German Federal Constitutional Court in a case in which a Protestant congregation had challenged the decision of the church leadership to divide the congregation and its confirmation by the church court held that internal church measures that do not have direct legal effects within the state's jurisdiction cannot be reviewed by state courts (BVerfGE 18, 385, 387–88). Similarly, the Administrative Court of Berlin argued in a case concerning the adoption of a decision by the Representative Assembly of the Jewish Community of Berlin that there was no legal protection by administrative courts for conflicts within a religious community. As an expression of the guaranteed autonomy of the religious communities, the secular state must not interfere in the internal affairs

of these communities and their local congregations (20 June 2013, file no. VG 27 L 141.13).

2. Right to Respect for Private Life

The right to respect for private life under Article 8 ECHR includes the right of the individual to develop his/her personality and to define his/her identity and self-understanding within collective settings outside the family. It is possible that such collective settings are embedded in an institutional framework, particularly in the form of a club, an association, or a religious community. Insofar, it can be argued that Article 8 ECHR also protects the integration into a particular society, when the individual derives central coordinates for his/her personal development and identity from this integration, not least because it means inclusion and delimitation from the outside world. Such a function can be fulfilled excellently by membership in a religious community.

However, it is not yet judicially clarified whether the right to respect for private life can exist parallel to the determinations of the guarantee of freedom of religion within a religious community. Generally, it appears to be possible that Article 8 ECHR has effects besides freedom of religion in a religious context. This can particularly be considered if a religious community spies on its members and collects dossiers on their private contacts or the times when they are away from home. Essential parts of private life should be free from intervention even in religious settings. This can be argued at least in the cases of ordinary members living a secular life. Maybe certain exceptions can be accepted in cases where members spend a consecrated life in a religious order or monastery.

a) Regarding the Formal Exclusion from Membership

When a member is excommunicated by a religious community, the person concerned is compulsorily cut off from his/her integration into the institutional settings. As a result, he/she loses his/her private social life or at least some aspects of such life within the context of the religious community, depending on the consequences of such a measure according to the respective ecclesiastical or religious rules. The consequences could be, for instance, that the (former) member can no longer visit the house of worship and take part in the religious

ceremonies therein. They can even amount to a loss of religion, as religion is traditionally understood as a collective phenomenon (see Classen 2003, 22–6).

In that sense, an exclusion from a religious community appears to be a measure with considerable potential to force the (former) member to redefine and restructure his/her private life. This potential is, of course, only realized in cases where the affected person has not already alienated himself/herself from the (faith of the) religious community in question in the time before the exclusion was decided upon. Such alienation and its manifestations, for example harsh criticism toward the religious leaders and their doctrine, or persistent misconduct that violates the moral code of the religious community, might just have led to the excommunication.

However, the question about the parallelism of the right to respect for private life and the determinations of freedom of religion within a religious community can only be answered in the positive if there is room for private activities within the institutional settings of the community that are not qualified as religious. Whether that is the case depends on the self-determination of the religious community. When religious activities within the institutional settings are the domain of the religious community and its freedom of religion, there can be no right of the (former) member to participate in such activities. The institutional rules for collective action prevail.

After all, there cannot be a right under Article 8 ECHR directed against a religious community to remain a member in the latter. Nevertheless, it appears to be possible that the right to respect for private life applies with regard to accompanying circumstances of the exclusion, such as its procedure or communication to the members of the religious community or its local congregation. Particularly, the communication should not reveal reasons that belong to the affected person's private life, for instance an extramarital or homosexual relationship.

b) Regarding the Effects of a Commandment or Recommendation on Social Distancing

The commandment or recommendation made by the religious community to its (remaining) members to socially distance from, or shun, the excommunicated person may be judged differently than the formal exclusion from membership. In

that situation, the religious community does not act directly vis-à-vis the excommunicated person. Instead, it issues rules or recommendations of behavior for its members so that they act in a certain way in relation to that person. Since it could be argued that the religious community by such rules steered its members' actions affecting the excommunicated person, the community could indirectly violate the right to respect for private life of that person.

The commandment or recommendation to socially distance from an excluded former fellow believer can form a consequence of the exclusion from membership according to ecclesiastical or religious law. Since the excluded or disfellowshipped person is no longer bound to the institutional settings of the religious community but is now an outsider in relation to that community, he/she is also not subjected any more to the community's dominant collective or corporative freedom of religion. Consequently, the right to respect for private life is not automatically put aside due to the fact that the rules concerning social distancing are issued by a religious community on the basis of its doctrine.

The question is whether such rules interfere with the private life of the excommunicated person and whether this interference causes physical harm to that person or reaches a certain degree of severity according to the severity test of the European Court of Human Rights. The commandment or recommendation to socially distance may cause the members of the religious community to avoid contact with the excommunicated person or to limit it to necessary encounters, to stop joint leisure activities or even to end friendships. In contrast, the excluded or disfellowshipped person may wish to continue his/her relationship and companionship with his/her former fellow believers as if the exclusion or disfellowshipping had not happened. That would amount to taking the benefits of a social life within the context of a religion without bearing the personal costs of such a life in form of adherence to the ecclesiastical or religious standards of behavior.

The right to respect for private life protects the establishment and development of relationships and friendships with persons from outside the family. But, as explained in the section about the contents of that right, this guarantee can only be invoked if the persons addressed by the right bearer are sharing his/her will for contact and for starting or maintaining a relationship or friendship. When a religious community orders or urges its members to avoid or reduce contact with the excommunicated former believer and they follow this

command or recommendation, they have given up or do not form any more the will to establish or maintain a relationship or friendship with that person. Thus, the wish of the excommunicated person does not find a counterpart in a respective acceptance by the addressed members of the religious community. Consequently, the excommunicated person cannot claim that his/her right to respect for private life was violated by the religious community because it has commanded or recommended its members to socially distance from him/her.

But even if there were a well-founded claim that a religious community should not order or recommend social distancing from, or shunning of, a former member, such measures would not violate the right enshrined in Article 8 ECHR when, first, the religious community could base their command or recommendation on their right to freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR and, second, this right prevailed over the conflicting interest of the former member in the context of a balancing of interests. Thus, the command or recommendation must find its reason in the religious doctrine of the religious community, and it must be regarded as so essential that it trumps over the interest of the excommunicated former member to maintain contact and friendship with his/her former fellow believers. In this context the institutional practice of the religious community concerned would play a role.

3. Right to Respect for Family Life

The right to respect for family life includes the right to maintain close family ties with members of the inner family. Since religious communities generally do not qualify as family and religious worship within the institutional settings of such communities cannot be subsumed under the notion of family life in the sense of Article 8 ECHR, the exclusion from membership in a religious community as such does not infringe the right to respect for family life. Conversely, the commandment or recommendation of social distancing or shunning as consequence of an exclusion from membership in a religious community may, in particular circumstances, constitute an infringement of the right enshrined in Article 8 ECHR. It may cause members of the religious community to withdraw from an excommunicated family member, to end communication, and to avoid any other form of contact with that person.

The right to respect for family life only covers contact rights within certain family relations. For instance, it normally does not guarantee the contact between adults and their parents, siblings, grandparents, or more distant relatives in cases where one party does not wish to spend time or communicate with that person(s). However, the situation is more complex when minors are involved. This can be the case either if the mother, father, or other caretaker of a minor is excluded from membership in a religious community, while the minor and maybe also other family members remain in the community, and that person is, as a consequence, object of a social distancing or shunning commandment or recommendation or if the minor himself/herself is excommunicated or disfellowshipped, while his/her parent(s) or other caretaker remain(s) in the community.

Whether a social distancing or shunning commandment or recommendation issued by a religious community in such a case violates Article 8 ECHR depends on the content of the measure as perceived by reasonable objective third parties in the position of addressed members of the community and, furthermore, on the individual family situation of the affected persons. If the measure of the religious community must be understood in a way that the mother, father, or other caretaker who remains in the community should hinder any contact of the child with his/her excommunicated (other) parent, it appears to be generally problematic. It appears to be even more problematic if the child is the person excluded from membership and the social distancing measure of the religious community must be interpreted in a way that the mother, father, or other caretaker remaining in the community should withdraw any form of contact and care from the child.

Against this background, it must be clarified whether disfellowshipping, social distancing, or shunning in the religious community in question really means a cut of any contact. Since such a measure is a theological or religious concept, there might be various strategies for dealing with an excommunicated person. For example, it may mean that family members should not practice common religious ceremonies with the excluded person, should not have a common meal with that person, should not talk to that person, or should not cohabitate with that person. In any case, the religious community has the right to define and explain the content of its measure. The interpretation given by representatives of other churches or religious communities or by activist ex-members is not relevant.

Depending on the content of the measure, its consequences regarding contact rights of an affected minor differ. It may not constitute interference if a parent or both parents should no longer study the holy scriptures of the respective religion together with the child, or no longer pray together with the child, or if he/she has, or they have, to spend less time together with the child because some formerly common activities in the context of religion can only be continued by one party after the excommunication. Conversely, it may constitute interference if a parent or even both parents should stop talking to a child or caring for his/her physical needs, or if the child should no longer be allowed to talk to his/her mother, father, or another caretaker, be that person living in the same household or not.

Furthermore, the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights shows that contact rights between parent(s) and child do not exist in any case and, when existing, are not unlimited. In cases where there are no close family ties in practice between a parent and a child, the right to respect for family life under Article 8 ECHR normally does not guarantee protection. For instance, a parent may already have left the family home before exclusion from the religious community, not least due to facts relating to the circumstances which led to that measure, and he/she may have shown no interest in the child for a long period of time. On the other side, an excommunicated minor of religious age who nearly reached adulthood may already have left the parental home to move in with his friends outside the religious community and may not wish to meet with his/her parents so that they do not harm his/her conscience.

Contact rights between parent(s) and child are limited by the best interests of the child. A parental contact may be (potentially) harmful for the child. For example, this will probably be the case if the parent has physically or emotionally abused or severely neglected the child in the past. It may be also not be beneficial for the child's development and well-being if he/she (continues to) has/have contact with a parent who is addicted to alcohol or drugs. Such aspects might have been a cause for the excommunication or disfellowshipping. Thus, religious rules may run parallel to secular provisions regarding child custody.

In any case, the European Court of Human Rights rightly pointed out in *Neulinger and Shuruk v. Switzerland* (para. 138) and other judgments that decisions about contact rights between parents and children are a complex matter. Therefore, it cannot be said in general terms that an excommunication or disfellowshipping measure issued by a religious community violates the right to

respect for private life if a child is affected by such a measure. Such a generalizing judgement would not meet human rights requirements.

4. Freedom of Religion

Finally, excommunication from a religious community and its social distancing consequences could interfere with freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR, namely the right to freely leave a religious community. The prospect that losing membership in the religious community could lead to a measure of social distancing or shunning could exert inadmissible pressure on members to remain in the community. This view emphasizes foreshadowing effects of the consequences of the loss of membership in a religious community on actual membership.

However, the exclusion from membership in a religious community due to religious misconduct may have different consequences than a voluntary leaving the community according to the respective ecclesiastical or religious law. When a voluntary leave does not lead to social distancing or shunning, such consequences of an excommunication by the religious community cannot restrict ex ante the right to freely leave the community. Thus, two different paths of losing membership must not be equalized if the religious community in question draws a theological distinction between them.

Furthermore, membership in an association, club, or other institutional framework usually goes hand in hand with obligations. These can include the obligation to pay the annual fee, to take on certain tasks of common interest, to observe a dress code, to comply with a confidentiality clause, or even to obey a more general code of conduct. Insofar, religious communities are not special, although their rules addressing members may often be quite extensive and refer to matters that are genuinely regarded as private and to moral choices. Members of any association can expect that violations of internal rules will not go unpunished, but will have consequences under association law or, in the case of a religious community, ecclesiastical or religious law.

The European Court of Human Rights stressed in the context of freedom of association guaranteed by Article 11 ECHR that this right cannot be interpreted as imposing an obligation on associations or organizations to admit whosoever

wishes to join and to tolerate whosoever wants to stay with them. Where associations were

formed by people, who, espousing particular values or ideals, intended to pursue common goals, it would run counter to the very effectiveness of the freedom of association if they had no control over their membership (27 February 2007, no. 11002/05, *Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen [ASLEF] v. United Kingdom*, para. 39).

For example, it was accepted in all Contracting States that religious bodies and political parties can generally regulate their membership to include only those who share their beliefs and ideals. The right to freedom of association did not comprise the right to become a member of a particular association (see already European Commission on Human Rights, 13 May 1985, no. 10550/83, *Ernest Dennis Cheall v. United Kingdom*). However, the expulsion from an association could constitute a violation of the freedom of association of the member concerned if it was in breach of the association's rules or arbitrary or entailed exceptional hardship for the individual (*Lovrić v. Croatia*, paras. 54 and 72).

These findings can also apply to religious communities. Regarding the latter aspect of exceptional hardship, it must be noted that, unlike “normal” associations, religious communities can claim their right to freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR, besides freedom of association under Article 11 ECHR. Therefore, their human rights position is particularly strong in the process of balancing. Consequently, it can be argued that the requirement of an exceptional hardship must be interpreted very narrowly. Regular consequences of an exclusion from membership due to a certain religious misconduct that are well-known to actual members cannot be qualified as exceptional. This is at least true in cases where there are no extraordinary circumstances in the person excluded that require special treatment.

After all, the perspective that excommunication or disfellowshipping due to a certain religious misconduct can lead to social distancing or shunning generally does not interfere with the right to freely leave a religious community, which is enshrined in the right to freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR. It does not exert inadmissible pressure on members to remain in the religious community.

IV. Relationship Between Family Members and Former Fellow Believers and the Excommunicated Former Member

The relationship between family members and former fellow believers on the one side and the excommunicated person on the other side can fall within the protection guaranteed by the right to respect for private life and family life under Article 8 ECHR. In that context, it must be taken into account that family members who remain in the religious community and former fellow believers of the excluded person additionally hold a relationship with that community. They can be the addressees of its social distancing or shunning commandment or recommendation. Thus, they may be able to invoke their freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR to break off contact with the excommunicated or disfellowshipped former member.

Many of the aspects already mentioned in the explanations regarding the relationship between the religious community and the excommunicated former member are also relevant for the relationship between family members and former fellow believers and the excommunicated person. This has to do with the fact that social distancing or shunning is executed by the members of the religious community as natural persons.

Again, the excommunicated former member does not have a contact right against another person outside of his/her inner family if that person does not want to enter into, or maintain, such contact. The reasons for the refusal of contact may vary, and their level of comprehensibility and seriousness legally does not matter because they are not necessary as a counter-right. It is possible that a remaining member of the religious community either simply follows the commandment or recommendation without questioning it or that he/she believes that ignoring the message would qualify as sin.

Furthermore, the remaining member might think that he/she does not want to waste time with a person who has left, according to his/her conviction, the right religion, particularly when religion had been the only bond between the parties. This may be a very likely reason regarding religious communities that are not mainly linked with a certain territorial, cultural, or linguistic origin but primarily fill their lines by recruitment in the framework of missionary activities. It is also possible that the remaining member holds that following the religious community's code of conduct needs his/her whole attention and that he/she

therefore should not associate with people who could send out disruptive signals and tempt him/her to turn his/her back on religion as well.

Concerning contact rights between family members, the legal situation is more complex. The explanations that have been made with regard to the relationship between the religious community and excommunicated former members laid down the cornerstones for the human rights assessment. When excommunicated persons wish to maintain contact by reference to their right to respect for family life under Article 8 ECHR, the addressed family members who remain in the religious community may invoke their freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR and also their right to respect for private life and family life under Article 8 ECHR as counter-rights. Thus, the conflicting rights (and interests) must be weighed and balanced to find an answer to the question whether a legal position of the excommunicated person is violated.

In this context, it should be mentioned that the European Court of Human Rights in its admissibility decision in the case *Šijakova and Others v. Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* took a restrictive approach to legitimate state interference into family life:

[T]he issue of maintaining contacts and communication between parents and children who are not minors, and the respect and affection they extend to each other, is a private matter, which concerns and depends on the individuals bound in a family relationship, the lack of which, and the reasons for and origins of such lack, do not call for a positive undertaking by the State and cannot be imputable to it (6 March 2003, no. 67914/01).

As mentioned, the notion of family usually implies close personal ties with strong emotional bonds. In situations where a family member is excluded from a religious community and other members remain in that community, there may often be a lack of such close personal ties. Family members may have alienated from each other already before the religious community has decided on the excommunication or disfellowshipping of the person concerned, because they were the first to realize or detect the religious misconduct. This may have happened when, for example, that person has committed physical or emotional violence toward family members, has taken drugs or excessively drunk alcohol on a regular basis, cheated, did not return home without prior announcement for days or even weeks, at a time, or violated his/her maintenance obligation or obligation to take care of the material needs of the family in the long term. It is also possible that alienation took place because that person has started to

blaspheme about religion, to ridicule the religious doctrine, the spiritual leaders or the (fellow) believers, or, on the other side, to use racist or misogynistic propaganda or to turn to other kind of hate speech or commitment to violence.

Adults are generally not required to contact or to maintain contact with excommunicated adult family members if they do not wish to do so. In that regard, social distancing or shunning cannot violate the excommunicated person's right to respect for family life under Article 8 ECHR. Regarding minors, there must be a thorough analysis what excommunication or disfellowshipping really means in the religious community concerned and what consequences are to follow by members if there is, according to the theological or religious doctrine, the possibility that a child or minor is excluded from membership or if a parent or parents are excommunicated while having a child remaining in the religious community.

As explained, the European Court of Human Rights rightly stresses the rights of children in its case-law. The Court assumes that it was principally in the child's interest to maintain his/her ties with his/her parent(s). But it also admits that there may be situations where further (regular) contact would harm the child's health and development. Therefore, the Court insists that in each individual case where a conflict arises there must be a comprehensive weighing and balancing of the child's rights or interests and those of the parent(s). That process should not least consider the child's age and level of maturity, the presence or absence of his/her parents and his/her environment and experiences (*Neulinger and Shuruk v. Switzerland*, para. 138). After all, it cannot be said that social distancing or shunning of (former) fellow believers that affects a child or children generally constitutes a human rights violation. If such behavior takes sufficient account of the interests of the child/ren in question, it is in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights and other human rights instruments protecting the rights of the child.

V. Conclusion

All things considered, the right to respect for private and family life under Article 8 ECHR is a weak instrument for an excommunicated or disfellowshipped person to defend himself/herself against religiously motivated social distancing or shunning in the triangular relationship with the religious community that

ordered or recommended such a measure, (former) fellow believers and family members remaining in the community. The European human rights system guarantees religious communities a far-reaching freedom of religion to define their system of faith, their membership rules, and their code of conduct. Members cannot claim freedom of religion against their religious community but are limited to the right to freely leave the community.

The right to respect for private life does not guarantee contact rights against persons outside the inner family who do not share the wish for contact. Conversely, the addressed persons can invoke their own right to private life and, in case they have religious reasons not to establish or maintain a relationship, also their freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR to fend off such a request. Therefore, a religious community that commands or recommends its members to socially distance themselves from, or shun, an excommunicated or disfellowshipped former member, directs its members only to a legally permitted activity or omission. This cannot qualify as a measure violating the human rights of the excommunicated or disfellowshipped person.

Similarly, the right to respect for family life regularly does not establish contact rights between adult family members. Fathers, mothers, adult children, and siblings need not enter into or remain in contact with an excommunicated or disfellowshipped person. However, the legal situation is more complex when minors are affected by social distancing or shunning. In that case, the content and extent of the measure issued by the religious community must be clarified, and a thorough weighing and balancing of the rights and interests of both the minor and of the family members concerned must take place. Only if such examination leads to the result that the rights and interests of the minor prevail over conflicting positions of family members who want to execute the social distancing or shunning measure, then the religious community in question could be blamed to violate human rights.

National authorities and courts that have to decide about legal consequences for religious communities where social distancing or shunning is practiced must therefore consider very carefully the various human rights positions within the triangle of religious community, excommunicated former member, and (former) fellow believers and family members remaining in the community. The latter two groups can claim their own right to respect for private and family life under

Article 8 ECHR and their freedom of religion under Article 9 ECHR when they end any contact with the excommunicated or disfellowshipped person.

Furthermore, the content and extent of the social distancing measures must be examined. The notion of shunning belongs to the language of the anti-cult movement (Pel 2023, sub 1 and 5). But it is primarily on the religious community itself to define and explain its doctrine and its code of conduct for members. That right is included in its church or religious autonomy and its right to self-determination under Article 9 ECHR. Representatives of other churches or religious communities, which are competitors on the market of religious offers to ascribe sense to the life of humans, and also activist ex-members, who gathered together to fight against the particular religious community or against any kind of religious community, do not qualify as expert witnesses about the religious faith or practice of that community.

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Research Notes

Scientology's Interfaith and Charitable Work in South Africa

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ABSTRACT: Unlike in other countries, the Church of Scientology enjoys a largely positive image in South Africa. Anti-cult campaigns do exist in the country, but Scientology has never been one of their main targets. One reason is the effectiveness of Scientology Volunteer Ministers' disaster relief activities, in a country where governmental agencies are plagued by endemic corruption. Another is the massive interfaith effort that has led to agreements with hundreds of religious organizations, whose bishops, pastors, and other leaders are trained by Scientologists through programs aimed at improving their communication and management skills, while no effort is made to "convert" them to Scientology. Most Scientology Volunteer Ministers in South Africa are not Scientologists. Interfaith and volunteer work does improve the public image of Scientology, but non-Scientologists who participate in it mostly praise its positive results.

KEYWORDS: Church of Scientology, Scientology in South Africa, Scientology Volunteer Ministers, Tools for Life, Scientology's Interfaith Activities.

Soft Drinks and New Religious Movements: The Saga of the Mc Col

It was a bright summer day in the Southern Hemisphere, December 9, 2023, in the park in front of the University of Cape Town. Thousands of people had gathered for a non-competitive Peace and Health Walk to celebrate the launch of

a new drink called Mc Col that promised to take the African continent by storm. We were both in attendance. Yet, we are not particularly interested in how soft drinks are marketed. But this was a gathering we could not miss.

Presiding the event was Dr. Samuel Radebe, the IMboni (something more than a prophet) of one of the largest South African new religious movements, The Revelation Spiritual Home, calling Africans to rediscover African traditional, pre-Christian and pre-Islamic, spirituality (Introvigne and Šorytè 2023). Radebe also operates a number of commercial companies whose aim is both to support his movement and to lift his devotees out of poverty, eventually allowing them to start their own small businesses.

One of these companies import and distributes Mc Col into South Africa and nearby countries. Next to Radebe, who was wearing the traditional cheetah skin hat of African chiefs, Asian executives with their customary Westernized dark jackets and ties appeared on the podium. They had come to South Africa to represent the South Korean manufacturer of the Mc Col drink, a company belonging to the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, once known as the Unification Church. Some of them introduced themselves as “Reverend” and paid their respects to Radebe in the name of their religion’s leader, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, the widow of Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012).

Seated at a table in the park, leaders of the Church of Scientology from South Africa and abroad cheered the event. They had trained a number of executives of The Revelation Spiritual Home through their *Tools for Life* program, and some of them looked forward to applying what they had learned from Scientology to the sale of Mc Col.

When we reported to some colleagues, specialized in the study of new religious movements, what we had witnessed in Cape Town as exceptional, they commented that it was not particularly new. New religious movements regularly cooperate between themselves within the framework of religious liberty coalitions to resist anti-cult campaigns, and most of them also participate in interfaith initiatives. In fact, these colleagues had missed our point entirely—or perhaps we had not explained it clearly enough. What happened in Cape Town on December 9, 2023, had nothing to do with religious freedom alliances or inter-religious dialogue. The aim was strictly to sell a soft drink. The uniqueness of the event was in putting together three very different new religious movements for a commercial venture. The Unification Church produces the Mc Col in South

Korea. The Revelation Spiritual Home distributes it in Africa. Scientology, although not involved in the Mc Col venture, trains executives of The Revelation Spiritual Home to acquire skills they can use both in their religious and commercial activities.

Anti-Cultism in South Africa: Scientology Is Not a Main Target

On the other hand, the Mc Col alliance happened because the three movements had learned to cooperate within each other for purposes other than selling soft drinks. Just one day before the McCol event, we attended the foundation meeting of the African Forum for Religious Liberty and Spirituality (AFRLS), the African section of FOREF, the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe, of which Radebe had been elected coordinator with a Scientologist serving as deputy coordinator (Introvigne 2023). Present at the event was also a member of the Family Federation (ex Unification Church) who is Executive Director of FOREF in Vienna, together with representatives of dozens of other religions present in South Africa, both newly established and mainline.

The establishment of AFRLS, and the large number of religious leaders who gathered for its launching event, could be interpreted as a response to an awareness that anti-cultism, as a global phenomenon, is also expanding to South Africa. One of the consequences of anti-cultism is that the massive charitable and humanitarian work some new religious movements perform goes unrecognized.

Eileen Barker once wrote that “one does not often see reports of the charitable work in which many of the NRMs [new religious movements] engage,” even if it is sometimes “outstanding” (Barker 2020, 538). That this happens, is evidence of the phenomenon social scientists call “gatekeeping” (Barzilai-Nahon 2008, 2009). For different reasons, the media filters out news that do not correspond to certain agendas or established stereotypes. “Cults” are by definition malignant, and gatekeeping works to exclude information that would contradict this prejudice.

Gatekeeping, however, does not always work. In 2020, one of us (Šorytė) conducted research about how the Church of Scientology was reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic. She interviewed Scientologists and others and examined

dozens of press clippings and media reports from several countries (Šoryté 2020).

She came to three conclusions. First, Scientology had developed an impressive range of activities on a worldwide basis, both spreading information about preventive measures and offering practical help such as distributing masks and sanitizing public spaces. Second, opponents of Scientology had dismissed even this admirable and effective activity as mere propaganda, a typical example of gatekeeping. Some specialized media are devoted exclusively to perpetuate the stereotypes about the “cults,” and to attack those, including scholars, who dare to report positive information about these movements. Confronted with the fact that, during the 2020 pandemic, Scientology and its Volunteer Ministers performed significant and positive charitable deeds and helped the population in a moment of deep crisis, anti-cult media reacted by raising doubts about the Scientologists' motivations, and even ridiculing them with a violent language—which, in this case, was also distasteful and offensive towards the victims of the pandemic and those who tried to help them. The verbal violence was also intended to serve notice that, should some media or others lower the gate and allow positive information about Scientology to be published, they will also be attacked.

The third conclusion, however, was that there was a country where these forms of aggressive gatekeeping were not working, Scientology's anti-COVID activities were represented for what they were, and the coverage was surprisingly positive and immune from the usual anti-cult stereotypes. That country was South Africa.

Later, after the worst phase of COVID-19 subsided, we visited South Africa twice and interviewed representatives of the Church of Scientology there. We noticed that the climate was very much different from Europe, particularly in France where hostility to Scientology is, as the French would say, “de rigueur” in most media circles. Not in South Africa, though, where Scientology was generally referred to with respect.

This was even more interesting as in South Africa campaigns against “cults” have been conducted for several years, targeting various Christian new religious movements and others promoting traditional African spirituality, with the support of some politicians. A governmental agency called Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (in short, CRL), had conducted in 2015–2016 an investigation on the abuse of

religion, and had published in 2017 a controversial report using typical anti-cult language (CRL Rights Commission 2017). One of the criticisms we raised ourselves against the report (Introvigne and Šorytė 2023) is that, as it admitted, it identified what religious groups should be investigated based on “controversial news reports and articles in the media” (CRL Rights Commission 2017, 4). This meant that the media dictated the agenda of a governmental commission, which did not ask itself whether some reports may be biased or conditioned by the hostility towards certain groups.

Be it as it may be, the report targeted dozens of religious movements active in South Africa but did not mention at all the Church of Scientology. This was an indication that “controversial news reports and articles in the media” on Scientology were either non-existing or not particularly important in the country. The reason was not that Scientology was not active nor visible in South Africa. On the contrary, the first Church of Scientology was established in Johannesburg in 1957, and the founder of the religion himself, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), spent time in South Africa in the late 1960s (Church of Scientology International 2024). Later, a magnificent private mansion called Castle Kyalami in Midrand, near Johannesburg, was bought to become the headquarters of Scientology for the whole continent of Africa and inaugurated on January 1, 2019 (Church of Scientology in South Africa 2024).

The anti-cult movement is in its essence transnational, and hostile literature was available in South Africa, yet it failed to have a significant impact there. What are the reasons of this difference between South Africa and other countries?

The Effectiveness of Scientology’s Disaster Relief

One reason explaining why the Church of Scientology has a positive image in South Africa may be the obvious effectiveness of Scientology’s emergency teams in a country where government-provided disaster relief often finds obstacles in the endemic plague of corruption.

As mentioned earlier, the impression that the anti-cultists did not succeed in tarnishing a generally positive image of Scientology in South Africa was confirmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Šorytė’s research of 2020, several examples were offered of activities in South Africa that were both regarded as

effective and generated a favorable media coverage. For example, in Rand West City, in the South African province of Gauteng, Scientology Volunteer Ministers disinfected the Public Safety Department in Randfontein and Westonaria (the two municipalities whose merger resulted in Rand West City), the Rand West City Civic Centre, the Old Westonaria Municipal Offices, the Randgate Clinic, the Westonaria Shelter for the Homeless, and the Westonaria Library. In the Gauteng province, Scientology mobilized 233 Volunteer Ministers, split in 18 teams. In the Johannesburg area, Volunteer Ministers decontaminated several fire stations, and the city of Johannesburg entered into an agreement with them to systematically disinfect all local taxis. Also in South Africa, Korekile Home for Cerebral Palsied Children, in Simunye, was disinfected by Scientology Volunteer Ministers, who donated gloves to the children. In Mogale City, the disinfection involved parts of the City Hall, the local library, the Munsieville Centre for the Aged and Disabled, Munsieville Stadium, and ThuroLefa Secondary School. In fact, Scientology Volunteers became so popular in South Africa that criminals falsely claiming to be Volunteer Ministers showed up at private homes' doors pretending to be there to sanitize them (Šorytė 2020, 28–30).

Scientology has now released statistics about its global anti-COVID work in South Africa. More than one billion square meters of essential infrastructure were sanitized by is Volunteer Ministers. They included community clinics, hospitals, public transport hubs, nursing homes, children's shelters, government offices and more. More than 1.3 million public transport vehicles were sanitized, including buses and taxis. Over 1.3 million educational booklets on hygiene education and illness prevention were distributed in English, Zulu, Sesotho, and Xhosa, the most widely used South African languages (personal interviews, Cape Town, South Africa, December 8 and 9, 2023).

One may object that these statistics come from Scientology itself, but this work was recognized with over three hundred recognitions and awards from government, the private sector, non-profit organizations, and others. This included recognitions from the African Union, the South African National Disaster Management Center, and the national Deputy Minister for Social Development.

After COVID, the sequence disaster – effective intervention of Scientology Volunteer Ministers – overwhelmingly positive media coverage repeated itself in South Africa several times. During the social unrest in July 2021, Scientology

Volunteer Ministers cleaned up and restored infrastructures across the Gauteng province. In January 2022, a devastating fire consumed a large part of the Parliament Building in Cape Town. Scientology Volunteer Ministers were amongst the first on the ground, working with firefighters and other first responders. In April 2022, torrential rains hit the city of Durban and surrounding areas in the KwaZulu-Natal Province. Scientology Volunteer Ministers travelled to the affected sites immediately, assisting rescuers in searching and finding survivors, distributing supplies and, very importantly, providing social and spiritual supportive counseling to traumatized victims. For this work, Scientology Volunteer Ministers received an award from the Departments of Health and Social Development.

In January 2023, after a devastating gas tanker explosion on Christmas' Eve 2022 in Boksburg, in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, in Gauteng, had all but destroyed an entire hospital ward, killing more than a dozen nurses and patients, Scientology Volunteer Ministers worked with the Department of Health to provide social and spiritual trauma support to those who lost loved ones and colleagues. A formally signed partnership with the Department of Health followed, to provide support in similar cases to frontline health workers who often get affected themselves by trauma, depression, and grief (personal interviews, Cape Town, South Africa, December 8 and 9, 2023).

As a result of these activities, Scientology-related disaster relief and educational agencies have signed partnership agreements with different South African national and local governmental agencies (Church of Scientology in South Africa 2023, 23)—something that would be difficult to conceive, say, in France.

Non-Scientists Who Are Scientology Volunteer Ministers

Another reason explaining why, unlike in other countries, a large part of the South African media coverage of Scientology's volunteer activity is positive is something that is true everywhere but, for whatever reason, proved easier to be understood by media and public agencies in South Africa than elsewhere. There are more Scientology Volunteer Ministers in South Africa, as in other countries, than there are Scientologists. This is because you do not need to be a Scientologist to be a Scientology Volunteer Minister. You need to be trained,

mostly by Scientologists, according to principles ultimately reflecting the ideas of Hubbard—but during this training nobody would ask you to “convert” to Scientology. There are more than 25,000 Scientology Volunteer Ministers in South Africa. Most of them are *not* Scientologists and indeed many, including pastors and other clergy, were trained as a result of agreements between the Church of Scientology and other religious bodies.

That the courses are not regarded as proselytization tools for Scientology is confirmed by the fact that the Church of Scientology has entered into formal and informal partnership agreements with several individual religious communities (including The Revelation Spiritual Home) and religious and spiritual umbrella organizations. They include the South African Christian Minister Council (with over six hundred member churches in seven out of the nine South African provinces), the African Religious and Traditional Leaders Council, the South African Traditional Healers Organization, the government-sponsored Faith Based Organization, and the Council of Churches of South Africa International. The latter (COCSAI) is a different organization from the South African Council of Churches, which is better known historically for its political involvement. COCSAI has some five hundred member churches, most of them of a conservative orientation. Overall, 350 organizations in South Africa, most of them religious, have entered into some sort of partnership agreement or cooperation with Scientology Volunteer Ministers (personal interviews, Cape Town, South Africa, December 8 and 9, 2023; we have also examined the written texts of the agreements discussed in this paragraph).

Interfaith Work: The Tools for Life Course Comes to South Africa

Scientologists we interviewed in South Africa insisted that the main reason they developed a work with other religious bodies is not protection from anti-cult attacks, which are not one of their main concerns in the country—at least for the time being. They have been happy to participate in the AFRLS and in other initiatives developed by Evangelical Christians to promote religious liberty, but they mostly originated in South Africa from groups that regard themselves as more immediately threatened. The reason Scientologists engage in interfaith activities in South Africa, they told us, has much more to do with a reflection on the endemic problems of the country, corruption and criminality, inspired by the

principles taught by their founder Hubbard. He believed that crime and corruption cannot be fought through punishment and police only.

Repression will not succeed if morality is not internalized by most citizens. Religions have an essential role in this process leading to internalize morality and integrity. Materialism alone would never create law-abiding citizens, Hubbard insisted. Thus, while Scientologists obviously believe that the path (or “technology,” as they prefer to call it) offered by Hubbard is the best way to individual and social happiness, they are also persuaded that reinforcing the presence of religion in society in general promotes the public well-being.

In practice, this aim is pursued in South Africa by offering to all religions willing to participate in the program (as well as to non-religious social actors) something called *Tools for Life* (Hubbard 2011). The “Tools” are nineteen courses corresponding to the nineteen parts of Hubbard’s *The Scientology Handbook* (Hubbard 1993; see also Hubbard 1976), presented in a way that does not require that students embrace the religious principles of Scientology. They are only taught practical skills on how to better communicate, manage their congregations, solve conflicts inside and between religious communities, and help their parishioners who experience difficulties. Since many churches and religions lost members in South Africa (as in other countries) who stopped attending services during the COVID-19 lockdowns and did not come back when restrictions were lifted, how to contact them and bring them back to the fold is also discussed when teaching these courses.

The *Tools for Life* course is available in South Africa in English, Zulu, Xhosa, and Sesotho but other African languages are being added. As of the end of 2023, more than 4,000 religious leaders including archbishops, bishops, pastors, priests, and traditional healers graduated from the *Tools for Life* course (personal interviews, Johannesburg, South Africa, January 18, 2023; Cape Town, South Africa, December 8 and 9, 2023).

A content analysis of the *Tools for Life* materials used in South Africa reveals that their aim is to improve the effectiveness of those who take the course in three basic areas: communication skills, social and spiritual support, and community resources with a particular focus on the post-COVID-19 context.

Those familiar with the ideas of L. Ron Hubbard know that he believed that a key to successful interpersonal relationships is what he called the ARC Triangle.

The letters ARC stand for Affinity – Reality – Communication. Affinity is the positive emotional relationship we establish with others. Reality is the agreement we reach with others about how things are. Communication is the most important part of the triangle: through communication, we socially construct reality and, once reality is consensually shared, we can generate affinity.

Hubbard also believed that communication often fails because of our bad habit of not to stop and pause when we come across a word we do not understand. A basic technology taught in *Tools for Life* is “word clearing.” Hubbard taught that

A misunderstood word will remain misunderstood until one clears the meaning of the word. Once the word is fully understood by the person, it is said to be cleared... The procedures used to locate and clear up words the student has misunderstood in his studies are called Word Clearing. The first thing to learn is the exact procedure to clear any word or symbol one comes across in reading or studying that he does not understand (Hubbard 2011, 14; see Hubbard 2008, 66–74).

Once basic communication skills have been learned, the next step is teaching students how to use them to better organize their communities and help community members that experience specific problems, listed in seven categories: gender-based violence, grief and trauma, anger, depression and failure, stress and anxiety, exhaustion and burn-out, self-doubt and lack of self-confidence. Obviously, learning how to talk effectively with those who are in these situations suppose that the student has achieved a good level of communication skills, to which basic organizational principles are added (Hubbard 2011).

In the South African context, a practical application of the skills acquired is taught under the name of “holistic community health and safety program”, whose aim is

to use the organizational and communication skills learnt in the *Tools for Life* training to provide effective high-end sanitization of the high-traffic community facilities mitigating the spread of illnesses, such as Covid-19, common seasonal, and childhood illnesses (Church of Scientology in South Africa 2023, 19).

Students who undertake the *Tools for Life* course are mentored by graduates who have already successfully completed the program. While they closely monitor the students, they do not explain or interpret the information for them but refer them to the appropriate course materials, suggesting re-reading the texts several times if needed. To develop communication skills, mock presentations are organized

where one student acts as the presenter and others as the audience. The audience is encouraged to ask “difficult” questions and the presenter to answer by keeping calm and never telling the audience that they are wrong, or their questions are inappropriate (Church of Scientology in South Africa 2023, 5).

To learn the all-important “word clearing” techniques, students are paired in teams. Their overseer makes sure that they do not move to the next step (or “drill”) until they have achieved the results of the current step (Church of Scientology in South Africa 2023, 14). At the close of the workshop, students are asked to write an “After Workshop Report” (Church of Scientology in South Africa 2023, 5).

Although to the best of our knowledge this criticism has not been raised in South Africa, in other countries there have been objections and even court cases claiming that companies that use Hubbard’s technology to improve the communication and organizational skills of their employees violate the religious liberty of those of them who are not Scientologists, by exposing them to the teachings of the religion of Scientology. These objections are, based on our observation of the activities in South Africa, unfounded. In the *Tools for Life* course there is no attempt to convert students to Scientology and there are no references to Scientology as a religion or to its theological principles, although it is clearly stated (but not particularly emphasized) that the secular and non-denominational principles taught in the program were developed by Hubbard.

We did interview South African religious leaders who took the course. None of them felt that their faith was threatened, or the aim was to persuade participants to join Scientology—although, not surprisingly, by participating in the project they developed personal friendships with Scientologists.

The *Tools for Life* countries is strictly connected with the Volunteer Ministers program. The overseers are normally Volunteer Ministers and many non-Scientologists who take the course decide to become Volunteer Ministers themselves (without joining the Church of Scientology).

South African Scientologists' Motivations

In the long article—in fact, almost a book—that French scholar Bernadette Rigal-Cellard wrote in 2019 about Scientology's interaction with other social actors, she proposed a distinction between

three major types of interfaith activities: 1, advocacy through international religious freedom conferences and interfaith religious services; 2, disaster relief operations; 3, better living and peace campaigns in socially deprived and violent areas (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 89).

Advocating for religious freedom is always considered by Scientologists as a key part of their human rights endeavors. They have also learned that they can be hit by unexpected attacks at any time. For this reason, South African Scientologists have embraced with enthusiasm the promotion of a religious freedom alliance that mostly originated from members of The Revelation Spiritual Home and the Family Federation/Unification Church and led to the establishment of the already mentioned African Forum for Religious Liberty and Spirituality (AFRLS). Interestingly, in her article Rigal-Cellard discusses the importance of the international activities on behalf of interfaith religious liberty advocacy by French Scientology leader Eric Roux (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 92–4). Roux was one of the speakers at the AFRLS launching meeting in Cape Town on December 8, 2023.

Disaster relief is a difficult activity that Scientology is well aware its volunteers cannot effectively perform alone. Yet another reason its Volunteer Ministers enjoy a positive image in South Africa has been their willingness to cooperate with other disaster relief organizations, including some whose religious ideas may be far away from their own.

The South African interfaith work we have discussed in this paper mostly belongs to the third category of Rigal-Cellard's typology: promoting a better living in “socially deprived and violent areas.” Unfortunately, a large part of South Africa can be classified into this category. There, the activity of Scientology volunteers in cooperation with both Christian and non-Christian religious organizations parallels the work with African American churches and with the Nation of Islam encountered by Rigal-Cellard during her fieldwork in the United States (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 99–104).

Her conclusion that according to many qualified witnesses the Scientologists' interfaith work does not lead to devotees of other religions converting to

Scientology—nor is this its purpose—but improves the situation in socially deprived neighborhoods also applies to South Africa.

Of course, if proselytization is not their aim, the question remains why Scientologists in South Africa do engage in such a massive volunteer and interfaith work. Scientologists we interviewed answered that they do it to make our planet a better place and because they firmly believe that what they call the “technology” developed by L. Ron Hubbard may alleviate the suffering of their fellow human beings. Critics insist that for “cults” charitable activities are always a form of propaganda.

Rigal-Cellard did note that,

with their yellow jackets the Scientologist rescue teams made sure to be far more visible on photos or on television than other teams and to use their presence as a proselytizing tool. Scientologists will say the bright color is to signal to victims or other helpers where they are for extra support. Indeed, all disaster relief volunteers do wear specific colors or logos in order to be located easily by victims or by the other members of their groups or by coordinators, since each team is specialized in one form of relief. In any case, the issue betrays the age-old ambiguity of humanitarian aid, inextricably altruistic and *pro domo* (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 88).

Obviously, humanitarian aid always benefits the image of those providing it, which does not mean that it is ineffective and only offered for propaganda purposes. Caritas International, the Roman Catholic relief agency, is well-known for its prompt intervention and effectiveness, yet there is little doubt that its action also promotes a positive image of the Catholic Church, something that is particularly needed today when the church is criticized because of moral scandals or controversial political statements by the Pope. The same can be said for the large relief agencies of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as the Mormon Church, and many other religious charities. Are they active to help the needy or to promote the image of their parent religious organizations? Our answer is that they do both at the same time, and this is somewhat normal and unavoidable.

We may broaden the argument by observing that this is also true for governments. The largest development agency in the world is USAID. It is not operated by a church or religion but by the government of the United States. Other countries, including China and (at least before the war in Ukraine) Russia, also sent teams around the world to help with COVID and other emergencies,

and invested money in humanitarian aid and support to development in poorer countries. While in some cases the propaganda and perhaps even espionage purposes of these missions is obvious, in many others effective aid is provided by both national governments and international institutions. Is this a form of “soft power” or genuine international solidarity? It is, in most cases, both.

Our point is not that the Church of Scientology, in South Africa as elsewhere, operates for “pure” humanitarian purposes and its motivations do not include the promotion of the good image of the church. All organizations, large and small, religious or political, churches and governments, not to mention large private corporations that also provide aid in case of disasters, both mobilize the altruistic and humanitarian feelings of their members, citizens, donors, and volunteers *and* make sure that who provides the aid is acknowledged, reaping benefits in terms of image and prestige. This is part of how social processes develop, and if only anonymous help and donations were allowed, the needy would receive much less than they currently do. What is unfair is that, while the world of volunteerism and humanitarian help follows the same general rules everywhere, only “cults,” and Scientology in particular, are singled out and accused to act for dubious motivations.

A vicious circle is thus created. If groups stigmatized as “cults” are not particularly active in charitable activities, they are accused of being anti-social and self-absorbed into an obsessive care of their own growth only. But if, as Scientology does, they develop an impressive network of charitable and volunteer activities, they are accused of doing this for purposes of propaganda and self-aggrandizement.

Annoying as they may be, in the eyes of the Scientologists these attacks are merely a distraction in what they see as a cosmic battle to rescue the planet. As for the outside observers, the fact that Scientology's good work sometimes goes unreported (but less so in South Africa) is both a confirmation of how persistent prejudices are against certain religious minorities, and something that should slowly be changed by studying how, as suggested by American scholar Donald Westbrook, “ordinary Scientologists,” rather than cultivating controversies, operate in ways that are not so much different from members of older religions (Westbrook 2018).

The interfaith work, including the *Tools for Life* courses, certainly affirms the public image of the Church of Scientology in South Africa as an organization that

has developed effective techniques to solve different social problems. At the same time, we see no reason to doubt the claims by our South African interviewees, both Scientologists and pastors and leaders of other religions, that the aim of these activities and courses is not to convert local congregation of other religious traditions into churches of Scientology or public relations agents of the church. It is to help them, through what Scientologists believe are uniquely effective organizational and communication tools, to perform in a better way their usual activities, ultimately creating an environment beneficial to all religions. Some may even be helped to sell more effectively a Korean soft drink.

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Reviews

Rosie Luther, “What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah’s Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning.” *Pastoral Psychology* 72 (2023):105–20.

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An article published by Rosie Luther in the journal *Pastoral Psychology* (Luther 2023) promises to reveal “What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah’s Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning.” Luther currently describes herself on LinkedIn as “Research assistant on an exploratory project examining emotional learning and transcranial direct stimulation” at Butler Hospital, Brown University, and was when she wrote the article a “part-time Psychology Department Tutor” at Eastern Connecticut State University (Luther 2024).

The problem with this article is that, whatever else it may be, it is not the account of a scientific investigation. Its stated objective was to examine the effect of “shunning” as practiced by the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The latter recommend that current members of the organization limit association or communication with ex-members who have been disfellowshipped or have publicly left the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Cohabiting relatives and those who have simply become inactive without a public announcement that they have left the Jehovah’s Witnesses are not shunned.

Luther’s interest is in familicide, i.e., “the murder of a spouse or at least one child” (Luther 2023, 109). While shunning and familicide have both been studied extensively, the original question Luther asks is whether the doctrines

and practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses, including (but not limited to) shunning, create a special danger that ex-members may commit familicide.

She starts with a sensational account of the tragic case of a woman called Lauren Stuart (1973–2018), who in 2018 killed her husband, her two children (although Luther mentions “three children”: Luther 2023, 105), and herself in Keego Harbor, Michigan. We are told that after “leaving Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) to enroll her sons in college, she was shunned by family and friends alike” (Luther 2023, 105). The only references to the Stuart tragedy in the article come from tabloids. The reader is left with the impression that Stuart was disfellowshipped and shunned for having “enrolled her sons in college.” Other statements in Luther's article reinforce this impression.

However, sending children to college is certainly not ground for disfellowshipping among the Jehovah's Witnesses. Although they do have certain reservations about modern university education, the Jehovah's Witnesses also report that “today, many of Jehovah's Witnesses have received advanced secular education” (“How Do Jehovah's Witnesses View Education?” 2024). In my personal experience of several decades of study of the Jehovah's Witnesses, I have met among them skilled professionals with college and university degrees.

This is true in different countries of the world. A 2023 study from Kazakhstan found that 23.9% of the Jehovah's Witnesses went to college and 19.1% obtained a degree there (Auyezbek and Beisembayev 2023, 8). A much older French study by the research company SOFRES dates back to 1998. At that time, the level of BAC+5 (meaning five years of post-secondary instruction after the high school's final exam) was 7% for Jehovah's Witnesses in their mid-30s. This was considerably lower than Kazakhstan in 2023 but consider that in 1998 the percentage of French citizens in the same age cohort with a BAC+5 education level was only 12% (SOFRES 1998, 4). Both investigations were conducted among Jehovah's Witnesses in good standing only and confirm that in the organization there was and is no prohibition against going to college.

After mentioning the Stuart case, Luther states that this “is not the only case of former JW members committing familicide” (Luther 2023, 105). Three other cases are mentioned but again one of the two references is to a tabloid, where the other is to a *Los Angeles Times* article that prudently presented the cases as “defying explanation” (Frazier 2003).

There would be of course one easy way to prove that having been a Jehovah's Witness results in an especially high risk of committing familicide. This would be a statistical study showing that the percentage of perpetrators of familicide among the former Jehovah's Witnesses is higher than among the population in general or the members or former members of other religions. Luther is no sociologist, but the possibility of such a study is not even hinted at. In fact, she found such a low number of anecdotal cases of familicides committed by ex-Jehovah's-Witnesses to suggest the possibility that the crime may be in fact *less* prevalent among those who have joined this particular religious organization than among others.

Luther offers two arguments in support of her theory that shunned ex-Jehovah's-Witness are at higher risk of committing familicide. One is a reconstruction of the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses that omits to quote mainline scholarly research on the organization by, for example, George Chryssides or Zoe Knox, but does include professional anti-cultists such as Steven Hassan. This explains the caricatural description of the Jehovah's Witnesses as a group of "fundamentalist" (Luther 2023, 106) believers—but to which definition of "fundamentalism" Luther refers is not explained—who live in the panic terror of the "genocide" (Luther 2023, 106) that God himself will commit at Armageddon, i.e., at the end of the world as we know it.

No serious scholar would recognize the Jehovah's Witnesses in this description, and Luther's reconstruction of shunning is not more acceptable. She claims that

Members who choose to leave the religion due to moral or doctrinal objections are shunned by the community. Members who sin in the eyes of their congregation are shunned as well (Luther 2023, 106).

She even pretends that "the idea that people are guilty of murder if they do not follow doctrinal rules is another aspect of JW culture" (Luther 2023, 116), a truly bizarre statement not supported by any reference.

Although possibly unknown to Luther, there is a large literature on shunning by academic scholars (summarized and quoted in Introvigne 2024). She would have easily learned from it that not all members who leave the religion are shunned, only those who leave publicly (or join an organization whose membership is incompatible with being one of Jehovah's Witnesses), thus proclaiming their disagreement with and criticism of the organization. These are the minority of ex-members that sociologists call "apostates" (Bromley 1998;

Introvigne 2022). She would also have learned that not all sinners are disfellowshipped and shunned, but only those who are found guilty of serious offenses after a careful investigation and do not repent. An organization that would expel all “members who sin” would soon have no members at all.

Having liberally read anti-cult literature, Luther falls in almost each paragraph of her article into its most common fallacy. She presents as unique to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and dangerous, beliefs that are commons to hundreds of other religious organizations. This is not surprising, as she considers even the Latter-day Saints and the Seventh-day Adventists, organizations many would regard as mainline, as “high control groups with doomsday prophecies” to be investigated (Luther 2023, 116–17).

Typical examples of the fallacy are Luther’s comments that the Jehovah’s Witnesses “view the Bible as the inspired word of God” (Luther 2023, 106: so do all Christians) and have a hierarchy where “men occupy all positions of power” (Luther 2023, 107: so do Roman Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Muslims, and many other religions). Jehovah’s Witnesses are also singled out for believing that the world outside of the community of believers is “Satan’s world” (Luther 2023, 107). In fact, there was a religious leader who stated that “the whole world is under the control of the Evil One,” but he was not one of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. He was the author of the First Letter of John (5:19, New International Version), a text all Christians accept as part of the Bible.

Luther finally comes to what is promised in the title of the article, her “investigation on the impact of shunning.” The “investigation” consists of interviews with ten former Jehovah’s Witnesses, each of which lasted for a time of sixty to ninety minutes (Luther 2023, 116). The sample is minimal even for a qualitative study, but there is worse. Luther’s sample was selected after “a request for participants was posted on the Ex-JW subreddit as well as on several Facebook-based support forums” (Luther 2023, 109). It is clarified that these “support forums” are intended for “former JW members” (Luther 2023, 116: in fact, for “apostates”). Whoever has encountered the Ex-JW subreddit is aware that some of the most radical apostates post their anti-Jehovah’s-Witnesses tirades there. It is thus not surprising that Luther’s ten interviewees all reported very negative experiences with Jehovah’s Witnesses and shunning, and even humored her with statements that, albeit vaguely, might have implied that ex-members are indeed at risk of committing familicide.

In this mess, which has mysteriously survived the peer review of a journal published by a reputable publisher (but where biased articles against Jehovah's Witnesses have already appeared: see Introvigne and Richardson 2023), there is one sentence that goes to Luther's credit. She writes that,

The current study also has several limitations. Participants were recruited from online social media forums for former JW members. The selection process was not random and relied on voluntary self-identification. Participants in such forums may be more reactive and polarized than the general population of former JW members (Luther 2023, 116).

She even admits that, because of such problems, "this report contains some retrospective accounts that may not be as accurate as descriptions of current experiences" (Luther 2023, 116).

These are honest statements but should have led Luther to the conclusion that no valuable information, much less generalizations about the whole world population of the Jehovah's Witnesses, can be derived from her ten interviews and from a hasty reading of anti-cult literature. Unfortunately, having admitted the serious limitations of her material, Luther nonetheless decided to draw general conclusions from it. The result is something that may be valuable for somebody interested in studying the anti-Jehovah's-Witnesses feelings of a tiny group of apostate ex-members and perhaps of Luther herself but is of no value or interest for the study of current or former Jehovah's Witnesses.

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