

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Massimo Introvigne on Brainwashing Theory Returns With New Names

Knut Holdhus
July 8, 2026



Brainwashing theory returns under new names. Illustration: ChatGPT



[Bitter Winter](#), the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion, founder of [CESNUR](#), specializing in new religious movements and religious liberty. A prolific author, he has advised governments and international bodies, and served as OSCE Representative on combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Christians worldwide and comments on contemporary religious controversies. Here at the UN Office at Geneva June 16, 2025

Leading scholar describes how anti-religious activists have managed to bring back old, discredited brainwashing claims as new concepts, but with the same underlying assumptions

In an [article](#), 6th July 2026, in [Bitter Winter](#), the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights, Dr. Massimo Introvigne, a prominent Italian author and sociologist of religion, writes extensively about the reemergence of "brainwashing" [See editor's note 1 below] theories in today's world.

He points out that by the close of the twentieth century, many scholars who studied new religious movements believed that the debate over so-called "cult brainwashing" [See editor's note 1 below] had largely been settled. After decades of research spanning sociology, psychology, religious studies, and law, a broad academic consensus had emerged: claims that minority religious groups possess unique techniques capable of overriding an individual's free will lacked credible scientific support.

Concepts such as "mind control" [See editor's note 2 below], "brainwashing" [See editor's note 1 below], and "coercive persuasion" were increasingly regarded not as established scientific theories but as speculative ideas that failed rigorous empirical scrutiny. Introvigne claims that rather than offering reliable explanations for religious commitment, these concepts often served as ideological tools that portrayed unpopular or unconventional faiths as inherently dangerous and helped justify discrimination, restrictive legislation, or state intervention.

This scholarly assessment gradually influenced public institutions as well. Long before governmental bodies formally addressed the issue, specialists had concluded that brainwashing [See editor's note 1 below] theories rested on weak methodological foundations and could not adequately explain why individuals joined or remained in new religious movements.

In 2020, for example, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reinforced this view by warning that "brainwashing" [See editor's note 1 below] rhetoric had become a characteristic feature of pseudo-scientific anti-cult

ideology that threatened religious freedom. Although a small number of writers continued to defend variations of these theories, their views occupied a distinctly marginal position within mainstream

academic discourse.



According to Introvigne, the rejection of brainwashing [See editor's note 1 below] theories was reflected not only in scholarship but also in the courts. Throughout the late twentieth century, judges in several democratic countries increasingly concluded that expert testimony based on claims of coercive persuasion failed to satisfy accepted standards of scientific reliability.

A landmark example came in the United States in 1990 with *United States v. Fishman*. During the proceedings, a federal court carefully evaluated testimony proposed by anti-cult psychologist Margaret Singer (1921-2003) and other proponents of coercive persuasion theory. After extensive examination, the court found that these theories lacked sufficient empirical validation, had not gained acceptance within the broader scientific community, and relied upon circular reasoning. As a result, the testimony was excluded, establishing an influential precedent that brainwashing [See editor's note 1 below] theories did not meet the evidentiary standards required in federal courts.

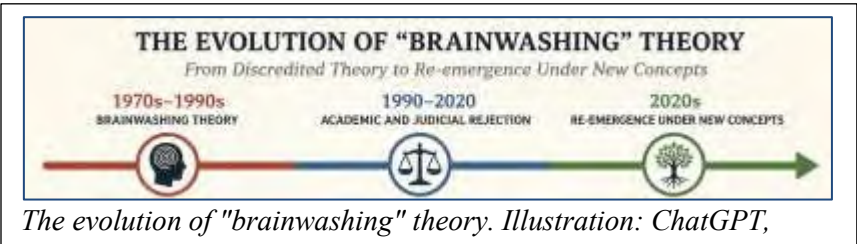
The [Bitter Winter article](#) describes how comparable developments occurred in Europe. Italy had already taken a significant step in 1981 when its Constitutional Court struck down the Fascist-era (1922-1943) criminal offense of plagio (enslaving another person's mind), a concept that broadly resembled allegations of psychological domination or brainwashing [See editor's note 1 below]. The Court concluded that the offense rested on concepts too vague and scientifically uncertain to be compatible with constitutional protections, including freedom of religion.



Decades later, the European Court of Human Rights similarly observed that there is no universally accepted scientific definition of "mind control" [See editor's note 2 below]. It also noted that characteristics frequently cited as evidence of coercion - strong commitment to a religious cause, communal lifestyles, deference to spiritual leaders, or energetic proselytizing - are not unique to minority religions but can be found across many established religious traditions.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, it appeared that brainwashing [See editor's note 1 below] theories had largely disappeared from judicial practice. While the concept continued to enjoy considerable visibility in popular media and among anti-cult activists, it no longer exercised the influence it once had in courtrooms. Public advocates continued to promote simplified versions of earlier coercive persuasion models, but these arguments generally failed to persuade judges applying contemporary standards of scientific evidence. France remained an important exception, where anti-cult legislation adopted in 2001 preserved similar concepts under different

terminology and where subsequent legal reforms expanded the notion of psychological subjection even further.



Yet the decline of explicit brainwashing [See editor's note 1 below] theory did not mark its complete disappearance. Rather than returning under its original name, the underlying assumptions gradually resurfaced through new legal

and conceptual frameworks. According to Dr. Massimo Introvigne, this resurgence has occurred indirectly rather than through an open rehabilitation of the discredited theory itself. Instead of speaking explicitly about "brainwashing" [See editor's note 1 below], contemporary discussions increasingly employ alternative concepts that often perform similar functions.

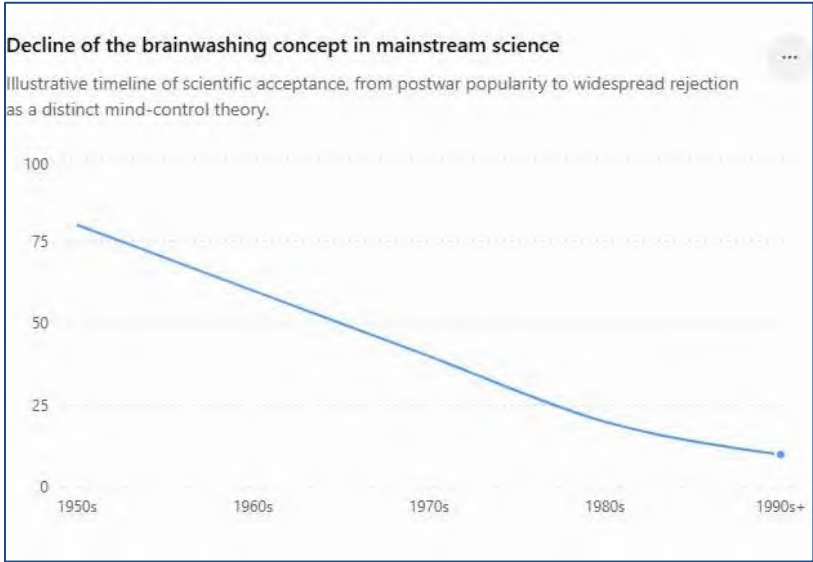


The [paper](#) argues that this revival can be observed along three principal trajectories. First, ideas originally developed in the context of domestic violence concerning coercive control have, in some instances, been extended into the religious sphere. Second, courts have increasingly been asked to evaluate allegations of "spiritual abuse", introducing new legal debates about the boundaries between religious authority, personal autonomy, and psychological influence. Third, language traditionally associated with brainwashing [See editor's note 1 below] has begun to appear in interpretations of human trafficking legislation, broadening the application of coercion-based arguments beyond their original context.

These developments suggest that although the classical theory of cult brainwashing [See editor's note 1 below] was widely rejected by scholars and courts alike, many of its core assumptions continue to re-emerge under new labels. The terminology may have changed, but the underlying questions concerning religious freedom, individual autonomy, and the state's role in regulating controversial religious movements remain as contested as

ever.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor



Decline of the brainwashing concept in mainstream science. Illustration: ChatGPT

[Editor's note 1: "Brainwashing" was a popular term that emerged during the early Cold War to explain why some prisoners of war and political detainees appeared to adopt beliefs favored by their captors. The idea suggested that powerful psychological techniques could erase a person's existing beliefs and replace them with new ones against their will, almost like reprogramming a machine.

Over time, however, the concept was largely discarded by mainstream psychology and cognitive science as a scientific explanation of persuasion or belief change. Researchers found little evidence for such a process, that any special, unique process existed that could fundamentally override human autonomy and completely remake a person's personality or convictions.

Studies in psychology, sociology, and psychiatry showed that belief change is usually gradual, variable,

and dependent on many factors: social pressure, isolation, coercion, rewards, threats, conformity, identity, and existing motivations. People can certainly be influenced, manipulated, indoctrinated, or coerced, but there is no scientifically demonstrated mechanism that allows a person's mind to be completely overwritten in the dramatic way implied by "brainwashing".

The concept came under especially heavy criticism in the 1970s - 1990s during debates about new religious movements - by anti-religious activists and others often called "cults". Some experts testified that members had been brainwashed, while other scholars argued that the theory lacked clear definitions, reliable measurements, falsifiable predictions, and strong empirical support. Courts increasingly viewed brainwashing testimony skeptically because it often could not meet scientific standards of evidence.

A major problem was that "brainwashing" lacked a clear, measurable definition. Different writers used it to describe very different phenomena, from prisoner interrogation to religious conversion to participation in controversial groups. Because it could not be reliably operationalized or tested, it failed to meet basic scientific standards. Studies of prisoners of war and members of new religious movements showed that apparent ideological conversions were often temporary, strategic, situational, or reversible rather than evidence of a mysterious mind-control process.

By the 1970s and 1980s, many psychologists, sociologists, and legal scholars concluded that brainwashing functioned more as a cultural and political metaphor than as a validated scientific theory. Courts also became increasingly skeptical of expert testimony claiming that members of new religious movements had been "brainwashed". Today, scholars generally prefer more specific concepts - such as persuasion, coercive control, social influence, indoctrination, obedience, and group dynamics - rather than assuming the existence of a mysterious power that can completely rewrite a person's beliefs.]

[Editor's note 2: In Japan, the "mind-control" myth has been a powerful tool used to stigmatize and suppress new religious movements (NRMs), particularly since the 1980s. The concept suggests that NRMs manipulate or "brainwash" their followers, depriving them of free will and rational thought. This narrative gained traction after the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack, when public fear of dangerous cults intensified. Although Aum was an extreme and violent exception, the incident cast suspicion on all NRMs, allowing critics, media, and the government to label diverse groups as manipulative or psychologically coercive.

The "mind-control" myth serves multiple social and political functions. It simplifies complex questions of belief, making it easier to portray converts as victims rather than as individuals exercising spiritual agency. This framing justifies legal and social intervention, including the coercive "[deprogramming](#)" of believers - sometimes involving confinement or psychological pressure to force renunciation of faith. Lawyers, ex-member groups, and certain media outlets have used the idea of mind control to construct NRMs as threats to family stability and national order, reinforcing social conformity and Japan's preference for established, non-controversial religions such as Buddhism and Shinto.

In recent years, the myth resurfaced following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose attacker cited resentment toward the [Family Federation](#). A public outrage largely created by media reignited scrutiny of NRMs, and politicians and journalists revived "mind-control" rhetoric to explain fundraising and recruitment practices. Critics argue that this framing discourages genuine religious tolerance and critical examination of Japan's restrictive religious climate. Overall, the "mind-control" myth functions less as a scientific or psychological concept and more as a moral panic - a cultural weapon used to delegitimize minority faiths and to reaffirm mainstream social norms about religion, obedience, and the boundaries of acceptable belief.]

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Hunting “Heretics”: Justice Minister Quoting Bible

July 7, 2026 • The News Desk

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South Korean Minister of Justice Jeong Seong-ho (정성호 – also anglicized as Chung Sung-ho). Photo: 대한민국 국회 / Wikimedia Commons. Korea Open Government License Type 1. Cropped

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boding public comments on religious freedom and faith minorities by South Korean Minister of Justice promising strict punishment for “heretics”

The relationship between religion and politics has long been one of the defining tests of democratic societies. While constitutional systems generally seek to prevent the state from establishing or [favoring a particular religion](#), they also recognize that believers retain the same civil and political rights as every other citizen. Religious leaders and communities may express opinions on public affairs, encourage civic engagement, and participate in democratic processes within the limits of the law. The challenge lies in ensuring that the principle of separation between religion and state does not become a pretext for restricting religious liberty or discriminating against unpopular faiths.

See also [“Church Closure” Risks in South Korea’s New Bill](#)

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This debate has become increasingly significant in East Asia, particularly in South Korea and Japan, where several new religious movements have found themselves being intensely persecuted, even by the authorities. In recent years, organizations such as [Shincheonji Church of Jesus](#) and the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#), in Korea referred to as [Unificationism](#)) have faced criminal investigations, civil actions, and growing public hostility. Critics have argued that these measures are necessary to protect democratic institutions and vulnerable individuals. Defenders, however, have warned that governments are moving beyond legitimate law enforcement toward policies that stigmatize minority religions and undermine internationally recognized standards of religious freedom.



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion, founder of [CESNUR](#), specializing in new religious movements and religious liberty. A prolific author, he has advised governments and international bodies, and served as OSCE Representative on combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Christians worldwide and comments on contemporary religious controversies. Here speaking at the UN Office at Geneva on 16th June

In an



Logo of [Bitter Winter](#), the world’s leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights.

[opinion article](#) published in [Bitter Winter](#) on 2nd July 2026, sociologist of religion Dr. Massimo Introvigne examines what he regards as a troubling illustration of this trend. His [commentary](#) focuses on a Facebook post by South Korea’s Minister of Justice, Jeong Seong-ho (정성호), concerning the [detention of Shincheonji Chairman Lee Man-hee](#) (이만희 – 95) and the broader treatment of religious minorities in South Korea. According to Introvigne, the Minister’s public statements reveal not only a particular representation of the



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interpretation of the constitutional relationship between religion and politics but also a willingness to prejudice ongoing legal proceedings against religious leaders.

Introvigne begins by highlighting the [detention of Lee Man-hee](#), who, at ninety-five years of age, has been indicted on allegations that he orchestrated the registration of more than 50,000 Shincheonji members in a political party during various elections.

The government argues that these actions amounted to political interference and violated the constitutional principle separating religion and state. Introvigne questions both the factual basis and the legal implications of these accusations. He notes that participation in political parties and elections is ordinarily regarded as a fundamental democratic right enjoyed by all citizens, including members of religious communities. He also observes that the allegation that thousands of believers were “forcibly” registered is asserted without a clear public explanation of how such coercion allegedly occurred.

The article then turns to the



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오늘 5만명 이상의 신도들을 특정 정당의 당원으로 강제 가입시킨 혐의를 받는 이만희 신천지 총회장을 구속기소했습니다.

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우리 헌법이 '정교분리 원칙'을 선언한 이유도 정치 권력과 종교의 결탁을 막고, 대한민국이 특정 종교의 교리가 아닌 오직 주권자인 국민의 자유로운 의사에 따라 운영되는 민주공화국이기 때문입니다.

불과 일주일 전, 일본 최고재판소도 신도에 대한 거액 현금 강요와 집권당과의 유착 등을 벌인 통일교에 최종 해산 명령을 내린 바 있습니다.

이번 사건 역시 그에 못지 않게 중대한 범죄로서, 그 책임에 상응하는 엄정한 형사처벌이 불가피합니다.

국가는 세속의 영역에, 종교는 영성의 영역에 머무를 때 비로소 민주주의와 공동체의 평화가 유지될 수 있습니다.

앞으로도 종교를 권력의 도구로 악용하거나 종교의 이름으로 국민의 자유와 민주주의를 훼손하는 범죄에 엄정히 대응하겠습니다.

"거짓 선지자들을 삼가라. 양의 옷을 입고 너희에게 나아오나 속에는 노략질하는 이리라."

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Recent Facebook post by South Korean Minister of Justice Jeong Seong-ho. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

broader implications of the Justice Minister’s statements. Introvigne argues that Jeong’s description of religious organizations as communities intended solely for “inner peace and spiritual comfort”, rather than participants in public life, reflects an unduly restrictive understanding of religious freedom. In democratic societies, he contends, religious believers are not expected to abandon their civic identities upon entering a place of worship. Rather, they remain citizens with the right to vote, advocate for policies, and participate in political debate, provided they comply with the law. To suggest that religion must remain confined to a purely private or spiritual sphere, Introvigne argues, risks narrowing the scope of freedoms protected in democratic constitutions.

Another major concern raised in the [article](#) involves the Minister’s invocation of developments in Japan. Jeong cites the dissolution order issued against the [Family Federation](#) by Japan’s Supreme Court as evidence supporting a firm response to religious organizations that allegedly interfere in politics. Introvigne argues that this comparison is misleading because, in his view, the Japanese court’s decision was based on issues unrelated to political ties with the ruling party. He therefore criticizes the Minister for conflating media narratives with the contents of judicial decisions.

In light of proposed South Korean legislation that could permit the rapid dissolution of religious organizations whose leaders are convicted of crimes or deemed to have improperly influenced politics, Introvigne considers such

statements especially significant as he points out,

“It is troubling that a Minister of Justice confuses media narratives with judicial documents. In South Korea, a draft law is pending that would authorize swift dissolution of religions whose leaders have been sentenced or that ‘interfere in politics’. In this context, the Minister’s misrepresentation of the Japanese decision acquires a sinister tone.”

The [article](#) also questions the propriety of the Minister publicly declaring that “strict criminal punishment” is inevitable before the completion of judicial proceedings. Introvigne maintains that justice ministers should safeguard the impartiality of the legal system rather than pronounce guilt in advance of trial.

He further criticizes Jeong’s decision to conclude his Facebook post by quoting Matthew 7:15 – “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” – to describe religious leaders under investigation. According to Introvigne, this use of Scripture in an official governmental communication creates an apparent contradiction: while accusing certain religious groups of improperly mixing religion and politics, the Minister himself invokes religious authority in support of a political and legal position.



Lee Man-hee (이만희 – 95), founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth). Photo: [MBC PD수첩](#) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 3.0 Unp](#)



Hak Ja Han (한학자 – 83), aka [Mother Han](#), Co-Founder of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Finally, Introvigne broadens his discussion to include the continued detention of [Family Federation](#) leader [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), who is eighty-three years old and reportedly remains hospitalized while under official supervision. He observes that both [Lee Man-hee](#) (이만희) and [Hak Ja Han](#) are elderly religious leaders enduring prolonged detention on allegations related to political activity rather than violence. This circumstance, he argues, raises humanitarian as well as legal concerns. While stopping short of asserting specific motives, he suggests that the treatment of such elderly defendants invites questions about proportionality and due process.

The [article](#) concludes by placing these developments within the longer history of religious persecution. Introvigne argues that governments and political movements are ultimately transient, whereas religious communities have repeatedly survived periods of discrimination and repression. Whatever the outcome of the present legal disputes, he suggests that the broader principles of religious liberty, due process, and equal participation in democratic society remain central to evaluating the actions of modern democratic states.

See also [“Church Closure” Risks in South Korea’s New Bill](#)

See also [Religion-State: The Danger of Policing Belief](#)

Text: [Knut Holdhus](#), editor

Featured image above: [South Korean Minister of Justice](#)

Jeong Seong-ho (정성호 – also anglicized as Chung Sung-ho). Photo: [대한민국 국회](#) / Wikimedia Commons. [Korea Open Government License Type 1](#). Cropped

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Global Anti-Cultism and the Return of “Brainwashing” Theories

by Massimo Introvigne | Jul 6, 2026 | [Featured Global](#)

Accusing “cults” of “coercive persuasion” looked *démodé*, at least in academia and courts of law outside of France. But the discredited theory is coming back.

by Massimo Introvigne*

*A paper presented at the European Academy of Religion’s Ninth Annual Conference, LUISS University of Rome, July 3, 2026.



Cover of the author’s presentation at the Rome EUARE conference. AI-generated.

Introduction: A Discredited Theory That Refuses to Die

At the end of the twentieth century, most scholars of new religious movements believed that the long and contentious history of “cult brainwashing” theories had finally reached its conclusion. For decades, sociologists, psychologists, historians of religion, and legal scholars had demonstrated that the idea of irresistible mental manipulation by minority religions lacked empirical grounding and scientific coherence. The notion that “cults” deploy mysterious techniques of “mind control” or “coercive persuasion” to override individual autonomy was exposed as pseudoscience, no more respectable than flat-earth cosmology. Its function was ideological and political: it provided a veneer of scientific legitimacy to the stigmatization and repression of unpopular religious minorities.

Schools had reached this conclusion well before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in a 2020 report, explicitly denounced the use of “brainwashing” rhetoric as the hallmark of the pseudo-scientific anti-cult ideology hostile to religious liberty. Some “contrarian” scholars were treated as academic curiosities and relegated to the margins.

This academic consensus was not confined to scholarly journals or religious liberty watchdog reports. Courts in democratic countries increasingly recognized that “brainwashing” theories were unreliable and inadmissible.

In the United States, the decisive moment came in 1990 with “United States v. Fishman.” A federal court examined whether the theories of coercive persuasion advanced by anti-cult psychologist Margaret Singer and her colleagues met the standards of scientific reliability required for expert testimony. After extensive hearings, the judge concluded that they did not. The theories lacked empirical support, were rejected by the mainstream scientific community, and relied on circular reasoning. The court thus formally ended the testimony of Singer and her associates.

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court therefore excluded the testimony of Singer and another anti-cult scholar, declaring that “theories regarding the coercive persuasion practiced by religious cults are not sufficiently established to be admitted as evidence in federal courts of law.”

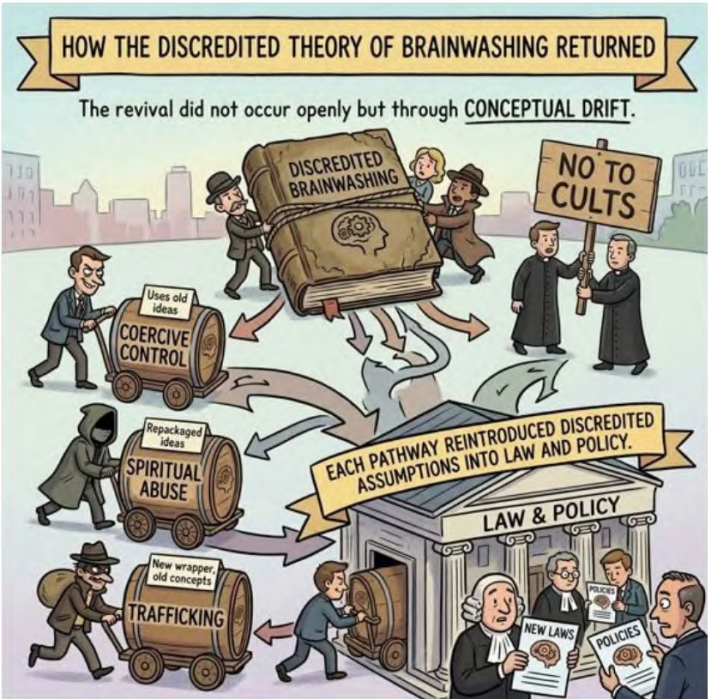
European jurisprudence reached similar conclusions. In 1981, the Italian Constitutional Court abolished the Fascist-era crime of “plagio,” a statute akin to “brainwashing,” declaring it incompatible with both scientific knowledge and religious liberty. In 2010, the European Court of Human Rights observed that no generally accepted scientific definition of “mind control” exists and that behaviors often cited as evidence of coercion—such as intense commitment, communal living, deference to leaders, and enthusiastic proselytism—are common across many religious traditions.

By the early 2000s, it seemed that the judicial use of “brainwashing” theories had been relegated to the past. They survived in the media, where deprogrammers like Steven Hassan tirelessly promoted simplified versions of Singer’s discredited models, but they no longer shaped legal outcomes. Except in France, where the peculiar 2001 anti-cult legislation had preserved the concept under new names and expanded it further in 2024 with the criminalization of “psychological subjection.”

Yet history rarely moves in straight lines. What had been expelled through the front door began to creep back in through the windows. The return did not take the form of a direct rehabilitation of “brainwashing.” Instead, it emerged through three indirect pathways: the expansion of coercive-control theories beyond the domestic domain, the judicialization of the concept of “spiritual abuse,” and the infiltration of “brainwashing” rhetoric into the interpretation of human-trafficking statutes.

2. How “Brainwashing” Returned: Three Pathways

By the early twenty-first century, scholars believed the matter had settled. Brainwashing theories had been discredited, their legal use curtailed, and their scientific foundations dismantled. The anti-cult movement continued to invoke them rhetorically, but they no longer shaped judicial or public reasoning in democratic countries other than France. This confidence, however, proved premature.



The three pathways. From the presentation of the paper at the Rome EUARE conference. AI-generated.

A. First Pathway: The Expansion of Coercive Control

The first pathway through which brainwashing theories returned was the attempt to stretch the concept of “coercive control” far beyond its original domain. Coercive control was developed to describe the dynamics of abusive intimate relationships, particularly those involving domestic violence. It focuses on patterns of domination, isolation, economic dependency, and threats that occur within a family relationship marked by emotional attachment and vulnerability. Within that context, the concept may have legitimate applications.

Extending coercive control to religious organizations is a conceptual leap without justification. The dynamics of a marriage or intimate partnership cannot be transposed wholesale onto a voluntary religious community. Yet anti-cult activists have increasingly attempted to do precisely this. In the United Kingdom, a group of parliamentarians has advocated for the

the inclusion of religious groups within coercive-control legislation. In Australia, the Victoria Inquiry on Cults has heard similar proposals, often driven by sensational media narratives and political pressures rather than empirical evidence.

The argument is superficially appealing: if coercive control is a crime in intimate relationships, why not in religious groups? The answer is straightforward. The psychological, relational, and structural dynamics are fundamentally different. Coercive-control theories presuppose a relationship including emotional dependency, economic entanglement, and personal intimacy—not one of these elements alone—that does not characterize membership in a religious organization. To apply the concept to religious groups is to revive, through a back door, the discredited idea that members of minority religions are incapable of autonomous decision-making because they are constantly subjected to irresistible psychological manipulation. It is “brainwashing” under a new name.

Cult leaders should be prosecuted like abusive spouses, say MPs

Lynne Wallis, whose brother was recruited by the Jesus Army, says victims deserve better protection



Media coverage of attempts to expand coercive control legislation in the UK.

B. Second Pathway: The Judicialization of “Spiritual Abuse”

The second pathway is more subtle and dangerous: the judicialization of “spiritual abuse.” The concept went through three phases. The first phase emerged in the early 1990s within evangelical Christian circles as a pastoral metaphor. Authors such as David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen used the term to describe the misuse of spiritual authority within Christian communities. They spoke of authoritarian leadership, manipulative use of Scripture, and shaming practices that undermined spiritual growth. The remedies they proposed were internal: better leadership, accountability, pastoral counseling, reconciliation, or, in some cases, leaving an unhealthy community.

Crucially, early proponents explicitly rejected the idea that spiritual abuse should be criminalized. They understood it as a matter of church health, not as a legal category. They did not invoke psychological trauma, PTSD, or coercive control. They did not imagine that the state would intervene in doctrinal or disciplinary matters.

The second phase began in the early 2000s, when the term migrated into the contexts of psychology, counseling, and safeguarding. Here it underwent a profound transformation. What had been a metaphor became a quasi-clinical category. Psychologists began to describe spiritual abuse as a form of emotional or psychological trauma. The scope of the term expanded dramatically. It now includes not only leadership misconduct but also doctrinal teachings, religious socialization practices, and emotional experiences associated with guilt, fear, or moral exhortation.

Attempts were made to develop measurement tools, but these instruments were often ad hoc, lacked validation, and relied on subjective self-reporting. Definitions became increasingly broad, sometimes reducing spiritual abuse to “using God or a higher power to control or induce fear.” Such definitions risk pathologizing any religious tradition that speaks of sin, judgment, karma, or post-mortem consequences. They also risk criminalizing ordinary religious socialization, which often involves moral instruction, communal norms, and spiritual discipline.

This psychological reframing created the conditions for the third and most problematic phase: the incorporation of spiritual abuse into law and policy. The third phase is the most troubling: the transformation of spiritual abuse into a legal category. Once the term had been broadened and psychologized, it became available for use in campaigns against minority religions, for state intervention in religious communities, and for the creation of new criminal offenses. Yet spiritual abuse, in its current form, is far too vague and subjective to serve as a basis for legal proceedings. Existing laws already address concrete harms such as

sexual abuse, fraud, and physical assault. Creating a separate category for spiritual abuse is redundant at best and dangerous at worst.

Japan offers a striking example. The concept was introduced into law as “religious child abuse,” defined not as physical or sexual harm but as inducing fear or psychological distress through religious teachings. After the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe, government guidelines criminalized practices such as the use of religious images that might induce fear or lead children to behaviors that deviate from societal norms, mentioning Jehovah’s Witnesses’ prohibition of celebrating birthdays as a specific example of spiritual abuse. Then, courts and regulations expanded “spiritual abuse” from children to adults. These broad notions played a role in the first- and second-degree decisions that dissolved the Unification Church, closed its churches, and confiscated its assets. International bodies, including two United Nations documents, have condemned these measures as violations of human rights and religious freedom.



From a booklet against “cults” allegedly practicing “religious child abuse” distributed in Japanese schools.

In South Korea, the election of left-leaning President Lee Jae Myung in 2025 led to a crackdown on both new religious movements, such as the Unification Church and Shincheonji, and conservative Christian churches, accused of trying to influence elections (a crime for clergy and religious organizations under Korean law). Proving the accusations linked to politics and possible illegal financing of politicians was difficult. It became clear that they often referred to the individual misconduct of rogue church officers rather than the organizations themselves. President Lee then switched to anti-cult rhetoric. He accused what he called “heretical movements” of harming their members and society through spiritual and psychological abuse. His party proposed a law to enable swift administrative dissolution and the seizure of their assets, which is currently pending in the Korean Parliament amid widespread international criticism.

In South Africa, the Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic (CRL) Rights Commission reinterpreted spiritual abuse to justify proposals for state oversight of religious groups, including mandatory registration and regulatory supervision. These initiatives were driven by sensational media reports and anti-cult rhetoric rather than empirical evidence, and they threatened to undermine religious diversity and autonomy.

In the United Kingdom, the case “Samrai v. Kalia” (2024) demonstrated judicial skepticism in a case brought against the priest of the Temple to Baba Balak Nath in Coventry, part of a Hindu religious movement regarded as a branch of Shaivism. The court scrutinized expert testimony purporting to establish spiritual abuse and found it methodologically flawed. It held that subjective distress alone does not constitute legal harm.





Justice Martin Spencer wrote the “Samrai” opinion.

Courts can resist the expansion of vague psychological categories into the legal sphere, but the pressure to legislate spiritual abuse remains strong. Spiritual abuse, in its current broad and subjective forms, is ill-suited for legal use. It may have a legitimate role in pastoral self-regulation, but it cannot serve as a basis for criminal prosecution without reintroducing, in disguised form, the pseudoscience of brainwashing.

C. Third Pathway: Trafficking

The third and perhaps most dangerous pathway through which “brainwashing” theories have returned is [the reinterpretation of human-trafficking statutes](#).

Trafficking law carries immense moral authority, and anti-cult activists have learned to exploit it by importing terms such as “psychological coercion” and “manipulation” into the anti-trafficking discourse. Argentina pioneered this strategy through expansive notions of vulnerability, enabling its special prosecutorial office, PROTEX, to treat minority religions as trafficking networks. Volunteer work was reframed as forced labor, spiritual teachings as grooming, and members’ insistence that they were not victims was dismissed as evidence of “brainwashing.” Some courts rejected these theories, but others allowed cases to proceed. U.S. TIP Reports repeatedly criticized Argentina’s definitions as excessively broad, yet parts of the U.S. antitrafficking establishment praised PROTEX.

This convergence was facilitated by institutional amnesia. After the Waco tragedy, U.S. federal agencies had learned—thanks to scholars such as Nancy Ammerman—to avoid anticult narratives. But trafficking units created later had no exposure to that expertise and proved receptive to activists who reframed “cult brainwashing” as trafficking by psychological coercion.

The [OneTaste case](#) became the turning point. After years of investigation of an organization whose activities included the promotion of female sexual awareness through both meditation and physical techniques, the FBI found no basis for sex crime charges, yet prosecutors pursued forced labor allegations grounded entirely in “coercive persuasion.” The resulting conviction marked the first U.S. federal case based solely on psychological influence, without physical coercion, setting a dangerous precedent.

A key figure in this shift was deprogrammer Steven Hassan, who counseled witnesses, shaped media narratives, and reintroduced behavioral models that had been rejected under the “Fishman” precedent. Hassan openly stated that he sought a case capable of establishing a new legal foundation for brainwashing-based trafficking prosecutions—and the OneTaste verdict appears to have fulfilled that ambition. The fusion of trafficking rhetoric with anticult ideology represents a new and potent threat to religious freedom, allowing revived brainwashing theories to enter courtrooms through the back door of “psychological coercion to force labor.”





What the three pathways share. From the author's Rome EUARE presentation.

Conclusion

Coercive control, spiritual abuse, and trafficking law have each become vehicles for the reintroduction of models that courts and scholars rejected decades ago. The dissolution of the Unification Church in Japan, the prosecutions in Argentina, and the OneTaste conviction in the United States show that these theories now shape real legal outcomes, with profound consequences for freedom of thought, belief, and association.

“Brainwashing” theories, no matter how often they are discredited, retain a powerful cultural appeal. They offer simple explanations for complex human behaviors. They allow states to intervene in religious life under the guise of protecting victims. They provide activists with a moral vocabulary that is difficult to challenge. And they tempt prosecutors with the promise of expanding their jurisdiction.

Vigilance is essential. Scholars, jurists, and defenders of religious freedom must continue to expose the pseudoscientific foundations of brainwashing theories, whatever name they take. They must insist on clear legal definitions, empirical evidence, and respect for voluntary religious commitment. And they must remind courts and policymakers that freedom of thought and belief is not a privilege granted by the state but a fundamental right that ideological fashions cannot override.

The return of “brainwashing” in disguise is a warning. If we fail to recognize it, we risk repeating past errors—errors that have already cost lives, destroyed communities, and undermined the very principles on which democratic societies are built.

Anti-Cult, Brainwashing, Religious Liberty



Massimo Introvigne

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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