

## Why Japan? Explaining the Post-Abe-Assassination Religious Liberty Crisis

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**ABSTRACT:** In 2022, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated. The assassin claimed he wanted to punish him for his support of the Unification Church (now called Family Federation for World Peace and Unification), which he believed was responsible for the bankruptcy of his mother, a Church member allegedly ruined by her excessive donations. An unprecedented campaign against “cults” followed, culminating in a lawsuit filed by the government seeking the legal dissolution of the Family Federation as a religious corporation. The Jehovah’s Witnesses were also targeted. The paper explores the reasons why Japan, a democratic country, was suddenly taken by storm by an anti-cult moral panic. Six possible causes are identified: Japan’s historical hostility to exclusivist religion; religious liberty as a foreign imposition; the decline of mainline religion; widespread hostility to religion in general and new religions in particular; the role of the Japanese Communist Party; and anti-Korean racism.

**KEYWORDS:** Assassination of Shinzo Abe, Unification Church, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, Anti-Cultism in Japan, Religion in Japan, Anti-Korean Racism in Japan.

### *Introduction*

On July 8, 2022, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954–2022) was assassinated in Nara, Japan. The assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, claimed he wanted to punish him for his cooperation with organizations connected with the Unification Church (now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification). Yamagami said he hated the Unification Church because his mother, a member, went bankrupt in 2002, allegedly because of excessive donations to the religious movement. He confessed he had also planned to assassinate Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, the leader of the Family Federation.

Anti-cultists and the media managed to persuade the Japanese public opinion, and the government itself, that the Unification Church was responsible for the crime. An unprecedented campaign against “cults” followed, with the enactment of new anti-cult laws and regulations and a governmental lawsuit seeking the dissolution of the Family Federation as a religious corporation

(Nakayama 2023; Duval, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). The twisted argument was that, if Yamagami's mother had not become a member of, and donated significantly to the Church, the assassin would not have had a grudge against the religious group and its supporters, including Abe, and would not have killed the former Prime Minister.

Obviously, the argument does not make sense. It is reminiscent of the defense often used by lawyers representing rapists that, if the girl had not showed herself as beautiful and sexy, she would not have been raped. Acting against the Unification Church and seeking its legal dissolution, as the Japanese government is doing, also means that in Japan crime pays. Through the government Yamagami is achieving precisely what he wanted, i.e., destroying the Unification Church.

This paper is an attempt to explain what is seemingly inexplicable. How is it possible that Japan, a respected democratic country, has decided to carry out such a travesty of justice, targeting also other movements stigmatized as “cults” such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, and ending up being denounced in a statement by the United Nations' human rights Rapporteurs (Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief et al. 2024)?

There is not a single nor a complete answer. However, I will propose, if not answers, at least six suggestions for future research: Japan's historical hostility to exclusivist religion; religious liberty as a foreign imposition; the decline of mainline religion; widespread hostility to religion in general and new religions in particular; the role of the Japanese Communist Party; and anti-Korean racism.

### *1. Hostility to Exclusivist Religion*

First, I suggest considering Japan's historical hostility to exclusivist religion. In Japan, as in China, the notion of religion as a separate field from politics and culture only appeared in modern times because of interaction with Western thought. The political authority was also the religious authority. The holder of the supreme political authority was divinized as a main God. This applied to the emperor but in the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), when emperors were figureheads and the military leaders called shoguns ruled Japan, the shoguns or at least some of them were also divinized. They were not the only Gods. A pantheon of lesser deities was allowed and Japanese, to use a terminology that will become common only later, “belonged” to different religions and worshiped many different Gods. To this very

day, the number of official adherents to Buddhism and Shintoism is greater than the total population of Japan as many Japanese belong to both (Tanabe 1999).

Under the Tokugawa shogunate it was mandatory for all families to register with a Buddhist temple, which did not prevent communities to also venerate the local Shinto clan Gods (*ujigami*). This state of affairs may seem strange to Westerners but may be compared, without overlooking the very different context, to the Roman Empire. There the emperor was also divinized, but Romans were allowed to worship a great number of Gods, which continued to grow as new populations with their deities were incorporated into the Empire.

The Pantheon was both a building that still exists in Rome and a concept that the Empire was welcoming all Gods. With a condition, though: each new God should accept to coexist with all the others without claiming exclusive worship. Jews first and Christians later refused to play this game. The Biblical deity was a jealous God, requiring exclusive worship and denouncing all the other Gods, not to mention divinized humans, as usurpers and imposters or worse. Psalm 95 said it in quite brutal terms: “omnes dii gentium daemonia,” “all the Gods of other people are demons” (*Psalms* 95:5).

While other religions in the Roman Empire were welcomed into the Pantheon, the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed, many Jews were killed, and Christians were mercilessly persecuted for three centuries. They refused to enshrine their God into the Pantheon on an equal footing with all the other deities and to worship the Roman emperor as a God. The same happened in Japan. Christians, who had been initially successful there, claimed exclusive worship for their God, refused to belong to Christianity and other religions at the same time, and to regard the emperor or the shogun as God. Thousands were killed, some of them crucified. Not only Christians but all Japanese were compelled to go through the *fumie* ritual, stepping on a sacred Christian image thus proving they were not Christians, or face execution (Clements 2008).

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 gave power back to emperors and supplemented the registration at Buddhist temples with the creation of a nationally unified Shinto system. Threatened by the cannons of Western warships, Japan slowed down the persecution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Meiji Emperor had to grudgingly legalize Christianity in 1871. However, antipathy for the exclusivist Christianity persisted and statutes against witchcraft were used against Christians. In the

infamous 1827 Osaka incident, six Christians were tortured and executed as witches. It was not the only case (Miyazaki, Wildman Nakai, and Teeuwen 2020).

Of course, nobody is executed for being a Christian in Japan today, but antipathy toward exclusivist religion remains deeply ingrained in the Japanese mind. Christian missionaries report that to this very day it is difficult to convert Japanese to a religion that demands exclusive allegiance. Christians operate prestigious educational institutions but less than 1.2% of the population in Japan is Christian (Statista.com 2024), compared for example with slightly more than 20% in South Korea (Statista.com 2023). This background of hostility to religions that do not allow their members to belong at the same time to other faiths extend to new religions, many of which, including some new Buddhist sects, are also exclusivist. This hostility is a sleeping dog, which may be awakened by incidents such as the Abe assassination.

## 2. *Religious Liberty as a Foreign Imposition*

The second element to consider is religious liberty as a foreign imposition in Japan. As mentioned earlier, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century tolerance of Christianity was imposed by the military might of the Western powers. After Japan lost World War II, the American legal experts who imposed in 1945 the so-called Shinto Directive believed that the divinization of the emperor and the state control of religion had been at the core of the Japanese nationalism and militarism. The Americans prohibited to worship the emperor as God and compelled the Japanese to proclaim religious liberty and enshrine it in their new Constitution (O'Brien 1996). As a leading scholar of Japanese religion, Mark Mullins, wrote, secularization and the acknowledgement of religious liberty are generally

regarded as an inevitable and unintended process that accompanies the modernizations of societies, but it is important to recognize that in the case of Japan it was an intentional process that was promoted and implemented by policies enacted by the foreign occupiers (Mullins 2023, 116).

These policies were never popular, Mullins noted, and were regarded as unfair American imperialist impositions, except by religious minorities. These very different history and approach to freedom of religion with respect to other countries explain why a strong pro-religious-liberty reaction did not manifest itself in Japan after the post-Abe-assassination crisis.

### 3. *The Decline of Mainline Religion*

A third feature, this one of more recent origin, of Japanese society is the decline of mainline religion. The first cause of this decline is the dramatic demography of Japan, which shares with Italy the lowest birth rate in the world. This leads to the depopulation of rural areas, i.e., the parts of the country that, like almost everywhere in the world, are the most religious. In 2015, specialized journalist and Buddhist priest Hidenori Ukai published a book dramatically entitled *Jiin shōmetsu* (The Disappearance of Religious Institutions: Ukai 2015). Ukai examined how demographic trends were affecting the future of rural shrines and temples. The demographic statistics suggest that approximately 49.9 percent of the rural municipalities nationwide may vanish by 2040.

Scholar Kenji Ishii, quoted by Mullins, pointed out that around 35.6 percent of all religious corporations are situated in these vulnerable municipalities. It is plausible that religious institutions in these areas might collapse as well. Ishii estimates that this would impact 41 percent of Shinto shrines (meaning that some 31,000 out of 76,000 may disappear: Mullins 2023, 124). A similar fate could befall many Buddhist congregations, with the potential loss of between 22 to 45 percent of their temples (Ukai 2015, 40–1; Ishii 1996).

It is a well-known sociological principle that declining mainline religious institutions and their followers become more aggressive towards religious minorities. They tend to attribute to their competitors, mistakenly, problems that are in fact due to other causes. This is another factor to consider when assessing how easy it was for activists and media to quickly spread an exceptional animosity against certain minorities in the aftermath of the Abe assassination.

### 4. *Widespread Hostility to Organized Religion*

A fourth element is widespread hostility to *organized* religion in general in contemporary Japanese society. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, 50% of Japanese expressed distrust and antipathy to religion. As Canadian scholar Adam Lyons

argues, these numbers continuously increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Lyons 2023). American political scientist David M. O'Brien (1951–2018) wrote that in Japan,

Strong religious beliefs, sharply defined creeds, and concerns about other-worldly salvation appear not merely unnecessary disturbances but foreign and abnormal (O'Brien 1996, 21).

In a recent book about the decline of the use of ancestors' altars (*butsudan*) in private Japanese homes, Australian anthropologist Hannah Gould suggests that excessive financial demands by Buddhist priests are a factor explaining this attitude (Gould 2023). Others believe that the religious establishment, with rare exceptions (including Soka Gakkai leaders, who opposed militarism and went to jail), was co-responsible of the tragedies of World War II.

This hostility targets *organized* religion and coexists with the strength of private beliefs in supernatural phenomena and beings, which many Japanese would not call “religious”—but outside observers and scholars would (Sumitomo 2000).

Although the hostility existed before, a crucial event reinforcing it were the crimes and deadly terrorist attack with sarin gas against the Tokyo subway by the new religious movement Aum Shinrikyo in 1995 (Beckford 1998, Reader 2000). Although many Buddhists would prefer Aum Shinrikyo not to be called a “Buddhist movement,” it was endorsed as such by leading international Buddhist authorities, including the Dalai Lama (something Chinese propaganda never allowed him to forget: *Reuters* 2007).

Aum Shinrikyo also organized events attended by leading Japanese scholars of religions. They were obviously unaware of its crimes, but some lost their jobs, and all were vilified by media. One consequence is that, while in most democratic countries of the world, scholars of new religious movements criticize anti-cultists and defend the religious liberty of groups stigmatized as “cults,” Japan is the exception to this rule. Most specialized scholars support the post-Abe-assassination anti-cult campaigns. A main reason for this is that, after the Aum Shinrikyo case, many concluded that jumping on the anti-cult bandwagon was the only way to protect their careers.

Adam Lyons has added the idea, spread by media and intellectuals for decades and that has gained widespread acceptance in Japan, that a strict religious education harms the well-being and prospects of career of children. Lyons has studied the rhetorics about the alleged misfortunes of the *nisei*, second-generation members of high-intensity religious organizations, which plays a large part in the

current campaigns against the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church (Lyons 2024).

Lyons has also called the attention on a multi-volume fictionalized memoir published between 1962 and 1968 by Kojiro Serizawa (1897–1993), a prolific if controversial writer who gained a sizable following in Japan. Entitled *Human Fate* (*Ningen no Unmei*), an award-winning epic in three parts and no less than 14 volumes (Serizawa 1962–68), Kojiro Serizawa's novel as summarized by Lyons

describes the life of his alter ego, Mori Jiro, beginning with the difficult circumstances of Jiro's (and Kojiro's) birth. When Jiro was a baby, his parents effectively abandoned him to the care of his grandparents because his father relinquished household responsibilities and donated the family's wealth to the Tenrikyo religion [an "old" new religion of Japan] in order to take up a spiritual career as a missionary at the turn of the twentieth century (Lyons 2024).

Similar stories fuel the Japanese belief that high-demand religion is by definition harmful to children. This tradition explains why even demonstrably apocryphal tales by second-generation Unification Church believers such as the one using the pseudonym "Sayuri Ogawa" (who may even have been received by Prime Minister Kishida) were quickly believed, despite being false (Fukuda 2023a).

## 5. *The Role of the Japanese Communist Party*

A fifth factor is the role of the Japanese Communist Party. Outside of Japan, not many know that it has been for many years among the largest non-ruling Communist parties in the world, and may well be today the second largest after its Indian comrades. The Japanese Communist Party has stated that it considers itself "at war" with one specific religion, the Unification Church (*Sunday Mainichi* 2022), although later the war extended to a broader concept of "conservative religion."

In 1968, Unification Church founder Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012) created the International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC). Through its thousands of volunteers supporting anti-Communist candidates in local and national elections, it played a key role in containing the Japanese Communist Party and its Socialist allies. For decades, IFVOC had also a prominent role in calling the attention on the activities of Soviet spies in Japan and advocating for effective anti-espionage legislation.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, documents in the Soviet archives confirmed that claims about an extensive network of Soviet spies operating in Japan with connections with local left-wing politicians were accurate. In the 1970s, however, the Socialist Party claimed they were part of an IFVOC conspiracy, and was sued by IFVOC. To avoid a humiliating defeat, the lawyer for the Socialist Party had to persuade its clients to pay IFVOC two million yen and settle.

That lawyer never forgave IFVOC or the Unification Church. His name was Hiroshi Yamaguchi. In 1987, writing in a Socialist publication, he called other leftist lawyers to join his efforts to establish an association against “cults” and the so-called “spiritual sales,” i.e., the sales of certain religious artifacts at exorbitant prices members of the Unification Church were accused of. He wrote that

the money obtained from this is used to finance the Unification Church and IFVOC’s campaign to enact the National Anti-Espionage Act (Fukuda 2023b, 52).

This is the origin of the main Japanese anti-cult organization, later called National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, which organized the massive campaign of slander against the Unification Church/Family Federation after the assassination of Shinzo Abe. It was started to destroy IFVOC and its support for anti-espionage legislation.

In November 2022, journalist Soichiro Tahara and Communist Party Chairperson Kazuo Shii discussed the Unification Church/Family Federation issue and presented the post-Abe-assassination campaign as the “final war against the Unification Church.” “This time, he said, we will fight thoroughly and completely until we win over the struggle” (*Sunday Mainichi* 2022).

## 6. *Anti-Korean Racism*

The sixth factor, which concerns the Unification Church, is Japanese anti-Korean racism. A 2023 report by the U.S. Institute of Peace discussed the issue after the false rumor was spread that the assassin of Shinzo Abe and his family are of Korean descent (they are not). The report noted that

In Japan, racism is a powerful underlying social force that shapes many issues, including the government’s general orientation. It has many targets,... but anti-Korean racism has been particularly salient over the past two decades (Chatani 2023).

There is, according to the document, an “underlying tendency among many Japanese to view Koreans as ‘inferior’ and ‘untrustworthy.’” Although anti-Korean racism has older roots,

In the 2000s, a new type of anti-Koreanism emerged in Japan. Many elements contributed to it, including the largely unregulated internet, a sense of disfranchisement due to long-term economic stagnation, South Korea's rise as a new economic giant and North Korea's aggressiveness (Chatani 2023).

Some Japanese bookstores have entire sections of books against Koreans, some of which would not be allowed and banned as "hate speech" in most European countries (Yeo 2017). This prejudice certainly extend to religions founded in Korea and whose leaders are Koreans.

In conclusion, I am conscious that the above six factors do not fully explain the witch hunt against the Unification Church (and the Jehovah's Witnesses) currently changing the image of Japan as a peaceful country friendly to human rights we were accustomed to for many years. However, each of them offers some context and background. And each deserves further study.

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