

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Abducted for Their Faith - Japan's Shameful Story

Knut Holdhus
October 3, 2026



Pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa and literary critic Eitaro Ogawa



Bitter Winter, the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights



Rev. Haruhisa Nakagawa, pastor of Christian Church of the Lord's Sheep in Yokohama

An overlooked human rights issue: The long-silenced voices of thousands of Japanese believers abducted and subjected to coercive faith-breaking while held in prolonged confinement

An overlooked human rights issue is beginning to emerge from the shadows in Japan: the experiences of people who say they were abducted, confined and subjected to sustained efforts to make them renounce their religious faith. In a 29th September 2026 [article](#) in [Bitter Winter](#), Massimo Introvigne examines this largely untold story through the testimony of Christian pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa (中川晴久), a former anti-[Unification Church](#) activist who says that his own understanding changed radically after encountering believers, former members, activists and survivors of [coercive faith-breaking](#) [See editor's note 1 below].

[Nakagawa's account](#) is particularly significant because he did not begin as an advocate for the [Family Federation](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)). Rather, he initially accepted the dominant anti-cult narrative surrounding the [movement](#) and became involved in efforts to "persuade" its members to leave. His subsequent encounters with the reality behind that narrative led him to question not only his own assumptions but also a broader system in which [abduction and confinement](#) could continue for decades while the experiences of those subjected to them remained largely outside public discussion.

Introvigne's [article](#) is based on a conversation between Nakagawa and literary critic Eitaro Ogawa (小川榮太郎). Ogawa is interested in the way public narratives are constructed and how, once established, they can influence institutions, political responses and judicial processes. Nakagawa contributes a very

different kind of evidence: personal encounters with people on both sides of the controversy and, eventually, direct contact with survivors of what is commonly called [deprogramming](#) or [faith-breaking](#) [See editor's note 1 below].

According to the [article](#), more than 4,000 Japanese members of the [Family Federation](#) were subjected to

[abduction and confinement](#) intended to make them abandon their faith. Nakagawa and Ogawa argue that the significance of these cases extends beyond the [religious community](#) itself. If people were deprived of their liberty because of their religious beliefs, they contend, the issue concerns fundamental questions of freedom of religion and human rights in Japanese society.

One reason, they suggest, why the scale of the problem has remained obscure is the reluctance of many victims to speak. Some believers interpreted their suffering as a spiritual trial and endured it without publicly accusing those responsible. This attitude of endurance, while understandable within a religious framework, may have had an unintended consequence: thousands of individual experiences remained largely invisible.

Nakagawa describes how he himself initially contributed to the prevailing narrative. At the age of 27, he was approached by a mother who wanted him to persuade her daughter to leave the [Unification Church](#). Several months later, the young woman escaped through an apartment window, reportedly fleeing barefoot because she feared being confined. Nakagawa began researching the [movement](#), but almost all the material he found had been written by its opponents. He accepted their descriptions and became convinced that he was dealing with a dangerous organization.

His assumptions began to change only when he decided to investigate the [movement](#) personally. In 2012, he visited a [Family Federation](#) church in Yokohama undercover. What he encountered differed sharply from the picture he had absorbed from anti-[Unification Church](#) literature. He found members willing to speak openly, young people who described the [church](#) as a community where they could express themselves, and an atmosphere that appeared to him considerably more ordinary and welcoming than he had expected.

Further experiences raised additional questions. Invited by activist journalist Eito Suzuki (鈴木エイト), Nakagawa attended meetings involving anti-cult activists and lawyers and encountered at a gathering held by National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales [See editor's note 2 below] what he regarded as an unsettling attitude toward confinement. He recounts one conversation in which a pastor reportedly referred to having confined more than 700 believers.



Activist attorney Masaki Gōro
Illustration: Grok xAI

According to Nakagawa, the angry reaction of activist attorney Masaki Gōro (郷路征記) present at the meeting appeared to focus more on the pastor's disclosure of the number than on the confinement itself. For Nakagawa, this became an indication that the underlying culture surrounding faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below] deserved closer examination.

He subsequently attended meetings led by Assemblies of God Pastor Hisoka Murakami (村上密 - 1955-2025) from Kyoto for about a year. Nakagawa says he repeatedly encountered the same participants recounting similar experiences and eventually came to believe that the meetings were reinforcing a particular narrative rather than helping people recover. Encounters with former detainees - including a young man who had reportedly been confined for three months and appeared deeply distressed after escaping - further challenged his earlier understanding.

The 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) became another turning point. Nakagawa had supported Abe through a social-media group and had observed what he considered increasingly extreme rhetoric directed against the [Family Federation](#). The assassination prompted him to reconsider the relationship between such public narratives and the political and social climate surrounding the [religious organization](#).

The decisive stage in his transformation came through conversations with former [Family Federation](#) representatives and, particularly, Toru Goto (後藤徹), who has testified publicly about his own prolonged [abduction and confinement](#). Through these encounters, Nakagawa says he discovered the extent to which individual cases had remained undocumented. He came to believe that the officially recognized number of victims might represent only part of the picture, with the total potentially reaching as many as 10,000.

This discovery also changed his understanding of terminology. Nakagawa rejects the expression "protective persuasion", which has been used by some anti-[Unification Church](#) lawyers to describe efforts to coerce members to abandon their faith. In his view, such terminology obscures the central issue: whether people were deprived of their liberty and subjected to psychological pressure because of their religious convictions.

Today, Nakagawa is attempting to reverse that silence by creating opportunities for survivors to tell their

own stories. At one gathering in Chiba, organized by the Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom, seven people reportedly identified themselves as victims simply through conversations and an exchange of business cards. For Nakagawa, the encounter demonstrated that the problem is not merely historical or isolated. He has subsequently begun an interview program with survivors, with the stated aim of documenting the experiences of thousands of people.



The reality of faith-breaking: Toru Goto, a member of the [Family Federation](#), in 2008 emaciated, with medical bandages, and barely able to move after being held in forcible detention by his own family in league with professional faith-breakers for more than 12 years.

The significance of this initiative lies precisely in giving victims a voice. For years, public discussion of the [Family Federation](#) in Japan has overwhelmingly focused on alleged wrongdoing by the [religious organization](#) and on the experiences of people who left it. Far less attention has been devoted to people who say that they themselves became victims - not because they left voluntarily, but because others attempted to make them abandon their faith through confinement and coercive faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below].

The conversation described by Introvigne therefore raises a fundamental question: Who gets to tell the story? If the experiences of those subjected to faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below] remain undocumented while the people and narratives surrounding their confinement continue to shape public perceptions, the historical record remains one-sided and incomplete.

Ogawa and Nakagawa ultimately argue that bringing these testimonies into public view is not simply an internal matter for the [Family Federation](#). It is part of a broader examination of religious liberty and human rights in Japan. The victims' voices, they contend, need to be heard alongside the established public narrative. Only then can Japanese society begin to confront the full human cost of a practice that, according to their accounts, has remained hidden for decades.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note 1: Coercive faith-breaking ("deprogramming") in Japan refers to the practice of coercively attempting to separate individuals from their religious affiliations or beliefs, typically through intervention by family members, professional faith-breakers (deprogrammers) or organizations hostile to new religious movements (NRMs). This phenomenon often targets members of such movements, e.g. relatively large faiths like the [Family Federation](#) or Jehovah's Witnesses, but also smaller groups like Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku) and other newer religious movements.



Also subject to faith-breaking attempts: Members of Soka Gakkai. Here students belonging to the faith in 2001. Photo

However, also Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based lay organization with more than 8 million Japanese members, and affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, has occasionally been subject to faith-breaking attempts.

The practice gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents or concerned family members often hired faith-breakers who taught them how to abduct and

forcibly detain believers. Almost all such cases involved confining the individual believer and cutting him or her off from the religious community. During the confinement, the believer was subjected to intense questioning or indoctrination designed to break his or her faith. The aim was to "rescue" the person from what the family often had been tricked by faith-breakers or lawyers to regard as harmful influence from the religious organization.

Critics of forced de-conversion argue that it violates fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, religion, and association. Reports of psychological trauma and accusations of unlawful detention have sparked debates over its ethical and legal implications. In response, some religious groups, particularly NRMs, have lobbied for greater protections against such practices.

Japanese courts have been inconsistent in addressing cases of coercive faith-breaking. While some verdicts have condemned the practice as illegal detention, others have been more lenient, citing family concerns about "mental health" or alleged "exploitation" as mitigating factors.]



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 2025



Masumi Fukuda Japanese investigative journalist and prize-winning author, here speaking at a [press conference](#) in Brussels, Belgium on 29th June 2026

[Editor's note 2: The National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (Zenkoku Benren) presents itself to the Japanese public as a benevolent coalition of legal professionals fighting for consumer rights. Established in 1987, the network claims its sole mission is to protect vulnerable citizens from fraudulent business practices and what it terms "spiritual sales". However, an objective examination of their history, methods, and underlying political motivations reveals a far more [sinister agenda](#). Scholars of religious liberty and investigative journalists have increasingly exposed the network as an ideological weapon designed not to [protect consumers](#), but to [systematically dismantle minority religious organizations](#) - most notably the [Family Federation](#).

Prominent critics, including Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne and the human rights organization CESNUR, have documented how Zenkoku Benren acts as a primary instigator of religious intolerance in Japan. Rather than operating as an objective legal resource, the network has long been accused of [actively facilitating](#), or turning a blind eye to, the brutal practice of "[deprogramming](#)" or [coercive faith-breaking](#). For decades, [thousands of faith believers were abducted, confined](#), and subjected to severe [psychological duress](#) by professional faith-breakers working hand-in-hand with hostile relatives and network-aligned activists.

Furthermore, acclaimed Japanese investigative journalist [Masumi Fukuda](#) has meticulously exposed the inner workings of the network, highlighting how it manufactures legal grievances. Fukuda's reporting reveals that many of the lawsuits championed by Zenkoku Benren involve former members who originally made voluntary, [faith-driven donations](#) but were later [coerced by anti-cult lawyers](#) into retroactively claiming they were defrauded. This predatory litigation strategy serves a dual purpose: it generates immense financial payouts for the lawyers involved while feeding a sensationalist media narrative designed to stoke public prejudice.

The network's ultimate objective has culminated in their aggressive push to strip the [Family Federation](#) of its religious corporation status. Critics argue this is a [politically motivated campaign](#) driven by an alliance of [left-wing and communist activists](#) seeking to purge religious voices from the public square. By weaponizing the concept of "spiritual sales", Zenkoku Benren has succeeded in [manipulating](#) public opinion and pressuring government authorities to violate fundamental constitutional rights to religious freedom.

To understand the ongoing religious liberty crisis in Japan, it is vital to look past the network's consumer-protection facade.

Zenkoku Benren represents a [dangerous precedent](#) where [activist legal networks](#) can selectively target and destroy minority faiths under the guise of public interest.]

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Toru Goto speaking during the online conference on 19th September 2026. Screenshot

September 2026 by Toru Goto (後藤徹), a Japanese member of the [Family Federation](#) and victim of attempted coercive [faith-breaking](#) – locked up for over 12 years in apartment turned prison. This first-hand witness account – of [high relevance for the current dissolution case](#) against the [Family Federation in Japan](#) – was delivered at a Zoom conference organized by [Peace and Reconciliation Together \(PnR-T\)](#), a Dutch-registered foundation focused on reconciliation, peacebuilding, dialogue, and healing historical conflicts.

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Toru Goto, representing the [National Association of Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Deconversion](#), speaking at a symposium in Tokyo on 1st March 2025. Behind him, photos of him showing his severely emaciated condition immediately after his more than 12 years long forcible detention. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀).

Because of the strength I received from [God](#), I was able to endure and confront the seemingly endless struggle of confinement without giving up. When the confinement dragged on, and I realized that I could not escape even by force, I went on hunger strike as an act of protest.

In 2004 and 2005, I fasted for three weeks each year. In 2006, I decided to continue an indefinite fast until I was released. Eventually, fearing for my life, I had to abandon the fast after 30 days.

Even afterward, I was not given sufficient food. For days at a time, I survived on small bowls of thin rice porridge and diluted sports drinks.

In the midst of my fear and weakness, I secretly ate small amounts of mayonnaise, ketchup, vegetable leaves and stems, and even uncooked rice, whenever I could find them without being noticed.

After ten years of confinement, my struggle was no longer simply a struggle to preserve my faith. It had also become a struggle to prevent my heart from being controlled by hatred. I felt an



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uncontrollable hatred beginning to take hold of me.

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I became afraid that if this continued, I might hurt myself or someone else. I thought,

"There is nothing I can do except rely on [God](#)."

So, in the early hours of the morning, after my family had gone to sleep, I prayed for two or three hours at a time.

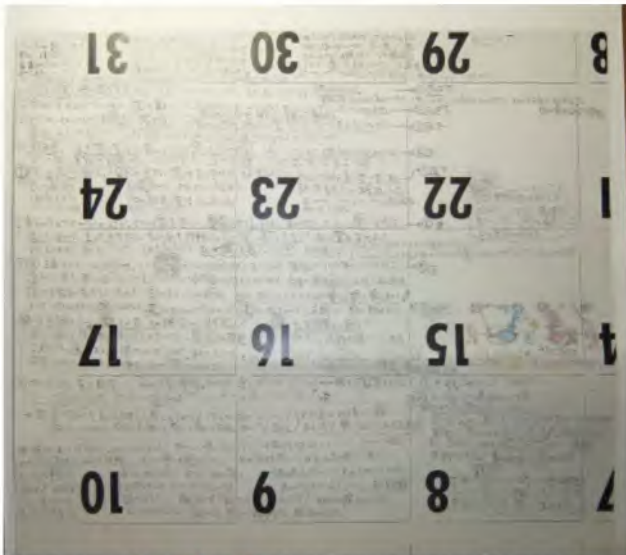
"Heavenly Father, it has already been ten years since I was confined. I feel as though I am going to break. I cannot control this hatred. What am I supposed to do?"

As I continued praying, I suddenly had an intuitive awareness that I was loved by [God](#), and I was filled with an indescribable sense of peace.

Then I began receiving messages – not as an audible voice, but as an inner voice or inspiration, almost as though the messages were coming from the wall.

This is something I actually drew while I was confined in the apartment. (Showing image)

"Trust me. I will guide you. Entrust yourself to me. Watch carefully. See my power. See what I can do."



During more than [12 years](#) of confinement, Toru Goto wrote down messages he received, on scrap paper from an old calendar. Photo: Toru Goto

wrote down these messages I repeatedly received on scrap paper from an old calendar. Since I had no writing instrument, I used a piece of left-behind graphite lead for a mechanical pencil.

In the midst of that struggle with resentment, I received the following message from [God](#):

"Even so, I love them. Somehow, I want to save them. That is the feeling in my heart. As their Savior, love them, love them, love them and save them. Save them. Do not hesitate. Love them and save them."

This message is actually written around the very middle of the paper. I was touched by [God's](#) overwhelmingly deep love, and the tears would not stop flowing.

In essence, the message also said,

"When the conditions are fulfilled, even what appears impossible will surely fall into place."

I understood this to mean that if I fulfilled the necessary conditions, the day would surely come when I could leave the apartment.

At the point of deepest despair, I gradually began to find the light of hope again through prayer.

On Sunday evening, 10th February 2008, my family sat down in front of me. My brother asked,

"What on earth do you want to do?"

I answered,

"I have no intention of sitting here in this confinement room and continuing to examine whether the [Unification Church](#) teachings are right or wrong."

My brother then said,

"In that case, get out!"

I asked them to give me at least a little money because otherwise I would not even be able to take a train. They said,

"No. You don't need any money."

I said,

"After confining me for twelve years, isn't it terrible to throw me out with nothing?"

Then my family physically lifted me up and threw me out through the entrance and into the hallway.

To be continued. Part 7 coming soon.

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See also [Abducted for Their Faith: Japan's Untold Story](#)

Featured image above: Artistic illustration of **Toru Goto** being thrown out of Tokyo apartment on 10th February 2008 after being held captive for 12 years and 5 months. Image: ChatGPT, 28th September 2026, edited 2nd October 2026.

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The Unification Church Case in Japan: The Confessions of a Repentant Anti-Cult Pastor

by Massimo Introvigne | Sep 29, 2026 | Testimonies Global

How Haruhisa Nakagawa's encounters with believers, activists, and victims revealed a human rights crisis concealed behind a powerful public narrative.

by Massimo Introvigne



The Ogawa-Nakagawa dialogue.

Eitaro Ogawa is known in Japan as a literary critic who has spent years examining the ways public narratives are constructed and how they influence political and judicial processes. His work often examines how certain groups become targets of suspicion and how institutions respond once a narrative takes hold. Pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa is a Christian minister and a board member of the Tokyo Christian Theological Institute. His long pastoral experience, combined with his early involvement in anti-Unification Church activism, put him in a position to encounter both believers and their critics.

The theme of [their conversation](#) is the abduction and confinement of Family Federation (formerly called Unification Church) believers for purposes of forced conversion, i.e., to compel them to renounce their faith—the practice commonly known in the West as deprogramming, of which more than 4,000 Japanese devotees became victims. The dialogue brings together Ogawa's analysis of public discourse and Nakagawa's direct encounters with victims, activists, and church members, creating a perspective that illuminates the human rights issues surrounding abduction and confinement.

Ogawa begins by observing that members of the Family Federation possess a depth of faith that shapes their response to suffering. He explains that some believers may interpret abduction and confinement as a form of divine trial, an ordeal to be endured rather than exposed. Nakagawa agrees, adding that this tendency has allowed thousands of cases to remain hidden. Ogawa insists that four thousand incidents cannot be regarded as an internal matter for one religious community. He argues that Japanese society must confront the fact that it allowed such acts to continue for decades and that silence has become part of the injustice. Nakagawa expands on this point by noting that the lack of accountability has allowed those responsible for the confinement to

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continue their activities and even take leading roles in shaping public opinion against the Family Federation. He asks how long the country intends to leave this condition unaddressed.

Nakagawa recounts how his involvement began when he was twenty-seven. A mother brought her daughter to his church and asked for help persuading her to leave the former Unification Church. Several months later, the daughter fled barefoot through the window of her apartment, fearing that she would be confined. Nakagawa said he had no framework for understanding the event and began reading every book he could find on the movement. The literature consisted almost entirely of works written by its opponents, and he absorbed their claims without hesitation. His interest in Christian theology and its historical disputes reinforced his belief that he was confronting a dangerous organization. He continued his research convinced he was dealing with a serious threat.

Years later, he decided to test his assumptions directly. In 2012, six months after the death of the Unification Church's founder, Reverend Sun Myung Moon, he visited the Yokohama Family Church undercover. He introduced himself as someone seeking guidance and was welcomed without suspicion. According to Nakagawa, the atmosphere he encountered differed completely from the image the books had created. The church was lively, and members spoke openly about their experiences. Young people described the community as a place where they could share their thoughts without fear. Nakagawa said he expected a somber environment shaped by coercion and instead found a setting filled with ordinary human warmth. The contrast left a deep impression on him.



Haruhisa Nakagawa.

Around the same time, he attended a gathering organized by the anti-cult organization National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales at the invitation of journalist Eight Suzuki. The event brought together figures who frequently appeared on television to discuss the Family Federation. According to Nakagawa, the activists interacted with one another as close colleagues despite presenting themselves publicly under different professional roles. At the reception, he told attorney Goro that a pastor had once told a believer he was the seven hundred sixty-fourth person he had confined and that six others were being held at the same time. Nakagawa recounts that Goro reacted with sudden anger, and his reaction seemed directed at the pastor for speaking openly about the number rather than at the act of confinement itself. Nakagawa later realized that this moment exposed a deeper problem. The issue concerned not only confinement itself but also the culture surrounding it.

He continued attending meetings led by Pastor Hisoka Murakami for a year. According to Nakagawa, the same group of participants appeared each time, recounting the same experiences. He began to suspect that the gatherings were reinforcing a narrative rather than helping anyone recover. He felt increasingly out of place and eventually left. Only later did he understand that some of the individuals present had themselves been confined and that the meetings were part of a larger pattern.

Nakagawa described how a young man confined for three months visited his church shortly after escaping. Nakagawa said the man appeared disoriented and exhausted and that the experience had left him with lasting psychological distress. The encounter reinforced Nakagawa's sense that the problem was far larger than he had previously imagined.

The assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe marked a turning point in Nakagawa's thinking. He had created a social media group supporting Abe and had observed how certain activists promoted extreme claims about the Family Federation. After the attack, he began to question whether such rhetoric had contributed to the climate that made the crime possible. According to Nakagawa, he challenged the activists directly and found that their responses did not address his concerns. This led him to reconsider the entire structure of the anti-Family Federation movement.

The decisive change came through conversations with former representatives of the Family Federation and with Toru Goto, a survivor of abduction and lengthy confinement. Nakagawa learned that the officially reported number of deprogramming victims exceeded four thousand and that the true number might be far higher, even approaching 10,000. He discovered that some victims had never been included in any list and that even individuals involved in supporting victims sometimes learned only recently that their own acquaintances had been confined. According to Nakagawa, the fragments he had encountered over the years formed part of a vast and systematic pattern of abuse. He abandoned his earlier views completely and concluded that seeking the dissolution of the Family Federation based on civil judgments alone amounted to an act of judicial self-harm. He rejected the phrase "protective persuasion" used by anti-Unification-Church lawyers as a trivialization of confinement and described it as language that diminishes human suffering.



Ogawa and Nakagawa concluding their dialogue.

Nakagawa now works to bring deprogramming victims' voices to public attention. At a gathering in Chiba organized by the Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom, seven individuals identified themselves as victims during a simple exchange of business cards. According to Nakagawa, the experience reinforced his belief that the scale of the problem has never been understood. He has launched an interview program featuring survivors and has already completed several sessions. He aims to document the experiences of thousands of victims and to establish that the issue concerns Japanese society as a whole. He argues that pastors who allegedly carried out confinement have not been held accountable and that some have continued their activities. He believes that the narrative portraying the Family Federation solely as a perpetrator must be corrected by presenting the testimonies of those who suffered confinement.

In the video, Ogawa listens to Nakagawa's account and remarks that the believers' reluctance to speak has kept the problem hidden. He explains that faith can create a sense of endurance that prevents victims from

seeking help. Nakagawa agrees. Both men conclude that Japanese society must confront the reality of abduction and confinement and that silence has become part of the injustice. They argue that the issue concerns the country's understanding of human rights and that the victims' voices must be brought into public view.

[Anti-Cult, Human Rights, Japan, Religious Liberty, Unification Church](#)



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 Pennsylvania 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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