



# Abe's killing: Blame the anti-cultists, not the Unification Church

By Massimo Introvigne -  
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## OPINION:

In 1901, an anarchist assassinated the President of the United States, William McKinley. One of the by-products of the crime was that, for decades, all anarchist groups, some of which were against violence, were criminalized in the United States. As late as 1927, anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti were executed for crimes they never committed, a story those in my generation remember because it was told in 1971 in Joan Baez’s song “Here’s to You.”

Cracking down on all anarchists because one of them had murdered a politician was unjust, but perhaps not surprising. Imagine, however, a different scenario. A right-wing extremist and a sworn enemy of the anarchists might have murdered the President, claiming that he deserved punishment because he was supposedly “soft on anarchy.” In this case, every sensible American would have agreed that blaming the anarchists would not make sense. Their most radical enemies should be blamed instead.

This is precisely what is happening in Japan after the assassination of Shinzo Abe. The Unification Church founded by Reverend Sun Myung Moon is blamed for the crime, and its members are vilified in their workplaces and schools, creating a human rights emergency.

This would already be unfair if the assassin would be a member of the Unification Church. No large group, religious or otherwise, should be punished for the crimes of one rotten apple. However, the assassin of Mr. Abe, Tetsuya Yamagami, was not a member of the Unification movement. On the contrary, he hated the organization founded by Reverend Moon with a vengeance and intended to punish Mr. Abe for having sent video messages to two events organized by a Unification-connected organization.

Plain logic indicates that the Unification movement is a victim here, together with Mr. Abe. The psychological evaluation that is now being conducted may easily indicate that Mr. Yamagami is a psychopathic, but real paranoids have real enemies. His weak mind may well have been excited by the hate campaigns against the Unification movement carried out by some Japanese media, fueled by “anti-cult” organizations and lawyers.

The media reported that the assassin’s mother made important donations to the Unification movement, which ruined the family and caused Mr. Yamagami’s grudge against the group. However, these donations stopped several years ago, and Mr. Yamagami killed Mr. Abe this year. It is much more likely that what prompted him to act were recent violent media campaigns against the Unification Church.

Donations to the Unification Church have been presented by the media as something sinister, particularly when they take the shape of purchasing artifacts for prices that include a donation and are connected with their spiritual rather than material value, or with spiritual practices intended to alleviate the condition of deceased relatives in the afterlife. Reporters are not compelled to study the theology of the Unification Church, but they fail to understand that similar donation schemes exist in many religions.

Actually, Martin Luther started the Protestant Reformation and split Western Christianity into two separate branches following controversy on the sale of indulgences by the Catholic Church, i.e., of promises that a soul may ascend to Heaven in the afterlife following a donation by their friends and relatives. Similar practices still exist in several mainline religions. Bulky theological treatises have been written about the spiritual meaning of donations, challenging the unbelievers’ caricatural interpretation that sees them only as something feeding the greed of pastors, monks, and priests.

Speaking of greed, most Japanese and international media have taken at face value the press releases and statements by an organization called the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales. These lawyers, using standard anti-cult arguments, look for donors to the Unification Church who have left the movement and may be recruited as clients and sue for recovering the amount of their donations. The lawyers have won some cases and lost others. Interestingly, one question reporters have not been eager to ask them is what percentage of the money these lawyers keep for themselves.

The Japanese and (to some extent) international media are inclined to believe the anti-Unification-Church lawyers because of their persuasions that, unlike legitimate religions (which sometimes may be just as pushy in soliciting donations), “cults” are bad. Japan was understandably shocked by the horrific acts of violence, including the sarin gas attack against the Tokyo subway in 1995, perpetrated by one group labeled as a “cult,” Aum Shinrikyo.

However, this does not authorize hate speech against hundreds of non-violent groups some may regard as “heretical.” A large majority of mainline scholars of new religious

movements abandoned the “cult” label decades ago and concluded that “cult” is a word with no meaningful content and is only used as a weapon to slander and discriminate against religious minorities that some lobbies, for whatever reasons, do not like. This is precisely what is happening with the Unification Church in Japan.

- Massimo Introvigne, an Italian sociologist of religions and the author of some 70 books on new religious movements (including The Plymouth Brethren and Inside The Church of Almighty God, both published by Oxford University Press, in 2018 and 2020; and Brainwashing: Reality or Myth? that has been just released by Cambridge University Press) is the managing director of CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions.

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