

# The Legacies of State Shinto and Aum Shinrikyo on Japanese Religious Politics as seen Through the Unification Church

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## Introduction

In light of a court decision to revoke the Unification Church's religious status in March of 2025 many fear that Japan today is taking a step back in the realm of religious freedom (Yamaguchi, "Court in Japan Orders Dissolution of Unification Church"). In truth it is a lot more complicated than it seems. This issue revolves around much more than just the Unification Church's legal battles for religious recognition. It is important to recognize that this is not an isolated incident. Not only has the Unification Church faced scrutiny for decades, but they are also not the first religious organization to be stripped of its legal status, nor the first to face public scrutiny (Yamaguchi, "Court in Japan Orders Dissolution of Unification Church"). Moreover the issue of the Unification Church extends beyond concerns for religious freedom, and represents the latest marker in a complex and recurring conflict regarding whether the state should protect religious freedom or enforce the separation of religion and state.

Since the establishment of the Japanese Constitution after World War II there have been

numerous conflicts surrounding freedom of religion, and just where the line between religion and state should be drawn. Though not always the case, commonly these restrictions on religious freedom are incited by perceived violations of the separation of state and religion. This is due to the legacy of the Allied Occupation and State Shinto. While these perceived violations of the separation of state and religion damage the reputation of both entities, religions tend to bear the brunt of the backlash as to politicians' can and do respond with legislative action (Klein 93).

This cycle of damage is due to a complex interaction of factors, most of which are rooted in Japan's history and the events revolving around the foundation of Japan as a modern state. Japan's unique history has shaped its distinctive relationship with religion. The legal status of religious freedom in Japan was a direct result of decades of outside pressures. These outside pressures took the form of Western powers which had been pushing for the right to practice Christianity since first contact, and culminated with strictly imposing the ideal of religious freedom at the end of World War II when the

assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the links to the Unification Church and the impacts it has had so far.

### **Japanese Religious Culture Creates Demographic Difficulties**

To determine to what extent and in what ways the religious community may have been harmed by these legislative shifts requires an understanding of the religious demographics of Japan. However, the data on religious affiliation in Japan is difficult to accurately determine (U.S. Department of State; Kozyra 43). Concrete numbers are hard to come by due to the religious landscape. Most importantly, the most common religions found in Japan are not mutually exclusive nor do they require affiliation with any particular organization to practice. Meaning for instance one person could belong spiritually to three or more different religions but not list any affiliation, or they could list all three (Kozyra 44). This causes trouble in collecting data and in understanding it. In 2023 Japan had a population of 123.7 million people. Of that population 87.2 million were Shinto followers, 83.2 million Buddhist and 10 million were otherwise affiliated (U.S. Department of State). If one were to fail to take into account the overlap of religious followers 145.8% of the population would be religious. This overlap of religions however, is not the sole issue when accounting for religious affiliation in Japan.

In addition the Japanese understanding of religion differs from Western understanding of

Allied Powers took full control over the government (Allison; Dorman 5). While many would claim this a noble goal, it's hasty implementation by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers' (SCAP refers to both General MacArthur himself, and/or the entire occupying government but in this essay it is attribute it to the latter) led to consequences that would reverberate throughout the decades, ultimately resulted in Japan having a more negative perception of religions as a whole, but especially impacting non-mainstream religions.

This paper examines the major legislative shifts of Japanese law regarding freedom of religion to contextualize how the situation with the Unification Church is the next chapter in Japan's ongoing struggle to find the balance between secular governance and religious liberties. To start off with, I will explain the religious demographics of modern-day Japan as well as the cultural attitudes surrounding religion. This culture has been shaped by historic legislation and in turn shapes how religions are perceived and further legislated today. From there this analysis will proceed chronologically, and providing historical context as needed. Our tour of legislation will first start with the legacy of Meiji Era legislation. Then we will look into the foundation of the modern state, including both SCAP's legislation changes and the immediate and long lasting consequences. From there we will jump forward to the impact of Tokyo Subway Gas Attacks in 1995. Lastly, we will return to the

the term (Kozyra 43). For many people in Japan, when asked if they are religious they do not first think of their beliefs but rather of their affiliations. To them the question is not “do you believe in *kami* (Shinto gods) or bodhisattvas” but rather “are you registered with a sect or temple” (43). Furthermore, most often religious affiliations are hereditary in nature (Thomas 9). This is further complicated by many religious activities (as defined by Western standards) being categorized as cultural activities further increasing the barrier to entry for what is considered religious. It is common in Japan to not define religious or ritual-like actions as religious because it is not done through affiliation with a religious group (9). Often, actions like visiting a shrine on New Years, or praying to Tenjin, the god of scholarship, to get into a good school, are not seen as religious activities but rather cultural ones (10). What Westerners might call religious is often seen instead as common sense (9). This is due to the effect that State Shinto had on religion. By mixing religion and government the Japanese Imperial government decreased the religious connotations of certain aspects of Shinto.

This difference in understanding of religions and religiosity has influenced not only the way the average person thinks of and interacts with religions but also complicates the matter of keeping religion and state separate. While new religious movements often face discrimination worldwide, Japan’s culture and history surrounding religion can increase this backlash

(Omorovie Ikeke 223). Shintoism has always been there but has never had all the answers to everything. Buddhism complemented Shintoism in that it answered many of the previously unanswered questions, without contradicting the Shinto beliefs (Kozyra 44). In contrast, Christianity’s introduction to Japan was met with much more backlash. This was due to many factors: most notably its exclusive nature and the confrontational stance that many missionaries took in the early days of its introduction (Kozyra 55; de Bary et al. 151). Due to the religious culture of Japan being syncretic, hereditary, and extremely well established there is often significant pushback against new religious movements due to a perceived attack against the family structure and culture, especially when the new religion is exclusive (Kozyra 51).

This culture surrounding religion has a direct effect on and is directly affected by politics and legislation. This negative perception of new religious movements can lead to stricter laws regarding religions, and having stricter laws surrounding religions gives an idea that religions need restriction because they *are* dangerous. This pattern culminates into a more negative perception of religion overall, thus when there are incidences of criminal religious activity the public is extremely willing for new restrictions on religions. This cycle can be seen in the wake of State Shinto, the Aum Tokyo Gas Attacks, and most recently with the scandals revolving around the Unification Church.

## Religion and State

The Japanese state, like many other countries, has had an equally long and complicated relationship with religion. It is this relationship and the public's response that we will examine. To understand the current debates on the relationship between state and religion one must first understand how this stage came to be set. There are three distinct shifts in treatment by the state throughout the course of modern history. The first was the shift to State Shinto under the Meiji Emperor. The second was the shift to the legally enforced separation of state and religion under SCAP. Then came the legislation shift in the wake of the Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack. With all three of these time periods there are two uniting outcomes; the government's aforementioned shift in religious legislation resulted in a lasting harm to the public's perception of organized religion, and especially in regards to the mixing of religion and state. Furthermore, the events regarding the Unification Church are a culmination of the public's increasingly negative perception of religion, the Unification Church's legal troubles, and politicians' desire to capitalize on Japan's religious hot button topics.

### The Legacy of State Shinto

*What is State Shinto?* State Shinto is the name given to Shinto during the time in which it had been co-opted by the government and used throughout Japan's rise to power in the decades leading up to the Second World War. It existed roughly five decades, starting in the middle of the

Meiji Era (1868-1912), lasting the entirety of the Taisho Era (1912-1925) and ended in the middle of the Showa Era (1926-1989) with Japan's defeat in World War II (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 356). The legacy of State Shinto is deeply embedded into both the culture and politics of Japan. It solidified Japan's imperial foundations through the strong ties between it and the Meiji regime. It set the precedent for how to utilize religion in favor of politics in the modern age. It was due to its effectiveness in bolstering nationalism that State Shinto would become the favored political target of American propaganda during the Pacific War and resulted in SCAP's determination to dismantle it in the wake of the war (Dorman 92).

The Meiji Regime utilized many tools to cement their power and to grow the nation; the two most infamous of which are State Shinto and the Emperor System. Both are highly complex topics which warrant entire books of their own because of their vast impact on Japanese society but here I will try and introduce basics needed to understand the impact it had on Japanese Politics regarding religion.

The Emperor System was born with the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and flourished until World War II wherein the new constitution severely limited his power (MIT Visualizing Cultures; "The Constitution of Japan"). This system was designed to protect Japan from Western expansion through strengthening the government by centering it around the imperial line. This was accomplished

through adopting imperialist expansion and ideology, as well as many other aspects of Western governance (Fukase-Intergaard and Intergaard 344). This adoption of Western thought had to be precariously balanced with maintaining traditional Japanese values in order to retain the popular support that had put them in power (366). When Japan grew powerful enough to be a threat, the Emperor System was deemed barbaric and utilized in anti-Japanese propaganda during the war (Dorman 91). In the end, the Emperor System took nearly all of the blame for Japanese nationalism that led to the Pacific War.

The Emperor System was created with the remaking of the government that marks the start of the Meiji Era. Due, to the failure of the Tokugawa Shogunate's dealings with Commodore Perry in 1853- namely the numerous trade concessions that not only put Japan at a disadvantage but also infringed upon its sovereignty- it was decided that a new stronger government would be needed to deal with the encroaching Western Powers and the regime was overthrown (Fukase-Intergaard and Intergaard 355). This regime was replaced by one that centered on the institution of the emperor. Thus it is often referred to as the Emperor System. This centering on the emperor was chosen due to the rising ethno-nationalism Japan was experiencing. It was a perfect fit as it relied on an already established, and fundamental part of Japanese culture which aligned with the new regime's nationalist ideology and monarchial government

would be easily understood and normalized to the Western Powers whom they were modeling (355). The imperial line had, for centuries, held onto their title only as a ceremonial figurehead and cultural authority, but were once, in centuries past, legitimate sovereigns (MIT Visualizing Cultures).

Wary of the poor treatment that other Asian countries had been receiving from Western powers, Japan felt the need to assert itself as an equal to the Western powers. One of the ways in which this was done was by modeling the new government after the West while still keeping their identity distinct (Fukase-Intergaard and Intergaard 349; Eskildsen 389). The key to which was a constitutional monarchy. In order to ensure the protection of the Emperor System the constitution was mottled after the Prussian Constitution. The Prussian model was chosen explicitly for the strong protections it offered the emperor (364). Thus the regime managed to balance the rising domestic nationalism with the international expectations. This aspect was comparatively an easy choice, as it did not have any true conflicts of interest on either side.

The topic of religion on the other hand was much more fraught. The West had been pushing for the ability to spread Christianity for centuries and wanted the constitution to guarantee religious freedom (371). Although religious freedom was technically granted by the constitution in 1889, it was not true freedom. Until the end of World War II, Japan had never had

true legal separation of state and religion (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 366). Although some paltry attempts had been made during the Meiji Era at the behest of the Western Powers to guarantee religious freedom, the letter of the law and the spirit of the law were in conflict. While the letter of the law allowed for freedom of religion, the spirit of the law clearly did not. Article 28 of the Meiji Constitution reads, "Japanese subjects shall, within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects enjoy freedom of religious beliefs." (Jun-ichi 267). One can clearly see the limitations to religious freedom disguised as civic duties. One such duty as a subject of Japan was to revere the emperor, who was codified as a deity in human form (Kozyra 49). This was an intentional subversion on the part of the Japanese government. They were feigning progressive religious ideals to appease the Western Powers all while utilizing Shinto to bolster the state's power (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 355).

While Japan did have historical backing for their imperial line in order for the Meiji Regime to utilize the Emperor System to the fullest it needed to implement several changes to the existing institution in order to legitimize itself further (Reader 163). Japan's imperial line, like all monarchies, claimed the divine right to rule, but their claim was under threat. First, the previous regime, the Tokugawa Shogunate, had strong ties to the most prominent religion at the time,

Buddhism. Since the Meiji regime was attempting to distance itself from the shogunate it could not rely on Buddhism for legitimization as doing so would taint their own image and thus needed a different source of legitimization (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 352). Shintoism therefore was the better option. Not only was it not strongly associated with the old regime, it was also the religion from which the emperor's claims to divinity stemmed from. Said claims were that the imperial line's divine right to rule stemmed from their direct unbroken line of succession that started with Amaterasu, the Shinto Sun Goddess (Reader 163). But before the state could embrace Shinto they had to ensure that it could reach everyone within the empire. Thus the constitution framed Shinto as a civic duty rather than a religious option. Implementing State Shinto in order to heighten nationalism and thus bind the nation tighter together was the goal of the regime.

Shinto had a number of flaws that inhibited the state from immediately positing it as the national religion. This was only determined after the state's initial failed attempts to declare it the nation's religion (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 356). The first of the problems was that Shinto had been pushed aside for centuries in favor of Buddhism. Buddhism was so dominant that most Shinto Shrines existed on temple land and were subservient to the Buddhist temple. Thus Shinto had to be completely separated from Buddhism in order to prevent the new regime being correlated to the old. Furthermore, Shino

lacked true hierarchy; it was an “uncoordinated mass of community cults,” (352). This made it near impossible for the state to utilize it as a means of unifying the populace. Thus before the state could utilize Shinto as a tool, Shinto had to be refined into a popular, community based religion.

Fixing these problems took decades, and refining of it was constant throughout the entirety of State Shinto’s existence. The state started first with severing all ties between Buddhism and Shinto, which was done with enthusiastic support from Shinto priests (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 356). Then the emperor’s ties to Buddhism were severed and Amaterasu was re-established not only as the emperor’s ancestor but as the mother of all deities (357). Great efforts were made to establish the emperor’s role in Shinto through implementing new rituals that placed the emperor center stage (357). This fixed the problem of the lack of hierarchy, allowing the state to control just what was being taught, but it did not fix the popularity problem.

This popularity problem was solved in two ways. First through combining the state’s new education system with Shinto thus allowing it to become a center of the community. One of the early ways in which this was done was through the “Teaching Subjects Campaign”. This campaign taught the “Three Great Teachings”: Respect for the gods, love of country; making clear the principles of Heaven and the Way of Man; and Reverence for the emperor and obedience to the

will of the court (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 360). Furthermore, schools that refused to teach such doctrines, often Christian schools, were threatened with an inability to hold religious gatherings at the schools (369).

Their second big move into popularizing and nationalizing Shinto was through deifying the war dead via Shinto Shrines (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 369). This aspect validated the community’s emotions and promoted nationalism. Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard explain, “The cult of the war dead ‘tapped Japan’s oldest and most effectively laden area of religious life, the cult of the dead and the ancestors,’”(369). This was done near the start of Japan’s imperial expansion efforts into Taiwan, Korea and Manchuria thus boosting both nationalism and Shinto (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 369; Eskildsen 388). Placing Shinto at the heart of education, and death allowed for the state’s new Shinto ideology to take root, tying it deeply to the core of what it meant to be Japanese. It was this distinct bond between the state and Shinto that would be named State Shinto and would leave a legacy of religious nationalism that would be feared and reviled for its powerful part in the Pacific War.

One can see the ways in which imperial Japan’s education was geared towards religious nationalism in a Japanese Ethics textbook used in the 1930s. This textbook states, “The ‘special dispensation of our Imperial Land’ means that ours is the native land of the Heaven-Shining

Goddess who casts her light over all countries in the four seas. Thus our country is the source and fountainhead of all other countries, and in all matters it excels all the others," (Reader 170). Heaven-Shining Goddess refers to Amaterasu utilizing the literal translation rather than the phonetic translation of her name. Here one clearly see the utilization of Shinto to promote the idea that Japan is inherently better than all other countries.

While State Shinto was not the first time the Japanese government had utilized religion for its own gain, it was the most successful and dangerous utilization. The timing of this development was crucial in its success. The Meiji regime was born in a time of great strife for Asia, the height of imperialist expansion. This external threat was coupled with the rising sense of nationalism in Japan resulting in a regime that both acknowledged and co-opted Western expansionist strategies in order to control the influx of Western influence. All while building Japan's own empire with the intent of making it an equal to said Western Powers. Such lofty ambitions could have only been achieved through the revitalized tools that were the Emperor System and State Shintoism, but ambitions like these isolated Japan making it an enemy to neighbors, and a potential threat and rival to overseas powers.

To summarize, the Emperor System was used to reinforce the emperor's authority in order to heighten nationalism and build an empire equal

to those of the West. This was done through strengthening the bonds between state and Shinto. A bond that would allow for Japan to be unified in a sense of religious superiority which allowed for a righteous expansion. This bond was formed only after Shintoism was molded to better fit imperial ideology. It separated Buddhism from Shinto. It pushed Shinto into a uniform and hierarchical structure. Then formally introduced Shinto doctrine to the people through the education system. This in turn allowed for increased nationalism which aided Imperial Japan's utilization of religion as a tool to further bolster imperial expansion into Taiwan, Korea and Manchuria through deifying the war dead. This was done, in part, through reinforcing the belief that the emperor was divine and that it was an honor to die for him, by utilizing his status as divine to further drive nationalist sentiments of Japanese superiority, and by honoring those who died for imperial expansion in Shinto shrines.

These changes to Shinto during the Meiji regime had a great impact on Japan's culture due to their resounding impact on Japan and the rest of the world. Firstly, it is because of the implied civic duty held within State Shinto that Japan's religious culture often does not recognize many Shinto rituals as religious action but rather cultural, in a similar way in which many Americans celebrate Christmas despite not having strong religious belief. Thus this disconnect between action and definition leads to difficulties in determining demographics and

religious impacts on culture today. Furthermore, the success in completing its goal of unifying the nation to enable better expansion resulted in great hatred from enemy states, such as the Allied Powers in the Second World War.

State Shinto's success in imperialism directly resulted in SCAP's fervent dismantling of it which in turn resulted in a messy relationship between religion and politics for decades to come. The interweaving of state and religion leached the religion out of Shinto in the eyes of many Japanese and played a key part in the aforementioned difference in understanding in what constitutes a religion. When religious acts are not only tied to the state, but then made mandatory, how is one to separate reverence to the divine being that was the emperor from going to jury duty? This interweaving granted the imperial line extraordinary power and ultimately resulted in SCAP's rigid insistence on the dissolution of State Shinto. Regardless of its difficulty, Japan has endeavoured to keep religion and politics apart, wary of a repeat of history.

*SCAP's Dismantling of State Shinto.* With the end of the Second World War Japan came under the control of the Allied Occupation, commonly referred to as SCAP. During this period of occupation there was a complete restructuring of the government, including a new constitution and new legislation. Technically, there has been religious freedom in Japan since the start of the Meiji Era in 1868. However, as we discussed before, this was not complete freedom of religion.

This religious freedom was conditional, and made all other religions beyond Shinto supplementary as one could only practice other religions after they had fulfilled their duties to the emperor and therefore to Shinto (Kozyra 49).

SCAP's religious goal in Japan was two-fold: to enforce secular government and to ensure freedom of religion. SCAP blamed the co-option of religion by the state as *the* reason for the Pacific War, framing it a tool for brainwashing that needed complete eradication. That was not to say they eradicated Shinto, but rather any and all ties between Shinto and the State. This was first announced through their 1945 Shinto Directive which states:

In order to free the Japanese people from direct or indirect compulsion to believe or profess to believe in a religion or cult officially designated by the state, and... In order to prevent recurrence of the perversion of Shinto theory and beliefs into militaristic and ultra-nationalistic propaganda designed to delude the Japanese people and lead them into wars of aggression,... The sponsorship, support, perpetuation, control, and dissemination of Shinto by the Japanese national, prefectural, and local governments, or by public officials, subordinates, and employees acting in their official capacity are prohibited and will cease immediately (Reader 172-173).

In SCAP's official directive they prohibited all financial support or official affiliation with religions by government officials at any level and they prohibited public educational institutions to

utilize textbooks with Shinto doctrine, or to visit Shinto shrines (Reader 173). This has caused issues due to the overlap of historical and religious sites. Many important cultural sites are Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples because of Japan's long religio-political history. Such as the infamous Yasukuni Shrine which is said to house all of Japan's war dead making it both a historical war site and a religious site (Kozyra 50). Additionally, SCAP's directive stated that there was to be no official state religion (Reader 173). Upon conceding defeat, Emperor Hirohito was required by SCAP to announce to all subjects that he was not divine, nor had any relation to divinity (National Diet Library, "Emperor, Imperial Rescript Denying His Divinity (Professing His Humanity)"). The use of Shinto as a tool for imperialism resulted in the strongly held belief by SCAP that it was impervious that state and religion never mix again. This directive paints a clear picture that State Shintoism was dangerous and not to be trusted. This heavy emphasis on its danger laid the foundation for the political scene to come for decades.

In declaring religious freedom SCAP scrapped all of the pre-existing legislation regarding religion and replaced it with powerful protections for religions. Article 20 of the current constitution states that "Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor exercise any political authority. No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious act, celebration, rite

or practice. The State and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity." This separation of state and religion is further codified in Article 89: "No public money or other property shall be expended or appropriated for the use, benefit or maintenance of any religious institution or association, or for any charitable, educational or benevolent enterprises not under the control of public authority" ("The Constitution of Japan"). SCAP wanted religion and politics to have absolutely no overlap (Dorman 95). This was both unpopular and unrealistic.

Governing regimes were not the only ones that gained legitimacy from the official ties between religions and state. Both, government and religions, are powerful and respected in their own rights, but when one is willing to acknowledge and support the other both grow in legitimacy. SCAP did not want a government organization of any sort to oversee any type of religious organizations. How or even if this could have been achieved is unknown as SCAP eventually conceded to religious organizations pressure for the Religious Affairs Sections' continued existence (Dorman 105). This was accompanied by the establishment of the Religious Corporation Law (RCL) in 1951. It is through the RCL that religions could gain the legitimacy they desired as the RCL is what grants religious organizations tax exempt status as well as implicit legitimacy. SCAP would firmly reject the idea that the government could determine which of the new religions were "true" and which

were “false” but that did not stop the people, nor the press’s belief that registration under the RCL should be limited to only “true” religions (117).

In creating the RCL SCAP still limited the government's ability to interfere with religions. With the implementation of religious freedom many new organizations were issuing applications. Within two years of the RCL being enacted the number of religious organizations expanded to five times that of before (Dorman 101). Of these new religious organizations many were already established groups, often Buddhist or Shinto, which were formally dividing into their own religious organizations along prior internal divisions, but many were also wholly new organizations only then allowed to flourish (102). SCAP’s extremely short list of qualifications needed was interpreted very literally by officials meaning just about anyone who met the technical qualifications was accepted as a religious organization. All one needed to register as a religion– and therefore be eligible for tax exemption– was proof of control of property and stated intent of religious activity (102). This low bar of entry coupled with the high reward enticed many businesses to register under false pretences (109). Many religious organizations that had been consulted during the writing of the law informed SCAP of the need for “more safeguards against unhealthy and injurious sects,” but went ignored (101). This influx of religious organizations due to the low bar of entry meant it was easy for unscrupulous organizations to slip through the

cracks, resulting in a huge threat to the reputation of religion as a whole (110).

Larger religions, such as Buddhism and Shinto, were expected to snuff out these “false religions” as they had done in the past, but were unsuccessful due to internal struggles. These “false religions” were not just those of opportunistic con artists but also genuine new religious movements, who simply held different beliefs, but all were targeted by the public and established religions equally harshly. The failure of the mainstream religions to eradicate both sides resulted in a great loss of reputation and trust which affected all religions (Dorman 99, 105). This degradation to religious reputation was further heightened by the fact that those who utilized the tax exemption granted to religious organizations for nefarious purposes were numerous. Most often this took the form of running businesses but claiming to be religions thus garnering more profits (102). The chaos caused by the internal division of the major sects, the increase in new religions, and the increase in criminal “religious” activity resulted in a media storm that capitalized and heightened the public’s frustration and anxieties. While the public desired stricter regulation on religions, this storm and subsequent calls for reform were curbed by SCAP censorship at the time. SCAP allowed no room for true negotiations and the law was upheld as it was for decades with only an increase in attempting to weed out those who would abuse the system (110, 115).

The use of State Shinto as a tool for imperialism had a major ramifications on post-war Japan; it massively impacted the reputation of religious organizations, created new political tensions and laid the ground work the political scandals decades in the future. Religion had been used to reinforce the Emperor System. Which then allowed SCAP to justify their drastic changes (Reader 172). Article 20 of the new constitution protected religious freedom and Article 89 further defined the separation of religion and state but failed to make a perfect system (“The Constitution of Japan”). Shinto and Buddhism, the two most long-standing religions in Japan, had taken a blow to their reputation due to their inability to hinder the new religions. Various organizations misused the law for their own financial gain by falsely claiming to be religious organizations, and in the chaos all religions were harmed. A sense of mistrust was born, but overall the public, which was heavily influenced by SCAP propaganda and censorship, ultimately felt that religions were good and required protection from the state.

### **Aum Shinrikyo: Domestic Terrorism and the LDP**

*The Attacks and Buildup.* On March 20, 1995 members of a new religious movement, Aum Shinrikyo, released a deadly gas into the Tokyo subway system. The Hibiya, Marunouchi, and Chiyoday Lines, as well as Kodenmaccho station, were the stages for this act of domestic terrorism (Murakami 59, 9, 118, 183). The deadly nerve

agent, called sarin, that was released killed 13 people and injured over 6,000 more, many of whom continued to feel long term side effects for years (Sugiyama et. al). As of 2020, in a study done utilizing 747 survivors, up to 14 years after the attacks over 50% experienced symptoms of tiredness, fatigue, dizziness, headaches, eye fatigue, blurred vision, difficulty in seeing far, difficulty seeing near, difficulty in focusing, with even more symptoms to lesser percentages (Sugiyama et. al). Furthermore, this attack was merely one in a long line of criminal acts committed by the religious movement Aum Shinrikyo. Most of the original attacks were done either as test runs for the one they would become infamous for, or to silence whistleblowers and largely utilized similar chemical weapons (Monterey Institute of International Studies).

The subway attacks served to highlight and reveal many of these prior acts of criminal activity. The gas attack that would lead to the group's destruction was not their first criminal offence, nor was it the first time the government became aware of them and their access to deadly nerve agents (The Japan Times). In 1989, 6 years before the subway gassing, the group killed a lawyer who opposed the cult, Tsutsumi Sakamoto, as well as his wife and infant son (Yamaguchi “30 Years after Deadly Tokyo Subway Gassing, Survivors and Victims’ Families Still Seeking Closure”). This kind of attack was not uncommon. Aum regularly attacked reporters, judges, and even concerned relatives of Aum members in order to keep their

activities concealed (Monterey Institute of International Studies). Their criminal acts were not strictly confined to such coverups; there were repeated attacks, both failed and successful, utilizing biological and chemical weapons on large scales (Gunaratna 3). Such as their attempt in June of 1993 wherein they attempted to spread botulinum toxin via a car and a spraying device during Prince Naruhito's wedding. Other such attacks were attempted over the next few years utilizing other biological and chemical weapons such as Bacillus anthracis, ebola virus, and phosgene. Aum's favorite murder weapon of choice seemed to be however the titular sarin, and another nerve agent, VX (Monterey Institute of International Studies).

These attacks, and the efforts put into gathering the materials required were noted not only in Japan but also in Russia and the US (Gunaratna 3,4). Aum's reach was widespread and known about by all three governments, and yet their attack succeeded (4). Despite the many whistleblowers and their deaths, the government was reluctant to act due to fear of insufficient evidence coupled with extreme caution concerning the groups suspected possession of sarin gas. The police's reluctance to raid the facilities without evidence was due to the threat of public backlash had the raids ended in failure. Had the raids ended in failure, it would have been interpreted as the government infringing upon a religious groups' rights. A simultaneous raid of all of Aum's locations was planned for March 22,

1995 (The Japan Times). However this reluctance proved to be deadly as just two days before the raid the subways were gassed.

Aum spent decades before the attack doing all it could to grow their membership and consolidate wealth and power. In the early to mid-1980s Shoko Asahara, after several career failures, turned to religion. He started to build his mythos as a Buddhist guru through teaching yoga classes and spreading photographs of him levitating as evidence of him having reached Nirvana (Gunaratna 2). In July of 1987 the group officially renamed itself as Aum Shinrikyo (the supreme truth) and Asahara furthered his religious doctrine and continued to add to his own mythos. Asahara incorporated a selective mix of Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian ideology, purporting himself as Buddha, Shiva (the Hindu god of destruction and transformation), and as a messiah whose job was to rebuild the Earth into a utopia (2). Thus the attacks were internally framed as the first step in creating this utopia, and as a test of loyalty to Asahara.

Aum's influence was low and its membership was few in those days but due to the Religious Corporations Law that changed quickly. In August of 1989 Aum registered itself as a religious organization and its membership sky-rocketed from 1,300 members in 1987 in Japan alone to 50,000 worldwide in 1995 (2). This is due to the RCL. While SCAP did not want anyone to think that the RCL was the government legitimizing any registered religion, that does not mean that it was

not perceived as just that. The reason that religious organizations had fought for the Religious Affairs Bureau and the RCL was because they knew it would do exactly that, offer legitimization in the eyes of the public (Dorman 117). Aum's registration by the government added an air of legitimacy to the group which allowed for their organization to grow to staggering heights. After the attacks, and after Aum was stripped of its status the numbers similarly plummeted. Though one cannot say that it was strictly due to the loss of their status but rather more likely due to the violent actions that caused said loss. Current membership of the main successor to Aum, Aleph, is at roughly 1200 members in Japan with other affiliate groups persisting and recruiting in Russia as well (Yamaguchi, "30 Years after Deadly Tokyo Subway Gassing, Survivors and Victims' Families Still Seeking Closure"; Gunaratna 4).

Before Aum decided to utilize violence to gain power it had attempted to integrate itself into Japan's political framework. In 1990 Asahara, the group's leader, as well as 24 other members ran in a House of Representatives election and lost (Gunaratna 3). Aum's attack thus managed not only to heighten peoples' fear of religion in general but also renewed peoples' fears regarding the sanctity of the separation of religion and state. There is no doubt from anyone that this act of domestic terrorism sparked significant changes in Japan's perception on religion and on Japan as a whole (Baffelli et. al 5). Most relevantly, this attack

directly led to a revision of the Religious Corporation Law for the first time in decades (Inoue). Furthermore it would be stripped of its religious status on the basis of its criminal activity. This however would not and did not hinder people from continuing to practice the religion. Aum is succeeded by three new religious organizations in Japan, Aleph, Hikari no Wa and Yamada no Shudan. Aleph is the largest with over 1000 members and plenty of its own controversies (The Asahi Shimbun).

*The Aftermath.* There is no doubt that Aum's attacks impacted all of Japan. It spawned an entire publishing industry with decades of news reports on the group's trials and the fate of Aum as well as documentaries and books on the subject flooding the market (Baffelli and Reader 1). It shook Japan to the core because it disrupted the core belief that Japan was a safe place to live. Calling violence of this scale uncommon in Japan is like saying that space is large. Japan was and is widely known to be one of the safest countries on Earth (World Population Review). In 1995 it had a homicide rate of 0.58 while in the same year the U.S. had a rate of 8.13 (Macrotrends, "Japan Crime Rate & Statistics 1990-2024"; Macrotrends, "U.S. Murder/Homicide Rate 1990-2024"). Aum's attack led to a breaking from the conventional wartime wisdom that religions needed protection and gave rise to the belief that instead it was religion that people needed protection from (Klein 81). This was not the first time such a

concept had been noticed but it was the first to lead to significant lasting change.

The political response to the attack was drastic due to the fact that it was believed that the government could have prevented the attack if they had just acted sooner. The political response was further heightened due to the political situation at the time. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had lost the prior election, and thereby control over the government for the first time since the 1950s. It was an unprecedented time for the LDP and proper response to the Aum attacks would make or break the party.

In the wake of the Aum attacks there were three key outcomes. First, Aum was stripped of its religious status on the basis of its criminal activity (Yamaguchi, "Japan's Government Asks a Court to Revoke the Legal Religious Status of the Unification Church"). Aum's leader, Shoko Asahara and 12 others were executed in 2018, after decades of public trials with many others ending up behind bars (Yamaguchi, "30 Years after Deadly Tokyo Subway Gassing, Survivors and Victims' Families Still Seeking Closure"; Murakami 365). Lastly, just nine months after the subway attacks, for the first time since its inception, the Religious Corporation Law was heavily reformed (Klein 81; Inoue).

Officially speaking, the reforms were proposed by a committee made up of many different representatives from religious organizations, including one representative from each religious group, with the exception of Jinja

Honcho who received two, along with three academics from Japanese Universities, along with the committee chair, Misumi Tesuo, who had formerly worked in the Ministry for Science and was at the time chairman for the Asia Pacific Cultural Center for UNESCO (Klein 86). Of these committee members there was a stark divide between those who wanted to uphold the Religious Corporation law as it was, and those who wanted reforms such as increased investigations into groups before granting religious status as well as stricter supervision (86). In order to get around this divide and provide the quick reforms as he had been tasked by the LDP, Misumi formed a subcommittee filled with only pro-reformer members. While there was significant backlash from religious organizations, Misumi was able to avoid punishment because of high public support for reform; of those polled, 85% were in favor (87). This naturally resulted in a bitter frustration for the religious organizations that had been sidelined and increasing popular support for the LDP.

On paper these reforms granted the government more oversight of religious organizations. The changes made were thus: religions that existed over multiple prefectures came under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education; religious organizations were obligated to submit lists of executive staff members, property owned, a fiscal report, and information on hiring and renting; they then have to share said

information with members and all interested individuals; lastly, authorities could demand information from and question religious organizations (Klein 90). However, many religious organizations strongly opposed this new law and simply refused to cooperate. In 1998 the year that the reforms were supposed to go into effect only about 40% of all religious groups actually submitted the required documentation (91). Additionally, there was a lack of staff to even look at the documents that had been submitted. For instance in Tokyo, where there are more than 6,300 religious corporations, there were only four officials to read the reports (91). As a result the law had little to no effect on religious groups in a legal sense at the time.

That is not to say the law had no impact at all. It reinforced the popular understanding that had followed the initial chaos of the implementation of the Religious Corporation Law and that followed directly after the attacks; that religions, and especially new religions, were dangerous. This was due to the “massive and inescapable media coverage that followed the terrorist attack” as well as the LDP’s utilization of these fears to their own political gain (Klein 85). To do so the LDP reignited fears of collaboration between religious groups and political parties that was born with SCAP’s heavy insistence. This reignition of fears was done explicitly in order to win back their majority in the upcoming elections. The LDP highlighted the ties between a religious organization named Soka Gakkai and the New

Frontier Party (NFP) who had become their biggest political rival (83). This fear was further stoked by Aum’s own attempts to be elected into office. While these fears would calm down in the coming years they never fully disappeared and consistently reappear in various different debates.

### **Shinzo Abe, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Unification Church**

Shinzo Abe’s assassination revealed numerous crimes among both the Liberal Democratic Party and the Unification Church. Abe’s death along with Yamagami’s claimed motivation lead to an investigation into Abe’s connections with the church. It was in these investigations that the extensive ties between the entire Liberal Democratic Party came to light. There were numerous repercussions from this revelation.

The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, hereafter referred to by its shortened name the Unification Church, is a religious movement that was initially started in South Korea in 1954. It is a Christian based movement started by Sun Myung Moon, and continued to be led by his wife Hak Ja Han Moon after his death in 2012 (Joseph). This religion spread rapidly throughout Asia and the rest of the world in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, it has not spread without controversies. The church faced suspicions of being a cult and was often seen as illegitimate, especially in the United States (Joseph). In Japan, the largest and most recurring source of distrust was due to the accusation of

predatory tactics in garnering donations (Yamaguchi “Japan’s Government Asks a Court to Revoke the Legal Religious Status of the Unification Church”). This is often disputed by the church and supporters, though they have made some overtures into repairing damaged relationships through refunding these donations (Yamaguchi, “Unification Church in Japan Offers to Set aside up to \$67 Million in a Compensation Fund”). The Unification Church’s reputation took another large hit when it was pulled firmly into the spotlight after former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s public assassination due to allegations of collusion.

Fear of history repeating itself, and political parties being too closely tied to religious organizations has plagued the Unification Church in decades past (Beckford 204). These fears were reignited by the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022. The reported motivation for the assassination of Abe was his ties to the Unification Church (Tanaka et al.). The assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, claimed to harbor a resentment towards the Unification Church for bankrupting his mother through predatory donation tactics, and thus attacked Abe for his implicit approval of the group (Tanaka et al.). Furthermore, in the wake of Abe’s death and the subsequent investigation into these claims it was discovered that Abe was not alone in his ties to the church and that many of the members of his political party, the Liberal Democratic Party, also had accepted significant financial contributions

from the Unification Church (Yamaguchi, “Japan’s Leader Grilled in Parliament over Widening Fundraising Scandal, Link to Unification Church”). Even the hint of such strong ties served to heighten the anxieties over possible conflicts with the constitution.

There are a few things to note about Japanese politics before we delve into just why the LDP’s ties to the church are so scandalous. First, the LDP is an extremely dominant party, so much so that the phrase “one and a half party system” was coined specifically for Japan. With the exception of 3 years from 1993 to 1996, the LDP has held control over Japanese politics since 1955 (Klein 84). In 1955 the LDP became the dominant conservative party of Japan (Christensen).

Another important figure to note is Nobusuke Kishi, Abe’s grandfather. Kishi was prime minister from 1957 until 1959 wherein he resigned after severe backlash for his ratifying of a revised treaty with the US while the opposition were boycotting the Diet session. This incited complaints of undemocratic action and large scale demonstrations (Christensen). Furthermore, he was imprisoned by SCAP for three years on suspicion of being a class-A war criminal before being released without trial (National Diet Library, “KISHI Nobusuke | Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures | National Diet Library, Japan”).

Kishi was also the first of the LDP to form close ties with the Unification Church. These ties were formed from Kishi and Sun Myung Moon’s mutual desire to prevent the spread of

communism (Yamaguchi, “Court in Japan Orders Dissolution of Unification Church”). The alliance formed between the two proved fruitful; Kishi provided support for Moon’s desired expansion and Moon helped support Kishi’s political career through funds and votes (McCurry). This alliance survived Kishi’s retirement from politics and was passed onto other party members including Abe who had sent congratulatory video messages to the church due to its “commitment to traditional family values”(McCurry).

Abe was not alone in his ties. He and other LDP politicians were discovered to have enlisted followers to work on election campaigns as volunteers, as well as giving speeches at church-sponsored events (McCurry). Prime Minister Kishida is also alleged to have secretly met with top officials from the Unification Church during a meeting with former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Despite his claims that he does not remember meeting anyone other than Gingrich there is photographic evidence to the contrary (Yamaguchi, “Japan’s Leader Grilled in Parliament over Widening Fundraising Scandal, Link to Unification Church”). This kind of use of religion in politics is nothing new, or unique to Japanese politics, nor is it inherently illegal (Klien 84). Kishida, in an attempt to allay fears of the Church’s power over the party, ordered an internal investigation into ties between party members and the church. This backfired when it was revealed that 179 of 379 of the party’s lawmakers had some kind of tie to the church

(McCurry). It also doesn’t help that when investigating into these ties it was discovered that many politicians within the LDP, including Abe, had failed to report all the money raised from fundraising and instead funneled said money into slush funds (Yamaguchi, “Japan’s Leader Grilled in Parliament over Widening Fundraising Scandal, Link to Unification Church”).

When the extent of this alliance made news it exposed the LDP’s hypocrisy. The LDP had on multiple occasions attacked other political parties on the basis of them being puppets of religious organizations, and was now shown to have done the same. The LDP also faced additional scandals that it had to allay in the hopes of continuing its party’s dominance over the political landscape. Thus, to prove it held no favoritism for the Unification Church it cracked down hard, resulting in the Unification Church losing its status and tax benefits. The reason it was such a scandal was strictly because of the Unification Church’s poor reputation, the secrecy in which relations were conducted and LDP’s past instances of utilizing such ties as political ammunition.

The investigation into the Unification Church extended beyond its ties to Abe, examining allegations of predatory donation practices and spiritual sales. This was reported to have been done through them leading individuals into secluded places and pressuring them into signing documents. There were also numerous reports of members taking out loans in order to pay for

promised donations (UCA News). This investigation resulted in the Unification Church being found guilty and being officially revoked of its legal status as a religion.

The RCL allows for government oversight of religious organizations in order to prevent unfair solicitations of donations, as well as to prevent requests of donors utilizing real estate or other assets as collateral damage (U.S. Department of State). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Science (MEXT) issued the order to revoke the Unification Church's status as they found that the Unification Church had been systematically violating this law since the 1980s. This decision was based on the questioning of the church as well as interviews with 170 individuals who allegedly suffered financial and mental damages. They cited 32 civilian lawsuits which resulted in ¥2.2 billion (\$15.5 million) in damages to go to 169 plaintiffs as well as additional out-of-court settlements with over 1,500 other victims and an additional 5,000 documents and pieces of evidence (U.S. Department of State, Yamaguchi, "Court in Japan Orders Dissolution of Unification Church").

This revocation of status does not mean that the group can no longer practice or proselytize. It simply means that it no longer receives the same tax exemption as a registered religion would (Yamaguchi "Japan's Government Asks a Court to Revoke the Legal Religious Status of the Unification Church"). The Unification Church is the third religious organization since the

inception of the law to be revoked of its legal status. It is, however, the first revocation based on a violation of civil law rather than criminal law (Yamaguchi "Japan's Government Asks a Court to Revoke the Legal Religious Status of the Unification Church"). This is one of the main factors that the Unification Church cites as why the ruling is illegitimate.

The views of the general populace on the incident vary drastically from that of the views of the Unification Church and its members. For much of the populace this is an incident regarding financial scandals and an infringement on secular government as guaranteed by Article 89. For the Unification Church this is not about Article 89 but rather Article 20, that of freedom of religion. In the Unification Church's most recent statement on the matter they state, "This is a grave matter that cannot be overlooked, and we are deeply aware of the seriousness of this decision, which has completely disregarded the truth, conscience, and freedom of religion"(The Family Federation For World Peace and Unification). They continue to go on stating that Yamagami's grudge was reported "without factual verification" blaming the media for unfairly involving the organization. They also argue that they have complied with all legal rulings, but that all of the incidents are over 15 years old. Furthermore claiming that the evidence submitted to the court was potentially tampered with. For the Unification Church this is an issue of freedom of religion and protecting human rights. They claim that since the assassination and the

revocation of their status “The social discrimination, persecution, and human rights violations against Japanese Family Federation members have reached an serious level [*sic*]” (The Family Federation For World Peace and Unification).

The Unification Church is not alone in their perception of this being a conflict regarding religious freedom. However, oftentimes instead of arguing about the predatory donation tactics, which are often simply dismissed as bad faith arguments, supporters of the Unification Church will switch the topic to deprogramming kidnappings. Stating that the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales aided in the kidnappings of Unification Church members and then utilized harmful “deprogramming” techniques to pressure them into filing lawsuits against the church (Nakayama).

Massimo Introvigne, an Italian scholar of religion, is a decent, if very vitriolic, example of such supporters, as his essay on the Abe assassination highlights a lot of the core counter-arguments. While I posit it as an example, please note it often lacks adequate citations and carries a hostile tone throughout but is not necessarily indicative of all such counter arguments but is also not uncommon in like articles. Introvigne mimic’s the church’s view that the church is the victim, unfairly dragged into something that had little to do with them stating, “While the weak mind of the assassin had clearly been excited by anti-Unification Church campaigns by militant

lawyers and anti-cultists, the latter succeeded in persuading most media, both in Japan and internationally, that rather than being a victim the Unification Church was somewhat responsible for the homicide, in a spectacular reversal of both logic and fairness,” (74). Introvigne argues that the Unification Church is in fact the victim of a smear campaign led by “hostile lawyers” who “relied on deprogrammers who sent to them their deprogrammed victims... then persuaded to sue the Unification Church generating significant revenues for the lawyers”(78).

Personally, I did not find any source claiming the Unification Church as the one responsible for Abe’s assassination, only that the assassin, Yamagami’s, claimed motivation was the ties between the two as well as personal victimization from the church. Introvigne slightly deviates from the Unification Church’s statement on the matter of the assassin’s reasoning. While the church claims the motive is unsubstantiated, Introvigne claims that it is illogical. This is because Yamagami’s claimed motivation relies on a bankruptcy that was declared in 2002 by Yamagami’s mother due to excessive donations to the church (76). Introvigne fails to account for the fact that murderers are rarely acting on pure logic, nor that childhood trauma has significant and permanent impact on a person’s psyche. Instead Introvigne places the blame on online “hate campaigns against the Unification Church”, Yamagami’s “weak head” and claims that anti-Unification Church activists utilized the media to

shift the blame onto the church and away from Yamagami (76, 77).

Introvigne's approach to the topic of the church's spiritual sales is that it is over and done with. This scandal started with over 200 victims coming forward with the help of Japan's National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual sales to sue the Unification Church for predatory financial practices (UCA News). The victims cited being extorted and coerced into donating money, and signing forms claiming free will. Some even reported borrowing money to donate to the church. This resulted in the network of lawyers filing suits seeking 123.7 billion yen (\$850 million) in damages for the victims (UCA News). Introvigne objects to the term "spiritual sales" (80). He claims that said sales were legitimate sales from regular businesses that just happened to be owned by members of the church and frames the lawyers as greedy people taking advantage of victims of deprogramming kidnappings (80, 78). Introvigne however, lacks citations regarding this section and many others. Regardless of that lack, he does still demonstrate many of the counter arguments made by the church. Though he misses one large one, the fact that the church has reimbursed many of the families who donated in excess to their financial situations, including Yamagami's own family (Yamaguchi, "Unification Church in Japan Offers to Set aside up to \$67 Million in a Compensation Fund"; UCA News). These financial reimbursements do not negate the actions of the

church, nor the harm that these people subsequently felt but the church expresses desires to move past such scandals.

For many supporters of the Unification Church they feel as though the association with the assassination is unfair, and is exacerbating existing discrimination problems, and ignoring prior incidents such as the deprogramming kidnappings. Introvigne's concerns for discrimination is a rare instance in which I could verify his claims through the United State's annual report on religious freedom. In the 2023 report there was a stated concern over the situation, and a determination to keep an eye on the situation (U.S. Department of State). The Unification Church's fears are not completely unfounded, but neither are the fears of the opposition. This is a tricky question of who needs to be protected from whom? Does the government need safeguards against the Unification Church's staggeringly close ties to the ruling political party? Do the people need protection from the government against the Unification Church? Or does the Unification Church need protection from religious based discrimination?

### **Conclusion**

Japan finds itself bundled up in a neat knot of political, and ethical questions in regards to the LDP and Unification Church scandal. All of these questions are due to the legacy of State Shinto and Aum Shinrikyo. It was due to the implementation of State Shinto during the Meiji Era that people saw the true political power that religion could

law, and had not been so successful at demonizing any government oversight on religions.

It was due to a heightened fear of the fraternization between politics and religious organizations that Yamagami's claimed motive for Abe's assassination held so much weight. Furthermore it had such an impact because the church already had a poor reputation due to its predatory donation practices. Yamagami's claims sparked an investigation into the ties, which then proved how extensive the ties between the two groups really were. This then resulted in the LDP attempting to save face by cracking down even harder on the Unification Church. Their loss of status was not a matter of religious freedom, but rather a matter of criminal activity and poor politicking.

have. It was due to SCAP that people came to believe the inherent danger of any mixing of state and religion. Furthermore SCAP insistence on the need for protection of religion and failure to add any safeguards for the people against religion resulted in a heightened fear of religious fraud. This led to an increased fear of religion, but one that could not be openly spoken of or the laws debated due to SCAP's control and censorship over the media. Then came Aum and its attack on the subway. This came at a time in which the LDP was out of power for the first time in nearly four decades. They were desperate for leverage, and then Aum gave it to them in the form of the people's renewed terror of religious organizations. The LDP then successfully utilized it to reform the Religious Constitution Law which further legitimized the people's fears of religion. This reform of the law would likely not have been needed if SCAP had built in more safeguards to the

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