

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Closing Cemeteries - Gross Japanese State Interference in Religion

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Hitomi Okajima and her family visit the Oze Cemetery in Katashina Village, Gunma Prefecture, Japan on May 4, 2025



Closing cemeteries owned or run by large religious minority becomes big issue of blatant state interference in religious matters

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Cemetery Management Impossible Due to Dissolution of Religious Corporation

The Request to Dissolve the Family Federation and the Cemetery Controversy (Part 3)

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

See part 1 [Japan: Even Dead Souls Face State Persecution](#)

See part 2 [Sacrilege: Japanese State Violating the Sacred](#)

Under a clear blue sky, a one-year-old boy tottered unsteadily across a wide lawn. Occasionally dropping to his hands and knees, he delighted in the feel of the grass.

"This is the first time my child is wearing shoes and practicing walking outside," said 37-year-old Hitomi Okajima (岡島仁美) with a smile. She lives in Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture.

Okajima is a so-called "second-generation" member of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). Taking advantage of the May holiday period, she visited the "Oze Cemetery", owned by the [religious organization](#) in Katashina Village, Gunma Prefecture, to pay respects at her family grave. With a picnic sheet laid out in front of the gravestone, it looked as if her family were enjoying a casual outing.

As the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)'s request for the dissolution of the [Family Federation](#) is close to being granted, anxiety and concern are spreading among bereaved families about what will happen to the cemeteries owned or contracted by the [organization](#).

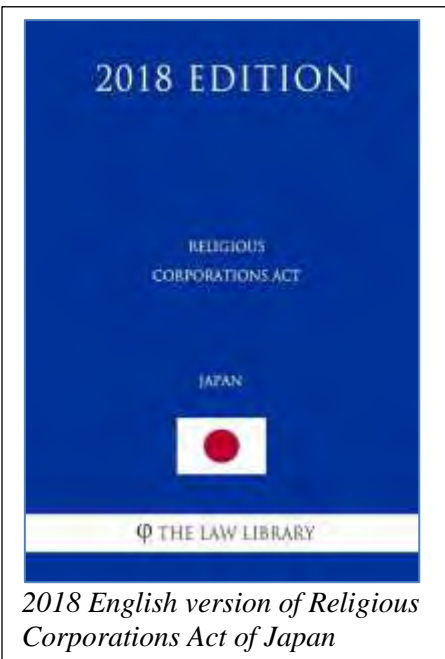
Okajima commented,

"I want to believe everything will be fine, but if it's lost, it would be truly sad. The cemetery has also been a place for grieving families to connect with one another. I hope it continues as it has."



The "Central Japan Cemetery" spreads across a mountain area in Suzuka City, Mie Prefecture, Japan

More than 40 years ago, the Oze Cemetery was developed in response to calls from members seeking a burial place for deceased children. Since then, it has served as a "final resting place" for followers who passed away. The peaceful atmosphere of the cemetery, surrounded by nature, has fostered bonds among members who visit. Many second-generation couples reportedly met and married through these community ties among bereaved families.



2018 English version of Religious Corporations Act of Japan

Over 500 volunteers help maintain the cemetery annually, with up to nearly 1,000 people assisting in busy years. A male follower in his 50s who traveled from Saitama Prefecture with his family said he had been volunteering at Oze for over a decade. "I want to come as much as I can, but it's sad that even that is becoming more difficult, and I have mixed feelings," he said with a sad look on his face.

What happens to religious corporations after dissolution?

Once a religious corporation is ordered to dissolve, it becomes a liquidation entity, and a liquidator appointed by the court handles the winding-up process. Under the Religious Corporations Act, the liquidator must:

- Conclude ongoing affairs,
- Collect receivables and pay debts,
- Distribute remaining assets.

Once this process is complete, the corporation's legal status ceases to exist. Until that time, however, access to the cemeteries may be restricted, raising concerns that they could be neglected. With financial operations halted, payment for cemetery staff and maintenance may be delayed, and the acceptance of new remains could be banned.

Furthermore, once the [religious corporation](#) loses its legal status, it becomes unable to operate cemeteries. This is because, under guidelines from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and local government regulations, cemeteries must be operated by local governments, public interest corporations, or religious corporations.

After dissolution, cemeteries will, in principle, be managed by the court-appointed liquidator until a new management entity is determined. However, it's highly likely that practical issues like cleaning or dealing with vandalism will be neglected.

The government should address the families' concerns



A demonstration by members of the [Family Federation](#) in Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan April 29, 2025, against the blatant state persecution

Even if another religious corporation or municipality assumes responsibility for cemetery management after liquidation, it's expected that holding ceremonies or burials based on the [Family Federation's](#) doctrines will be difficult. The religious community among believers that centered around the cemetery, offering emotional support to bereaved families, may weaken as a result.

One possible alternative is forming a new public interest corporation composed of bereaved families from each region. However, many cemeteries in general face financial hardships, and passing administrative reviews poses a significant challenge.

In cases where the cemetery land is leased under the [religious organization's](#) name, negotiating with the landowners is essential. Even if a new managing organization is ready, if the owner refuses, legal battles over eviction could ensue.



A demonstration by members of the [Family Federation](#) in Osaka, Japan April 1, 2025, against the blatant state persecution

At the "Central Japan Cemetery" in Suzuka City, Mie Prefecture - run by the [religious organization](#) on

land owned by a Buddhist temple - Jiro Nakabayashi (中林次郎), secretary general of the cemetery's bereaved family association, shared his unease,

"Families ask me what will happen to the cemetery if the [Family Federation](#) is dissolved, but I have no answer."

A man in his 30s living in central Japan, whose relatives are buried there, said,

"For the bereaved, the worst outcome would be the cemetery being abolished or left in neglect. I've heard there are non-members buried there too, so I think there should be an opportunity to explain the situation to all involved."

In the [dissolution order](#) issued on 25th March, the Tokyo District Court repeatedly emphasized that religious freedom would be guaranteed, stating that "the order has no legal effect whatsoever to prohibit or restrict the religious activities of believers" and "it does not attempt to interfere with spiritual or religious matters."

However, the court also pointed out that the [dissolution order](#) "may hinder believers from continuing their religious practices using assets belonging to the [corporation](#)." The court declared this to be a "necessary and unavoidable" outcome.

Still, is it truly "necessary and unavoidable" to make cemetery operations unfeasible and potentially tell bereaved families to "leave"? Can the mental anguish caused by being barred from interring remains or freely visiting graves really be dismissed as not interfering with "spiritual or religious matters"?

If freedom of religion is to be protected even after dissolution, then the government and courts must not neglect their responsibility to tangibly uphold that promise for current believers. At the very least, the government must not offer vague explanations but confront and clarify the situation, including conducting thorough fact-finding investigations.

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Sacrilege: Japanese State Violating The Sacred

- May 22, 2025
- Knut Holdhus

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Dissolution order threatens sacred grounds: Believers regard likely move by authorities to erase cemeteries as sacrilege



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“My Mother Lives in the Afterlife”


The Request to Dissolve the Family Federation and the Cemetery Controversy (Part 2)

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of *Sekai Nippo*

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Oze, the largest high-altitude marshland in Honshu and famously known as the setting for the classic song “*Natsu no Omoide*” (*Summer Memories*), attracts hikers from all over Japan each year who come to see the beautiful scenery with blooming Asian skunk cabbage (*mizubashō*), as mentioned in the lyrics. In Katashina Village, Gunma Prefecture – the Kanto gateway to Oze National Park – a Western-style cemetery with blue lawns lies peacefully in harmony with the rich natural surroundings.



Oze Cemetery, owned by the [Family Federation](#), in Katashina Village, Gunma Prefecture. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)

This is the Oze Cemetery, owned and managed by the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). The land was donated by believers over 40 years ago and developed into one of eight church cemeteries nationwide, holding a particularly special place among them.

More than 1,400 believers are buried here. A chapel has been built on the grounds to allow families to pray and pay their respects.

“This cemetery changed the way I live.”

So says Kayo Shiraishi (白石佳代), 35, a second-generation believer who was interviewed at Oze Cemetery earlier this month. That day, Shiraishi helped host a barbecue event where bereaved second-generation believers could connect and share experiences. Within the [religious organization](#), the cemetery functions as a crucial community hub for believers.

Shiraishi’s mother, Yukiko Fukuda (福田ゆき子), died of ovarian cancer in 2009 and now rests in the columbarium (room with niches for funeral urns) at Oze Cemetery. When her mother passed away, Shiraishi was 19 years old and had rejected the [Family Federation’s](#) teachings. She recalls, “I was in touch with people who opposed the [church](#), and I had prepared documents to officially leave.”

But her view on life and death changed drastically with her mother’s passing. Her mother, saying she “couldn’t die and leave her children behind,” endured a two-year-and-seven-month battle with cancer. When the cancer metastasized throughout her body, doctors advised the family that her final days would be better spent at home. Two weeks after being discharged, she passed away.



The [Family Federation](#) has a crystal-clear teaching about life after death. Here, “*Transfiguration*”, a photographic reproduction of painting from 1824 by Alexander Ivanov (1806-1858). It portrays the transfiguration of Jesus as he meets with the spirits of Moses and Elijah while three disciples are onlookers. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image

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Shiraishi witnessed her mother's final moments. Just past midnight, her father, Minoru Fukuda (福田実) (69), held his wife in his arms on the bed. As Shiraishi and her siblings looked on, her father whispered,

"You've fought hard. You've done enough. It's okay to go now."

Her mother nodded slightly and passed away. Shiraishi described the moment as "moving."

"When I die, I want to die embraced by a loving husband like that. I want to be in a marriage like theirs."

Though she didn't fully understand the concept of God or religious doctrine, witnessing her parents together at the end made her feel this way naturally.

After placing her mother's ashes in Oze Cemetery, Shiraishi and her family visited every month on the monthly memorial day of the mother's death. The drive took about two hours each way, but to Shiraishi, who was deeply grieving, it never felt long.

"It was a mysterious feeling – even exciting. The car ride filled with memories and conversations about mom became a precious time for our family."

Upon arriving at the cemetery, the manager—who was also a believer—would unlock the columbarium (room with niches for funeral urns) for them. The whole family would touch the urn containing the mother's ashes. Their visits only lasted about 10 to 15 minutes, but they always ended by saying, *"We'll come again."* The manager would then offer them tea and sweets, and they'd enjoy some quiet, happy family time – a monthly ritual.

Though Shiraishi once "hated the church," she eventually developed faith through these visits.

"The idea that we don't become nothing after death or reincarnate, but that we continue to exist forever in the afterlife as individuals – that was comforting to me."

Now married with a family of her own, she still gathers with her family for a meal on her mother's death anniversary.

Government Undermines Believers' Views on Life and Death



A demonstration by members of the Family Federation in Tottori, Japan 19th March 2025, against the blatant state persecution. Photo: FFWPU

If the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's request to dissolve the Family Federation is finalized, the fate of the organization's land holdings remains uncertain. Despite the unclear future of Oze Cemetery, believers continue to request to be buried or have ashes interred there.

Minoru Fukuda (福田実), Shiraishi's father and a cemetery board member, expressed anger at the situation, saying the pressure to shut down even cemeteries goes beyond exclusion from society (ostracism):

"This isn't even mura hachibu (村八分 – a traditional form of social exclusion). Mura hachibu excluded people from village life except for emergencies like fires and funerals – that was part of Japanese tradition. Targeting cemeteries through dissolution is an act of cultural destruction."

While the government and courts claim that "freedom of religion will still be protected" after dissolution, removing churches as gathering spaces and cemeteries as places of spiritual refuge makes maintaining a religious community extremely difficult.

Shiraishi's monthly cemetery visits were possible only because the manager was a fellow believer who allowed frequent access to the columbarium. If that is no longer permitted, it would mean being cut off from "conversations" with her deceased mother – an unbearable thought for Shiraishi and her family.

Looking at her mother's portrait inside the columbarium, Shiraishi said:

"Losing this cemetery would be like having our home and hometown taken away. We'd lose sight of why we were born and why we live. I wonder – what kind of views on life and death do the people in government have?"

See part 1 [Japan: Even Dead Souls Face State Persecution](#)

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Featured image above: Kayo Shiraishi (right) and her father Minoru Fukuda appeal for the cemetery's preservation in front of her mother's memorial portrait in the Oze Cemetery's columbarium – 4th May 2025, Katashina Village, Gunma Prefecture. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)

[Editor's note: Murahachibu (村八分) means "Social Ostracism in a Village". 村八分 is a traditional Japanese practice of ostracism within a rural community. It literally means "eight parts out of ten", and refers to the act of excluding a person or family from most aspects of communal life as a form of social punishment.

In traditional Japanese villages, ten types of mutual assistance were essential for survival (e.g., help with house building, weddings, funerals, festivals, etc.).

If someone violated social norms or committed a serious offense (like betrayal, theft, or disrupting harmony), the community would cut off ties with them in eight out of those ten areas.

The two exceptions (the remaining "two parts") were typically firefighting assistance and funeral assistance. Even someone ostracized would still be helped if their house caught fire or someone died – because those were considered essential and sacred duties.

村八分 reflects Japan's traditional emphasis on group harmony (和, wa), collective responsibility, and social conformity. Being subjected to 村八分 was extremely serious – it meant social death within one's community, which in rural Japan could be more devastating than legal punishment.

While it's a historical concept, modern forms of social ostracism (e.g. bullying, workplace exclusion) are sometimes still described metaphorically as 村八分.

村八分 is a traditional Japanese form of social ostracism where a person is cut off from communal life in all but the most essential matters. It highlights the power of collective norms and the severe consequences of going against them in a tightly knit society.]

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