

FFWPU Europe & Middle East: In Japan Even Dead Souls Face State Persecution

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Mitsuo Ito - left - and Ryoko Ito visit the grave of their eldest daughter, Kotomi, at the Central Japan Cemetery - April 26, 2025 in Suzuka City, Mie Prefecture



Japanese state persecution reaching new extremes as it seems certain that even members' dead souls may not escape inhuman treatment brought about by dissolution order

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"Don't Take Away the Place Where Our Daughter Sleeps"

Bereaved Families Cry Out Over 3,200 Graves at 8 Sites Nationwide

The Request to Dissolve the Family Federation and the Cemetery Controversy (Part 1)

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)



It looks like not only living members of the [Family Federation](#) will be persecuted mercilessly by the Japanese state, but also dead ones. Here, from a [Family Federation](#) Seonghwa (burial) ceremony in 2015

If the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's request for the dissolution of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) is approved, a major social issue could arise concerning the management of cemeteries operated by the [organization](#).

There is no precedent in Japan of a religious corporation that owns cemeteries being ordered to dissolve by a court. With no prior example to follow, no one truly knows what will happen to these burial sites after dissolution. Could they lose not just the legal status as a religious corporation, but even the graves where their beloved family members rest? We spoke with bereaved family members who live with this fear.

In a mountain valley surrounded by rich nature in Suzuka City, Mie Prefecture, lies an orderly cemetery. This is the "Central Japan Cemetery", where followers of the [Family Federation](#) are buried.

During a joint memorial service held by the [religious organization](#) on 26th April, Mitsuo Ito (伊藤光夫) - 60 - and his wife Ryoko (伊藤良子) - 63 - placed their daughter's portrait on her gravestone and offered flowers and fruit.

"I can't possibly tell my daughter that we might have to leave this cemetery," said Mitsuo as they both looked distressed at the possibility that their daughter's grave could be lost due to the dissolution of the [religious organization](#).

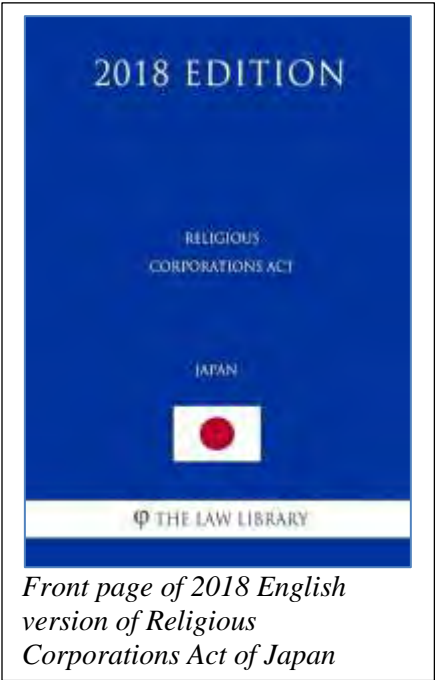


Their eldest daughter, Kotomi, passed away at 18 while in her third year of high school. She was one of the 63 victims of the 2014 eruption of Mount Ontake on the border of Nagano and Gifu prefectures.

Mitsuo had been climbing Ontake with fellow followers of the [Family Federation](#) when the eruption occurred. Kotomi had reached the summit ahead of him and sent him a photo with the message, "I'm waiting for you." However, before Mitsuo could reach the top, the eruption occurred. Kotomi and several other members of the [religious organization](#) died.

Still burdened by guilt, Mitsuo said, "I can't help but think that if she hadn't been waiting for me at the summit, she might have survived."

Stricken with grief, he couldn't part with her ashes for three years. After finally interring them at the Central Japan Cemetery, he has made monthly trips from their home in Aichi Prefecture, driving about an hour on the expressway.



Despite the deep emotional wounds, the annual memorial service and the chance to connect with fellow believers have been a source of healing for the couple. Many visitors offered flowers and prayers at Kotomi's grave. The cemetery provided a space and time where members came together like one big family, easing their pain.

According to the Religious Corporations Act, once the dissolution is finalized, all operations run by the [organization](#) must be forcibly terminated. There are eight cemeteries nationwide under the names of the [organization](#) or its affiliates, holding over 3,200 graves. The Central Japan Cemetery is located on land owned by a Buddhist temple, which the [church](#) has leased under its name and entrusted management to volunteer members.

It remains unclear whether cemetery management can be smoothly transferred to another organization or whether it could lead to closure or even forced reburials. Anxiety is growing among the bereaved families. During the joint memorial service, the bereaved families' association at Central Japan Cemetery issued a statement to the press expressing their concerns:

"If the [organization](#) is dissolved, the cemetery's management will be left without an operator, raising the possibility of it being irresponsibly abandoned. This would be unbearable for us and would severely damage the dignity of the souls of the deceased."

Fear of losing a place to mourn

In the beliefs of the [Family Federation](#), the soul lives on eternally after death. Thus, the memorial gatherings have a warm, friendly atmosphere. Scenes could be seen of families enjoying meals picnic-style near the graves, and of bereaved families from across the country cheerfully saying, "It's been a while" and warmly reminiscing together.

But all of this could be lost if the [religious organization](#) is dissolved. Even if cemetery management is transferred to another religious or public-interest organization, religious services like the current

memorials may be difficult to continue. If the transition is not smooth, there is a risk - just as the bereaved families fear - that the cemeteries may be neglected for long periods.



In the beliefs of the [Family Federation](#), the soul lives on eternally after death. Here, a photographic reproduction of an oil painting from 1894 titled "Passage" by Finnish painter Anna Sahlsten (1859-1931). The painting presumably portrays the spirit of the person on the bed departing upon death

Mitsuo Ito, seeing the ongoing media coverage about the potential dissolution of the [religious organization](#), expressed his feelings plainly:

"Will politicians - all for their own convenience - really take away even the resting place of our loved ones?"

In 2020, Mitsuo Ito climbed Mount Ontake once again and at last reached the summit.

"I wanted to see the scenery my daughter saw. I wanted to stand where she had stood. I felt like she was still waiting at the summit."

He said that seeing the scenery he was supposed to see with his daughter became a kind of closure [See editor's note 1 below] for him.

Now, standing before his daughter's grave, Mitsuo appeals to the Japanese government, which has pushed ahead with the dissolution request without hearing much from current followers:

"Please think about the bereaved families who see this place as their spiritual refuge (掘り所)." [See editor's note 2 below]

[**Editor's note 1:** The sentence quietly conveys emotional resolution. The use of 区切り (kugiri - closure) suggests a personal chapter coming to an end - not forgetting it but reaching a meaningful point of acceptance or peace.]

[**Editor's note 2:** 掘り所 (yoridokoro) translated as "spiritual refuge" may also mean emotional support, source of spiritual or emotional grounding, a place or idea to lean on. 掘り所 (yoridokoro) is a powerful term. It doesn't just mean a physical location - it implies emotional or spiritual reliance, especially in the context of grief or trauma.

The sentence as a whole is a heartfelt plea - asking authorities (or society) not just to focus on legal or political matters, but to remember the emotional stakes for the families left behind.]

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• May 19, 2025
• Knut Holdhus

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Engaging in a larger battle – Interview with former and current member brings up new ideas for way ahead after dissolution order verdict



Logo of the Sekai Nippo

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Voices of Former and Current Believers

Court Order to Dissolve the Family Federation


by Yasuhiro Uno (宇野 泰弘)

“Learn from other religions” –


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Masaki Nakamasa (仲正昌樹)

“The religious organization must engage with society” – Nozomi Kojima (小嶋希晶)

Masaki Nakamasa – Born in 1963 in Kure City, Hiroshima Prefecture. Received his PhD from the University of Tokyo in 1996. Currently a professor of law at Kanazawa University specializing in the history of political thought and social philosophy. Major works include *Postmodern Nihilism* (Sakuhinsha) and *Beyond Hegel* (Kodansha).



A second-generation believer answers a reporter's question at a press conference led by Nozomi Kojima – 26th March 2025, Shibuya Ward, Tokyo. Photo: Yasuhiro Uno (宇野 泰弘)

Nozomi Kojima – Born in 1995 in Hokkaido. A second-generation member of the religious group **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** (formerly the **Unification Church**). She is the head of the “Association of Second-Generation Members for the Protection of Believers’ Human Rights”. Advocates for freedom of religion and the rights of religious minorities, holding symposiums and lectures across Japan.

The trial for the **dissolution order** against the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** (formerly the **Unification Church**) has **moved to the Tokyo High Court**. Regarding the decision by the *Tokyo District Court* and the issues facing the **organization**, we spoke with Masaki Nakamasa (仲正昌樹), a former member and professor at Kanazawa University, and Nozomi Kojima (小嶋希晶), a second-generation member and representative of the *Association of Second-Generation Members for the Protection of Believers’ Human Rights*.

Interviewer: Yasuhiro Uno (宇野 泰弘)

– The **District Court's decision** is quite harsh for the **religious organization**.

Kojima: I couldn't accept it at all – it was shocking. From the perspective of current believers, the **religious organization** has clearly improved. However, in today's Japan, it's become harder for people of faith to live freely. While we must take the **decision** seriously, I also wonder if the trial was conducted fairly.

– The **dissolution order** includes cases that were already settled. What are the problems with this?

Nakamasa: Even people with no connection to the **religious organization** are saying it's strange to include settled cases as grounds for dissolution. It's common sense that once a case is resolved, it shouldn't be re-litigated or used later by a judge to say, “Actually, this side was at fault.”

– Your media appearances have decreased since the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Why is that?

Nakamasa: Public interest in the **Unification Church** issue has gradually waned. Also, from the media's perspective, people like Eito Suzuki (鈴木 エイト) – who make stronger statements – might be more convenient.

– The **religious organization** now focuses on **abduction and confinement** issues and appeals for religious freedom. How do you see that?

Nakamasa: There's no doubt that **deprogramming** through **abduction and confinement** is a problem. But it's important to communicate how the everyday lives of believers are not that



Militantly campaigning against the Family Federation: Activist journalist Eito Suzuki, born as Kiyofumi Tanaka. Photo: Milkahie /

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unusual. They should ask, "Is it really necessary to dismantle us?" There's an impression they want to solve the issue by "taking down the central enemy," but that's not how reality works.

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– **There's a public perception that believers blindly follow the religious organization's leadership.**

Nakamasa: People see the [religious organization](#) and its members as unconditionally obeying [Hak Ja Han Moon](#), but that's not entirely true. Like how Catholics don't necessarily obey the Pope blindly, that nuance should be conveyed.

There's also a strong lingering belief in Japan that the Japanese [church](#) shoulder the financial burden of the global organization. Even if that's no longer the case, admitting it once was could add credibility. They should clearly explain that they no longer siphon off believers' assets to send to Korea. Veteran leaders could say, "We overextended ourselves in the past, but we wouldn't let our children do that now."

– **You've also said the religious organization is too obsessed with "defeating communism", leading to further isolation.**

Kojima: The [religious organization](#) is trying hard to adopt a victim narrative now, but I find that a bit off. While it's true the [organization](#) and its members have suffered – from things like being [abducted and held captive](#) – it's also true that, over its 60+ year history and nearly 290 churches, our immaturity and overly strong faith have hurt former members.



Demonstration against the court order to dissolve the [Family Federation](#), Shinjuku, Tokyo 11th May 2025. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Nakamasa: Thriving religions often adopt the stance: "Even if we disappear, it's okay – as long as our ideals survive." I remember in my time, the [religious organization](#) used to say things like, "There are people in real pain. We fight to protect them. It doesn't matter what happens to us." That spirit seems lost. Now they're just focused on self-preservation, which is not a good reason to keep going.

– **You've mentioned arrogant comments by believers on social media.**

Kojima: I often hear members of the [religious organization](#) say, "Japanese people don't understand religion." But the general public's resentment is not toward religion per se – it's toward the [Family Federation](#). Most Japanese people respect traditional religions. Blaming the [dissolution order](#) on "Japan's lack of religious understanding" comes across as arrogant. Some might even say the [Family Federation](#) is the very reason Japanese people misunderstand religion.

– **As a second-generation member, what do you think the religious organization should become?**

Kojima: Since the [dissolution order](#) was filed, I've felt keenly the lack of allies. It's painful to be misunderstood. I hope the [religious organization](#) will learn to engage with society and listen to painful criticism.

Nakamasa: That's probably the key point. In times of crisis, an organization must be able to value that kind of engagement, or it won't truly survive.

Kojima: Maybe our role is to engage in dialogue with society and deepen mutual understanding. Regardless of whether the dissolution happens or not, we should focus on communication.

Nakamasa: It's important to identify what ideals members themselves have, aside from the goals handed down from the top. They should ask, "Besides protecting the [religious organization](#), what do we really want to do?" Maybe they could hold open discussion forums to explore this.

– In other words, believers should express their own dreams and ideals in their own words.

Nakamasa: Exactly. It shouldn't be just for the sake of the [religious organization](#). If they could return to the attitude of "fighting for persecuted and suffering religions and cultures," it might resonate more. They need to rethink what "fighting" really means.

– Are there other challenges the [religious organization](#) faces?

Nakamasa: Put simply, religions that restrict thought through rigid rules tend to self-destruct. Instead, they should liberate thought.



Interfaith unity: From the unity ceremony of reconciliation between Christianity and the [Family Federation](#), held in Gapyeong, South Korea 23rd August 2024. Photo: Screenshot from live transmission by PeaceTV.

Kojima: Originally, the [religious organization](#) had a doctrine of "interfaith unity" (超宗教 – cho shukyo – transcending religious boundaries). We aren't reprimanded for attending events held by other religious groups. When you think about it, the way of thinking is supposed to be something open and inclusive. But somewhere along the way, we started trying to force our thoughts into rigid molds of our own making. As a result, each of us may have unintentionally narrowed our own thinking and let things drift in the wrong direction. It was supposed to be more open and free.

Nakamasa: I feel the same way, as a former believer. They should actively go out and learn from other religions – saying, "Please teach us your views."

Featured image above: Dialogue between Masaki Nakamasa (right) and Nozomi Kojima in Shinjuku, Tokyo. Photo:Reika Kato (加藤玲和)

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