

The Opposition to “Cults” in Various Countries and Its International Coordination

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ABSTRACT: Opposition to groups stigmatized as “cults” has (re-)emerged in recent years as a significant social force in countries as diverse as China and Argentina. The article examines six national situations—United States, China, Russia, France, Japan, and Argentina—and the different interests inspiring the local anti-cult campaigns. In its second part, the article argues that, while remaining different, anti-cult campaigns also have common elements and are supported by the lobbying efforts of diverse social actors such as the umbrella anti-cult federation FECRIS, the research consortium Invictus, the international diplomatic action of France, Russia, and China, international TV networks that have allied themselves with the anti-cult movements (primarily Netflix), anti-trafficking agencies interested in expanding their activity to “cults,” and private individual and corporate donors. While there is not a single “hidden hand” coordinating the anti-cult activities throughout the world, the role of these coordinating agencies should not be under-estimated.

KEYWORDS: Anti-Cultism, Anti-Cult Movement, FECRIS, Invictus, MIVILUDES, Brainwashing.

Introduction

The opposition against groups stigmatized as “cults” manifests itself in countries as diverse as China and France. This paper examines the question whether in its present form this new/old “anti-cult movement” is international, and organized as such, or is governed by national logics only.

In the first part, I will present six national examples—the United States, Russia, China, France, Japan, and Argentina—which show that there are obvious differences. In the second part, I will argue that these differences are compatible with the existence of an international cooperation and coordination.

1. Part I: Six National Examples

A. The United States

The anti-cult movement was born in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s. These were the years in which many in the younger generations, for different reasons, rebelled against the dominant values. Some expressed their rebellion by embracing new religions very different from the Christianity or Judaism of their parents, both Asian such as the Unification Church or the Hare Krishna movement and indigenous to America such as the Church of Scientology (Bromley and Shupe 1981).

To thousands of young Americans, primarily college students, these movements appeared exotic, new, and exciting. To their parents, they looked dangerous, sinister, and incomprehensible. Why would reasonable boys or girls abandon the university to serve as full time volunteers for a controversial group? Some psychologists and lawyers had an answer. The choice of these young men and women, they said, had not been free, no matter what they told their parents. They had been “brainwashed” by “cults” (Introvigne 2022).

What could the parents do? It soon became clear that the American legal system would resist proposals for new laws against “cults” and lawsuits based on the dubious theories of “brainwashing.” Deprogramming was also declared illegal. Thus, the American anti-cult movement moved from courts of law to the court of public opinion, as it managed to persuade hundreds of journalists that stories about evil “cults” “brainwashing” their followers were sexy and would sell well.

Recently, cable TV has emerged as the media most interested in an alliance with anti-cultists, since its market is highly competitive and needs scandals to sell. Netflix in particular has become specialized in producing lurid series about “cults” and their sins.

At the core of this version of anti-cultism is an individualistic idea of freedom. Surrendering a substantial part of our liberty to a religious organization or leader is not regarded as an admissible choice. It is denounced as a “bounded choice” (Lalich 2004) from which “cultists” should be “liberated,” that they want it or not. The American model wants to protect “cultists” from themselves.

B. China

China boasts that it has the largest anti-cult movement in the world. Indeed, the China Anti-Cult Association has local organizations and representatives in every area of the country, including remote villages, and millions of members. However, it is not really a voluntary or private group. It is a branch of the CCP, the Chinese Communist Party, directly organized and controlled by Party bureaucrats.

“Cult” in the English official name “China Anti-Cult Association” translated the Chinese “xie jiao.” In fact, “xie jiao” since the Middle Ages is an expression used in the Chinese Empire to indicate “heterodox” religious movements. “Heterodox” always had a political meaning, to designate an organization that does not support the state and its leadership, the latter being incarnated in the emperor in past centuries and in Xi Jinping today (Wu 2016, 2017).

Thus, the Chinese model, while borrowing from the Western anti-cult rhetorics, does not protect the individuals from themselves but the state from the “cults” or “xie jiao.” If you are active in any capacity in a movement listed as a “xie jiao” in China, you go to jail. While the anti-cult association organizes massive propaganda campaigns, ultimately the main tool China relies on to eradicate “cults” is not propaganda but the police: in fact, a specialized anti-xie-jiao police with more than 6,000 agents.

C. Russia

The Russian model of anti-cultism has in common with its Chinese counterpart the use of the police to crack down on “cults” but there is an important difference. The leaders of the China Anti-Cult Association are atheists. The leaders of the Russian anti-cult movement are Orthodox priests or laypersons employed and paid by the Russian Orthodox Church.

“Cults,” as it has already happened in 2017 to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, are raided by the police, declared “extremist,” and “liquidated” by courts of law, which play the key role in the anti-cult fight in Russia. Their properties are confiscated. While the latter measure can hide the transfer of prime real estate from “cults” to government-connected oligarchs, or even relatives of the top leaders, what the laws protect is the religious monopoly of the Russian Orthodox Church, which in turn lives in a symbiotic situation with the Putin regime (Šorytė 2020).

D. France

This year 2024 France made its bad law of 2001 against the “cults” worse, making “psychological subjection” allegedly practiced by the “cults” a crime punished with heavy jail penalties (Barker 2024). The new law also reinforces the role of the MIVILUDES, the governmental agency whose mandate is to combat “cultic deviances” and that also acts as an ATM machine distributing taxpayers’ money to private anti-cult organizations.

Followed on a smaller scale by Belgium, France is one of the rare countries that uses as its main weapon against the “cults” a specialized governmental agency. What France wants to protect is clearly indicated by another law passed in 2021, against “separatism.” Although the law primarily targeted Islam, the government explained it also offered a framework to fight the “cults.” As its final name indicated, the law wants to protect the “republican values” against those who would deny them, at least implicitly, by joining a “separatist” organization, i.e., one that lives “separately” from the majority and according to different values. This is regarded as not tolerable in France (Introvigne 2021).

E. Japan

In 2022, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954–2022) was assassinated by a man who had a personal grudge against the Unification Church (now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification), with which Abe had cooperated through the years. The assassin’s mother, a member of the Unification Church, went bankrupt in 2002, allegedly because of her excessive donations to the movement. A campaign against “cults” followed the assassination, targeting both the Family Federation, which the government is now seeking to dissolve (Nakayama 2023), and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who had nothing to do with the Abe assassination but are a typical target of anti-cult campaigns in all countries (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society 2024).

As a statement by four Special Rapporteurs on human rights of the United Nations on the issue, unusually strong worded considering that it criticized a democratic country, has recently noted, the campaign against the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Unification Church reveals the reluctance of Japanese society

and politics to fully accept international standards of freedom of religion or belief (Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief et al. 2024).

In Japan, the notion of religious liberty was imposed as part of the Constitution and of the laws by the legal experts that came with American General Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964) after World War II (O’Brien 1996). Despite these laws, the idea that religion should conform to the prevailing social mores and that those who live differently from the majority threaten the all-important value of social harmony remains very strong in Japan. Every time an incident reveals that something connected with religion can disrupt social harmony, as it happened with the terrorist sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway by the new religious movement Aum Shinrikyo in 1995 (Reader 2000), or the Abe assassination in 2022, draconian measures are introduced to expel from society what are perceived as “foreign” religious bodies threatening stability.

F. Argentina

In Argentina, an anti-cult movement existed for decades but remained comparatively small and not very influential. It suffered a crucial defeat when the first case against the Buenos Aires Yoga School collapsed in 2000 (Juzgado de Instrucción Criminal n° 46 2000). However, more recently Argentina has emerged as a laboratory where a new strategy is being tested. “Cults” are attacked through the use of laws against trafficking. It is argued that just as prostitutes and immigrant slave laborers are victims of traffic even if they may not realize it, so are “cultists.” The fact that “victims” deny that they are victims is thus regarded as irrelevant.

Based on these theories, the Buenos Aires Yoga School was raided again in 2022 (Amicarelli 2024). Although in some anti-trafficking cases connected with religion courts have ruled against the prosecutors (Introvigne 2023, 2024a), the model is tested in Argentina with a strong support from international anti-cultists. They have started cases claiming that “cultists” are “trafficked” in several other countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, and are very interested in the outcome of the Yoga School case in Buenos Aires.

2. Part II: International Coordination

From what we have discussed so far, it may seem that national situations are totally different. However, while domestic peculiarities should not be neglected, it is also true that campaigns against the “cults” are increasingly coordinated at an international level, although this coordination is not always visible. I will mention six examples that deserve further attention.

A. FECRIS

As early as 1994, several anti-cult organizations came together to establish an umbrella organization called FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), with headquarters in Paris. It has correspondent organizations outside of Europe too. It is and always was financed by the French government. For more than twenty-five years, one of its largest and most active components, which also contributed financially, was its Russian branch, which was controlled by the Russian Orthodox Church and financed by the Russian government. In March 2023, reasons connected with the war in Ukraine suggested a separation from the Russian branch, although forms of cooperation have continued discreetly even after that date (Introvigne 2024b).

FECRIS has also supported anti-cult campaigns in China (Berzano et al. 2022, 38–44), and its propaganda can be found behind anti-cult activities and proposals all over the world. FECRIS also cooperates with the American-based ICSA (International Cultic Studies Association) as evidenced by the conference held on July 3–6, 2024 in Barcelona putting together ICSA, FECRIS, and Japanese anti-cultists, although it should be acknowledged that some American ICSA leaders are somewhat more moderate than their European counterparts.

B. Invictus

Much more discreet than FECRIS, but not less dangerous, is a group called “Invictus” (“Undeclared” in Latin), headquartered at the University of Barcelona with the ambition of putting together those in the academic minority who support brainwashing theories and the anti-cult movement. It was also represented at the Barcelona conference. None of its members and co-workers is a scholar of religion.

They are all psychologists who still support brainwashing theories. Interestingly, one of them is a Japanese psychology professor and anti-cult activist called Kimiaki Nishida (Invictus 2024). He is the person who drafted in Japan after the Abe assassination the controversial regulations on “religious abuse of children.” His role was explicitly criticized in the United Nations statement (Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief et al. 2024).

While Invictus is in part a money-making enterprise, using the support of psychology schools in several universities to get European funds, it also plays a role in organizing attacks against the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other movements and in trying to keep alive the discredited brainwashing theories.

C. The French Government

The French government devotes a specific budget to promote the activities of its anti-cult agency MIVILUDES abroad through the French diplomacy. Even Argentinian anti-cultists have boasted about their contacts with the French Embassy (Salum 2023 [2013]). Japanese anti-cultists’ relationships with France started in the late 1980s (Yamaguchi 2000) and continue to this day.

From the point of view of France, this activity is primarily defensive and aimed at countering American criticism of French anti-cult campaigns. But it also promotes French “grandeur,” as local politicians have often hailed MIVILUDES as a model the whole world should imitate.

D. Russian and Chinese Disinformation

Research has traced fake news targeting the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Scientology, and other groups to Russian disinformation TV channels such as Sputnik (see e.g., *Sputnik.kg* 2018). They are also spread on social media by both Russian and Chinese trolls. Like France, these governments are interested in defending their repression of “cults” at home against international criticism. But there is also an interest in creating disorder and social unrest, which has led to increased troll activity after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

In Japan, solid evidence has emerged connecting the attacks against the Unification Church, who was active in political anti-Communist campaigns, and the very foundation of a Japanese anti-cult movement in the 1980s to the Japanese

Communist Party and left-wing organizations, supported by China and at that time by the Soviet Union (Fukuda 2023, 52–3).

E. Netflix

Although other TV networks have now jumped on a lucrative bandwagon, Netflix remains the strongest media partner of anti-cultists. Headquartered in the U.S., it has branches in 45 countries and some 300 million subscribers. Its branches obviously communicate with each other, and we have seen vitriolic series against “cults” produced in South Korea, Mexico, and the United States, and distributed worldwide. Few reputations can resist these concerted attacks.

F. Anti-Trafficking Agencies

Obviously, fighting the international traffic of human beings is a laudable enterprise. However, it is also true that anti-trafficking agencies are competing with other branches of the governments for funds and have a vested interest in continuously expanding their sphere of activity. Although some Argentinian excesses have been criticized (Fautré 2023), ultimately there is an international anti-trafficking lobby that looks with interest at the experiment in Argentina of expanding the mandate of anti-trafficking prosecutors to “cults” and defend these prosecutors when they are attacked internationally. It is probably behind some strange and misleading American coverage of the Buenos Aires Yoga School case, including in *The New York Times* (Lankes 2024).

G. Private Donors

American scholar Holly Folk is conducting a study about private donations supporting anti-cult campaigns. It is a study in progress, but as presented in international conferences (e.g., Folk 2022) it shows that very large amounts of money were donated by certain billionaires and large corporations. Some may be ideologically motivated, but it is also clear that pharmaceutical companies, for example, are interested in supporting actions against Scientology, which in turn runs successful campaigns exposing the negative effects of psychiatric drugs, and other movements critical of certain medicines.

This lobby action obtained a spectacular success this year 2024 in France, where a new Article 5 was introduced in the anti-cult law punishing with long jail terms those who for religious or other reasons dissuade their followers from using medicines and vaccines generally recommended by the medical profession.

3. In Conclusion

There is not a single “hidden hand” guiding diverse national anti-cult campaigns throughout the world. However, there are visible and less visible international forces promoting them, whose role should not be underestimated. This international action against religious liberty requires an international reaction in favor of it. As anti-cultists join forces putting together atheists and Russian Orthodox priests, Communist activists, and Big Pharma corporate executives, who overcome their different ideologies to unite against what they perceive as a common enemy, so women and men of good will should learn to cooperate, going beyond their theological differences and affirming freedom of religion or belief as a universal value.

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