

The Abe Assassination. Donations to the Unification Church: Separating Facts from Fiction

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Media have accepted at face value the accusation by anti-Unification-Church lawyers that “victims” are defrauded through “spiritual sales.” The real story is different.

by Massimo Introvigne

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Anti-Unification-Church lawyer Hiroshi Watanabe railing against “spiritual sales” in a post-Abe-assassination press conference. Screenshot.

The Terror of the French Revolution killed some 30,000 priests, nuns, and lay Catholics. To excite the public opinion against the Catholic Church, the architects of the Terror used an argument they knew is always effective: money. Countless pamphlets, gazette articles, and caricatures showed greedy priests ruining families by soliciting extravagant donations.

Communist propaganda learned and applied the lesson. When Mongolia was under a Communist regime, **some 60,000 Buddhist monks were killed**. The regime prepared it with a massive propaganda poster campaign, where monks were depicted as vampires sucking the blood of the Mongolian population by asking for heavy donations.





Warrant for a genocide: propaganda against "greedy" monks by the Communist Party in Mongolia. From the collection of the now defunct Memorial Museum of the Victims of Political Repression, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Photo by Massimo Introvigne.

We are now witnessing the same propaganda at work against the Unification Church/Family Federation in Japan after the assassination of Shinzo Abe. The assassin claimed he wanted to punish Abe for having sent a video to an event, and a message to another event, of an organization connected with the Unification Church, a group he hated because he believed his mother's donations to it had led her to bankruptcy.

There is in Japan an anti-Unification-Church group known as the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales. They claim that countless Japanese have been ruined by both donations and the purchase of worthless artifacts sold by the Unification Church at extravagant prices.

"Spiritual sales" is a label coined by anti-Unification-Church leftist media in Japan in the 1980s. A company called Happy World imported to Japan and sold vases and miniature pagodas. Some of those who bought them were connected to small new religions other than the Unification Church, and declared that these artifacts were imbued with a good spiritual energy. Not surprisingly, Happy World was happy about it, and raised the prices. The Unification Church did not sell the vases and pagodas and had nothing to do with claims about their alleged mystical powers. However, those who operated Happy World were Unification Church members, and donated to the Church part of their profits. Thus, they were accused of "spiritual sales," particularly after the hostile lawyers' association was founded in 1987.

After 1987, the sales of vases and pagodas stopped, but other Unification Church members had businesses selling artworks, jewelry, and seals or stamps used in Japan to confirm signatures. These stamps were exquisitely crafted and made of expensive materials, but they were sold at prices higher than usual, also because it was claimed they brought good luck, a common claim for different artifacts in Japan. Again, these items were not sold by the Unification Church but by members who then used part of their profits to donate to the Church.

In 2000, an existing law on door-to-door sales was significantly amended, and its name was changed to "[Act on Specified Commercial Transactions](#)." It prohibited to "intimidate or disturb" perspective buyers in order to conclude a sale. Based on this law, members of the Unification Church who sold seals were detained, and eventually received suspended jail sentences. The then President of the Church in Japan acknowledged responsibility for not having instructed members about the new law and their duty to respect it. He resigned in 2009, and the Unification Church adopted a new policy counseling members whose businesses sold "lucky" artifacts, including stamps, to strictly comply with the 2000 law.





Seals in Japan are, in general, an expensive commodity. Credits.

The hostile lawyers used the label “spiritual sales” also for donations to the Unification Church, a different matter. They claimed that the Church was “selling” eternal salvation, both for the living and their deceased loved ones, against donations. They managed to persuade some Japanese courts to establish the dubious principle that if the amount of donations was high, it should be presumed they had been obtained through “fraudulent or threatening” means, or “psychological techniques” depriving the donors of their “free will” (a notion dangerously close to the discredited and pseudo-scientific **theory of brainwashing**).

Tokens of appreciation given to the donors may also be maliciously confused with items sold through “spiritual sales.” In some Catholic organizations, those who make important donations receive a book or diploma autographed by the Pope. Obviously, they are not “buying” the diploma or the book for an extravagant price. The book or the diploma are just symbolic reminders that the Church is grateful for their donations.

The lawyers relied on a frequent fallacy of campaigns against the groups labeled as “cults.” They present as unique practices they have in common with mainline religions. The Catholic Church believes that many souls after death go to Purgatory, a temporary state between Heaven and Hell. Time in Purgatory can be abbreviated by their relatives and friends through prayers, Masses for which they pay a honorary to the priest—and donations. Indeed, one of the reasons Martin Luther separated from the Church of Rome was his dislike for the Catholic doctrine of indulgences, which taught that monetary offerings may automatically shorten time served in Purgatory. Buddhist orders have similar teachings, connecting donations with deceased relatives’ better reincarnations and escape from the dreaded Cold Hells.



Hundreds of Protestant churches maintain the Biblical principle of tithing, and ask members to donate ten percent of their income. Tithing is suggested as a possibility, although it is not mandatory, in the Unification Church too, which also has specific practices such as donating for four years in multiples of thirty, acknowledging the collective responsibility of humankind for Judas' betrayal of Christ, whom he sold for thirty pieces of silver.

In its general principles, the Unification Church's theology of donations is surprisingly similar to its Catholic and Protestant counterparts. Japanese courts of law have started recognizing it, also because donors now sign notarized statements where they state that they are donating freely, understand all the implications, and will not sue the Unification Church in the future. In 2021, the Family Federation still lost one donation case but won two others—in one of which the Tokyo District Court ascertained that the plaintiff had tampered with the evidence.

Ultimately, the problem is theological and philosophical. For a believer, donations may be deep spiritual experiences. For an atheist, or somebody who believes that groups such as the Unification Church are not "real" religions, no caution would be good enough, and no donation would ever be recognized as the fruit of a free and reasonable choice.



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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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