

The Abe Assassination. The Word “Cult” Is A Tool for Discrimination

09/02/2022

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The anti-Unification-Church campaign in Japan is another egregious example of the use of the “cult” label to discriminate against unpopular minorities.

by Massimo Introvigne

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A member of the Unification Church/Family Federation protests in Korea against discrimination in Japan.

On June 6, 2014, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Pope Francis in the Vatican. He offered him a replica of a Japanese 17th-century “secret mirror.” It looks like a normal mirror but, when inclined to intercept a ray from the sun, it reveals an image of Jesus Christ.

Christians in Japan had to use the secret mirrors at that time since, if they were caught with a Christian image or symbol, they were executed. Abe apologized to the Catholic Church for the more than 5,000 Catholics who had been killed in Japan during the persecutions of the 16th and 17th centuries and beyond. Many of them were crucified.

As late as 1829, three women and three men were paraded through the streets of Osaka and crucified for being members of the “evil cult” of Christianity (perhaps they weren’t) and for recruiting followers through the use of black magic.





Christians crucified in Nagasaki in 1597, engraving by Wolfgang Kilian (1581–1663). *Credits.*

Abe's apology was commendable, but it would seem to refer to atrocities of a remote past. Or perhaps not. Scholars such as James T. Richardson and Wu Junqing have noted that not much has changed from the times when witches were burned in the West and "evil cults" were bloodily persecuted in Imperial China and Japan. The only difference is that black magic has been secularized into brainwashing, a pseudo-scientific concept implying that "cults" now bewitch their followers through mysterious psychological techniques.

Ironically, while Abe apologized for the persecution of Christianity in Japan as an "evil cult" that used black magic, his assassination is being used to label the Unification Church/Family Federation as a "cult" that obtains donations through brainwashing, the modern version of black magic, and call for a crackdown on "cults" in general. The twisted logic supporting these claims is based on the fact that Abe's assassin hated the Unification Church because his mother made heavy donations to it twenty years ago. He killed Abe to punish him for attending via videos events of an organization connected with that Church. Rather than blaming the assassin, and the hate campaigns against the Unification Church that may have excited him, the victims are put on trial in a spectacular reversal of both logic and fairness.

But what is a "cult"? A large majority of scholars of religions agree that there are no cults. "Cult" is just a label used to discriminate against groups that powerful lobbies, for whatever reasons, do not like. It was not always so. "Cult" and its functional equivalents in other languages derived from the Latin word "secta" such as the French "secte"—to be translated "cult" rather than "sect"—had a precise meaning in early-20th-century sociology. They indicated young religions, where most or all members had converted as adults rather than being born in the faith. The example used by the early sociologists was that Jesus and the apostles were part of a "cult" as none of them was born as a Christian; they were all converted Jews. After some centuries, those born Christians became the majority, and Christianity evolved from "cult" (or "secte" in French) to church. Most of the scholars who used this terminology were themselves Christians, and clearly for them the word "cult" had no negative implications.

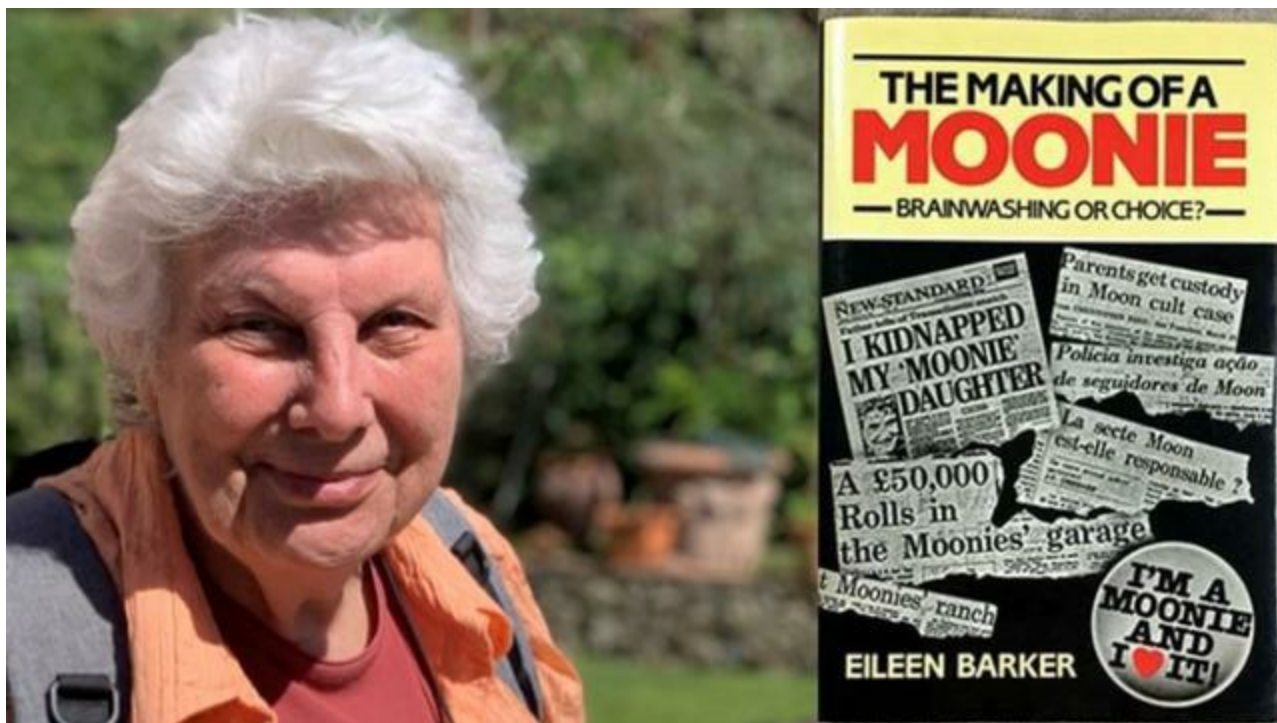




Typical sensational coverage of “cults” (sectes) in the French media.

However, during the course of the 20th century, with some older precedents, a new science, criminology, started using the word “cult” with a very different meaning. A “cult” was a religious group that systematically committed crimes or would likely commit crimes in the future. This meaning of “cult” was similar to the expression “evil cult” used to persecute and crucify Christians in Imperial Japan. It also created a confusion. A sociologist in the 1960s, asked whether Jesus and the apostles were part of a “cult,” should have answered yes based on traditional sociological categories but, since the criminological use of the term was conquering the media as well, would risk to be misunderstood and accused of having labeled the first Christians as criminals.

For this reason, since at least the 1980s, international scholars of religion, led by British sociologist Eileen Barker, abandoned the word “cult” and adopted “new religious movements” for the newly established groups where most members were first generation converts. They were aware of the use of “cult” by criminologists, and did not deny the existence of groups that routinely commit crimes in the name of religion, among “new” but also among “old” religious traditions—such as networks of pedophile Catholic priests or terrorists who use or misuse the name of Islam. Since the word “cult” would only create confusion, they adopted other expressions, which later included “criminal religious movements,” suggested by the undersigned.



With her 1984 book on conversions to the Unification Church, Eileen Barker debunked the theory that “cults” were different from “religions” because they used “brainwashing” to convert their followers.

Criminal religious movements are groups that systematically commit or at least incite to commit common crimes such as physical violence, rape, child abuse, or murder. Since the late 1960s, activist “anti-cult” groups appeared that called for limiting the activities of “cults.” They defined them not as movements committing common crimes such as homicide or sexual abuse but as groups guilty of an imaginary crime, brainwashing. The word “brainwashing” was coined during the Cold War by the CIA to designate mysterious techniques allegedly used by the Chinese Maoists and the Soviets to turn almost instantly otherwise “normal” citizens into Communists. It was later applied to “cults.” By 1990, it had been debunked by religious scholars, as pseudo-science simply used to discriminate against

certain groups, and rejected by courts of law, at least in the United States.

The Abe assassination is now used for reviving the dead horse of brainwashing and of theories claiming that bad “cults,” unlike good “religions,” recruit members and donors through mental manipulation. Just as it happened during the European witch hunts and the Japanese persecution of Christians for which Abe apologized, accusations of black magic—of which brainwashing is only the secularized version—and of operating an “evil cult” lead to dehumanize, discriminate and persecute those so accused. Today, they come for the Unification Church. Tomorrow, they may come for any religion that has among its enemies lobbies powerful enough to persuade the media it is a “cult.”

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Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions ([CESNUR](#)), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the [Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia](#) (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion](#) and of the executive board of University of California Press' [Nova Religio](#). From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the “Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions” of the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

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