WHEN RELIGION BECOMES A WEAPON: JAPAN RECOGNIZES THREATS OF HELL AS CHILD ABUSE



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Japan recently crafted a child-protection guidance that began after **the tragic assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022**. Abe was shot twice with a homemade firearm while campaigning in Nara and later died from his injuries. The attacker, Tetsuya Yamagami, had been reportedly raised by a mother who became deeply involved in the **Unification Church** (officially known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) when he was a child. For years, the family was reportedly, making large donations, and this contributed to the family bankruptcy and ongoing hardship for the children.

Yamagami mentioned that he had a long history of vehemently hating the organization and that's why he chose Prime Minister Abe, because of his publicly visible connection to the faith. The case finally brought national attention to the covert and hidden harm, experienced by many children raised inside of punitive and coercive religious milieus.

Japan decided to do something consequently bringing light to religious communities similar to the Buddhist tradition that I was raised in. I feel that fellow adherents, spiritual teachers, parents, child protection, professionals, and people who've been harmed by their religion and consider themselves survivors, might want to pay close attention to this...

In December 2022, Japan's ministry of health, labor and welfare issued a revolutionary new national guidance in the context of religious indoctrination of children. The basic premise has to do with using religion as an ideological form of coercion and threat with fear of punishment and hell, is considered ideological child abuse. Furthermore, **one's religion does not create an exemption from child abuse laws.**

Just to be clear, Japan did not declare that religion itself altogether is inherently abusive or outlaw religious education, or prevent people from practicing a certain faith like in Communist countries. Japan's constitution still fully protects freedom of religion, which includes the right to hold and practice one's personal religious beliefs. However when these practices involved ideologies or conduct that harms a child under the guise of religious justification, this does not make harmful conduct acceptable. In other words, you can't teach and use the threat of spiritual punishment or hell to those of a young age to psychologically control and coerce them.

Japan Says Threatening a Child With Hell Can Be Psychological Abuse

The Japanese guidance is unusually explicit. It identifies the use of frightening religious threats, including telling a child that they will go to hell or be sick, punished or destroyed if they fail to comply with religious expectations. **This conduct now constitutes psychological abuse when it is used to frighten or coerce the child.** The guidance also addresses situations in which children are pressured into religious activities, prevented from making ordinary decisions about their education or future, isolated from others, or subjected to other forms of coercive control. Much of my work has focused on Buddhist monastic settings, where children are offered to monasteries at a very young age, often without their consent.

The important word here is **coercion**. Japan is not attempting to determine whether spirituality or hells exists, whether a particular religion or philosophy is true, or whether a religious doctrine is spiritually beneficial. The government is looking at what happens when an adult takes a terrifying religious belief and uses it as a mechanism to control a child. **That is a child-protection question, not a theological one.**

I think this is an extraordinarily important distinction because religious communities have often been allowed to hide coercive behavior behind the word... *religion*. In the US, we go so far as to say "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Many countries acknowledge that physically beating a child is terribly wrong, although unfortunately, corporal punishment is still the norm in many nations, in fact, even in my own state of Colorado, USA.

We're just starting to talk now about not only the threat of being physically harmed, but what happens when you tell a child that not listening to a parent or a teacher or one in spiritual authority could result in eternal punishment. Conversations now

become complicated and or convoluted by theology, tradition, vows, karma, lineage, and what people consider to be their religious freedom. I myself had to join an organization called Recovering From Religion and seek out a secular therapist to help me to deconstruct, deconvert and de-indoctrinate from harmful views that I had adopted that were not inherent to my personal world view. Basically we just have to look simply... is the child being threatened, frightened and harmed? I would argue that any tradition that does the same, not only to a child, but to an adult is simply not ethical.

The Question Is Not Whether A Doctrine is Correct

I want to be careful here because I, to this this day am a long time Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. I am not arguing that all of Buddhism or any religion is inherently abusive. I have inferred through going deep into meditation practice and reflection into my own personal ethics, and I have found that many religions use and exploit the fear of some afterlife and use some type of internal cosmology that gets transmitted to children into subsequent generations that can indeed be: fear-based, toxic, and harmful. Telling any human being at a very young age that they could go to hell if they don't comply... can plant the seeds of psychological terror, and can be used as a tool of obedience.

I think that faith or religion can be taught responsibly, when you talk about things of compassion, forgiveness and positive human qualities. Its tenets do not have to become a mechanism of psychological control, particularly when the child is too young, dependent or frightened to meaningfully question the authority making the threat. The distinction between what is toxic and what is helpful, is not anti-religious. In fact, I think critical thinking, discrimination and genuine ethics, protects the integrity of religion by forcing us to separate genuine spiritual practice from the use of any tenet or spiritual authority as a weapon.

I Know What This Kind of Fear Can Do

I have lived deeply within the culture, teachings and structures of Vajrayana Buddhism. I was told, beginning at nineteen, that I had to give my life and value over to my guru/tradition lest I be punished if I left. I was clearly told that there would be catastrophic consequences in a future life. I was told that I could be born in what was described as a **vajra hell**, a terrifying form of existence associated with the consequences of breaking certain deep commitments. I know firsthand how life controlling and spiritually, psychologically tormentive, religion, even the most "progressive" ones, can be.

For an adult who has already developed the capacity to critically examine religious claims, that teaching may be processed as part of a larger philosophical system, understanding esoteric nuances. For a young person who has been taught that the priest/teacher/guru is spiritually authoritative and that the consequences are literally eternal, the psychological impact can be very different.

Fear is still fear simply because it has been given a religious name. I have also known Tibetan Buddhist adherents who wanted to leave their lay or monastic commitments but believed they could not do so without breaking their vows and suffering terrible spiritual consequences. This is not liberation or freedom... it is a trap.

The Japanese Guidance Goes Far Beyond Hell

Threats of hell are only one part of what Japan's guidance addresses. The ministry also identifies physical abuse in religious contexts, including hitting, beating or whipping children in connection with religious activities, and it addresses psychological abuse involving intimidation, frightening behavior, coercion and pressure to participate in religious practices. The guidance recognizes that religious beliefs can also become connected to restrictions on a child's education, career choices, friendships and other aspects of ordinary development.

The guidance also addresses neglect and deprivation. If religious practices or financial demands result in a child being deprived of basic necessities, that does not cease to be neglect simply because the money was given to a religious organization. If a child is prevented from receiving necessary medical treatment because of religious beliefs like "faith healing," the religious justification does not erase the child's need for protection. Japan's existing child-protection framework recognizes the failure to provide necessary medical care as neglect, including situations in which religious beliefs are involved.

The principle is remarkably simple: **the child does not become less worthy of protection because the adult's justification happens to be religious.**

Religious Freedom Does Not Mean Freedom to Terrorize Children

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UNCRC, takes a similarly nuanced approach. Article 14 recognizes a child's freedom of thought, conscience and religion while also recognizing the role of parents in providing guidance appropriate to the child's developing capacities.

> ***Children have rights, parents have rights, and religious communities have rights, but none of those rights should be interpreted as giving adults permission to psychologically terrorize children into religious obedience. See: UNRC Article 14***

When those adults also control the child's understanding of morality, death, the afterlife and ultimate reality, fear can become an extraordinarily powerful instrument of control.

What Happens When Leaving Becomes More Terrifying Than Staying?

A child who is told that their family will abandon, shun, excommunicate them if they leave... is being threatened. A child who is told that questioning the teacher/guru/priest will bring terrible consequences upon their entire family is being threatened. A child who is told that leaving a religious community means eternal punishment, spiritual destruction or an unimaginably horrific rebirth is being threatened, even though the threat is expressed in theological rather than secular language.

The fact that the parent or adult believes that the threat is true, does not automatically make the use of that threat, ethical. That a tradition has propagated an idea for hundreds or thousands of years doesn't make it true.

Japan Is Also Telling Authorities to Take Action

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare instructed child consultation centers and local governments to respond appropriately when suspected child abuse occurs in a religious context, including cooperation with police when conduct may constitute crimes such as assault or bodily injury, similar to what we have in the United States called the Child Protection Services or CPS. The government also directed authorities to consider protective measures when necessary to safeguard children.

That matters because one of the oldest problems survivors encounter is the institutional dismissal.

Adherents and those who support religious freedom think: "That's their religion. That's how their tradition works. The parents have a right to raise their children that way. You don't understand the vows. You don't understand karma. You don't understand the teacher."

I have heard versions of these faith based, magical thinking arguments throughout my own life. They can sound sophisticated because they invoke theology, culture and religious authority, but none of them answers the fundamental child-protection question: **Is the child safe?** Japan's guidance essentially tells authorities that religion cannot be a reason to look away.

This Is Not an Attack on Tibetan Buddhism

I want to emphasize this because criticism of religious abuse is too often distorted into an attack on an entire faith tradition. I am not saying that Tibetan Buddhism is abusive in its entirety. I am not saying that all Buddhist teachings about realms, karma and rebirth should be erased. I am not saying that all Buddhist vows are inherently harmful, that teachers should never discuss the consequences traditionally associated with breaking vows, or that parents should not introduce their children to any Buddhist practice or theory.

I am saying that **religious teaching and religious coercion are not the same thing**.

A child can be taught about Buddhist cosmology without being terrorized into obedience. A teacher can explain vows without using threats to prevent a student from leaving. A community can encourage spiritual commitment without treating a person's decision to walk away as a catastrophic moral crime, demonic or a moral failure. A parent can raise a child in a religious tradition while still allowing that child to develop their own conscience and eventually make their own decisions about what they believe.

No religious tradition should require an exemption from basic, human ethical principles, ever.

Japan's 2022 guidance does not solve the enormous, worldwide and ubiquitous problem of religious abuse. It does something more modest and, in some ways, more important. It gives child protection authorities a vocabulary for recognizing conduct that has historically been hidden behind the word *religion*, and it establishes that religious motivation does not erase a child's right to protection. I would only hope that the west could follow suit and implement similar protections.

We simply have to protect and care for our most precious and vulnerable asset, our children and our posterity. If a spiritual tradition is genuinely worthy, it should not need terror and threats of spiritual punishments to keep anyone of any age, from leaving.

Sources

- Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare: Laws and Guidelines Concerning Child Abuse. This is the primary government source and includes the December 27, 2022 Q&A specifically addressing child abuse connected to religious beliefs. 厚生労働省
- Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare: Ministerial Press Conference, December 27, 2022. The health minister explains why the government issued the guidance and instructs child consultation centers to respond appropriately and promptly to cases involving religiously motivated abuse. 厚生労働省
- The Asahi Shimbun: Government guidelines define child abuse from religious parents. This provides English-language reporting on the guidance, including the government's examples of threats of hell, restrictions on education and employment, physical punishment, denial of medical care and cooperation with police. Asahi Shimbun
- Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Convention on the Rights of the Child. Particularly relevant are Article 14, concerning children's freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and Article 19, concerning protection from physical or mental violence, abuse and neglect. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan
- Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare: Child Abuse Response Handbook. This provides the broader legal framework defining Japan's four categories of child abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and psychological abuse.

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AUTHOR: Dawn Boiani dawn.sandberg@gmail.com Dawn Boiani

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