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Taiwan, France, Japan: Roots and Consequences of an Anti-Cult Ideology

05/08/2024 MASSIMO INTROVIGNE

Some had predicted the demise of religion in the Global West after the end of the Cold War. It did not happen—which caused harsh reactions.

*by Massimo Introvigne**

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Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022, credits), left, and Francis Fukuyama (credits), right.

Why did a reaction hostile to religious liberty manifested itself almost at the same time in France, Japan, Taiwan, and other democratic countries (but not all) in the late 1980s and 1990s? Obviously, there is not a single answer, but a look at the context may help.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and announced substantial reforms. The process he started eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although inside the Soviet Union Gorbachev had a somewhat different image than in the West, I do remember the euphoria generated by his advent and the subsequent events in Eastern Europe. The mood was captured in 1992 by the famous book by Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History"—later widely ridiculed, although the content was less naïve than the title.

In short, the prevailing theory was that the story had ended, and the world or at least the so-called "first world" or the "Global West" (including Westernized Asian countries such as Japan and Taiwan) will embrace unanimously the values of a democratic, secular, and progressive society. It was admitted that a "Global East" and "Global South," including the Islamic world, less-Westernized Asian countries, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe would remain different but many believed it was just a matter of time before they will also embrace the victorious secular and liberal ideology as well. China, it was predicted, will also become democratic through business and commerce.

These predictions were all wrong, but they were also applied to religion (I would charitably omit the name of some fellow sociologists who fervently believed in them). It was argued that religion in the global West during the Cold War served to mark the identity and offer a defense against the threat of atheistic Soviet Communism. As the latter had disappeared, the need for religion will be greatly reduced. Not only scholars but liberal politicians and journalists repeated this theory time and again.

At first, it looked like they were right. For different reasons, most of them not connected with the end of the Cold War, the largest Christian churches in the West started losing members and prestige, due in particular to the first sexual abuse scandals and bitter internal controversies about moral issues such as abortion and homosexuality, following the post-1960s revolution in Western sexual mores.

However, something totally unexpected happened. While in the Global West (but not elsewhere) the Catholic Church

and the historical Protestant churches lost members, less traditional religions had a substantial growth or reaffirmed their presence. They included "old" new religious organizations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, some Pentecostal denominations, or the Mexico-based La Luz del Mundo, and newer religious movements such as the Church of Scientology or the Unification Church. It was not only a question of numbers. The Unification Church remained comparatively small but had a substantial political influence, particularly in Japan. Brand-new religions were also founded, and some were fairly successful. In Taiwan, after the end of the Martial Law, some religious and spiritual groups, including Tai Ji Men, acquired growing visibility and prestige.

A large gathering of Jehovah's Witnesses. Source: JW.org.

This went against the dominant predictions and mightily disturbed the liberal politicians and intellectuals who had announced the demise of religion in the Global West. Their answer was that in fact there were no successful new religions. Perhaps they were successful, but they were not religions at all, but something different: "cults," "frauds," or political or even criminal groups disguised as religions.

Using bricks that already existed, but that were put together in a full-blown theory and were accepted by some governments in the late 1980s and 1990s, they created an international anti-cult ideology, which rested on four pillars.

First, "cults" are not religions. Not being religions, they are not entitled to religious liberty. Gifts to them should be taxed, which was argued both in France and in Taiwan and of course pleased the tax offices.

Second, they are not religions because, unlike religions, they are not joined freely. Their leaders use a mysterious technique called "brainwashing," "mental manipulation," or "psychological subjection"—some were even accused of "raising goblins" as it happened to Tai Ji Men in Taiwan—to manipulate and lure their "victims." This theory was quickly debunked by scholars as a scientific fraud and a circular argument—we know that Scientology, for example, is a "cult" because it uses "brainwashing," and we know it uses "brainwashing" because it is a "cult"—but continues to be used by governments and included in laws and regulations, from France to Japan.

Tai Ji Men protests in Taiwan.

Third, we know that "cults" use "brainwashing" because, while we should not believe academic scholars who are by definition naïve or paid "cult apologists," we should believe those ex-members who have turned into opponents of the movements they have left and claim they were "brainwashed." Sociologists call these hostile ex-members "apostates" and note that the majority of ex-members are not promoting campaigns against the groups they have left and thus are not "apostates."

Fourth, we know that among millions of ex-members, not to mention actual members, of religions stigmatized as "cults," we should believe the "apostates," and not the others, although they are a tiny minority, because they are presented to the governments, the courts, and the media, by the anti-cult associations that, unlike the scholars, "tell the truth" because they represent the "victims" and occupy a higher moral ground.

Of course, this model can be shortened to one single passage: a group is a "cult" if anti-cult organizations or their international federations such as FECRIS say it is a "cult."

German, Canadian, and Italian anti-cultists at an anti-cult conference in Russia.

The model has no scientific value and just functions as a political tool to discriminate against groups some lobbies or powers do not like. However, it is very convenient for those who want to perpetuate the myth that in the post-Cold-War Global West (unlike in the "backward" Global East or Global South) religion, particularly conservative religion, is by definition declining and the triumph of progressive, liberal, and secular values is unavoidable and irreversible.

Ideologists are dangerous. If the reality does not conform to their ideology, they usually take a hammer—or a hammer and a sickle in the case of Communists—and start hitting the reality. When you hit hard the reality, blood normally comes out. Punishing Tai Ji Men and other groups as religious frauds and hitting them with taxes in Taiwan, mobilizing left-wing activists against the Unification Church and creating a climate in Japan that is now assaulting other groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, and legislating against "brainwashing," under any other name, in France are all by-products of the same obnoxious ideology.

TAGGED WITH: ANTI-CULT, FRANCE, JAPAN, RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, TAI JI MEN, TAIWAN

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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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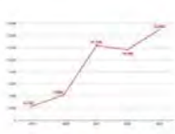

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