

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Highly Distorted Media Reporting in Japan

Knut Holdhus
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Leading scholar reveals the reasons for distorted media reporting in Japan

Fourth of six parts of Seiron report - More on [part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#)



The first page of the feature article in the December 2023 issue of Seiron (正論) with the title "Doubts about the Request for a Dissolution Order".

The Japanese monthly opinion magazine Seiron (正論) published in its December 2023 issue a feature article on the vicious persecution of the [Family Federation](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) in Japan.

Two parts of the report by Makiko Takita, well known journalist and editor-in-chief of the magazine, contain an interview with Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion and editor-in-chief of [Bitter Winter](#), the leading international online magazine on religious freedom and human rights.



[Bitter Winter](#) published this part of the report of Seiron on 22nd January 2024, as the fourth of six parts of the English version of the original Japanese feature article. Read the [whole Bitter Winter article](#). More on [article 1](#), [article 2](#), [article 3](#).

In this part of the interview with Dr. Introvigne, he discusses the challenges facing the media in Japan regarding their coverage of the [Family Federation](#), formerly the [Unification Church](#), and other new religious movements. The scholar

expresses concerns about the reliance of the media on certain sources, particularly National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (Zenkoku Benren), which operates as a so-called anti-cult movement. Introvigne argues that in a democratic society, it is crucial for the media to gather information from various sources and present a balanced perspective.

Massimo Introvigne highlights a lack of neutral and independent organizations in Japan similar to those found in Europe, such as the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) in Italy and INFORM in England. He suggests that the absence of such organizations in Japan has created a situation where the media is effectively dependent on entities hostile to the [Family Federation](#). This leads undeniably to biased reporting.

The Italian scholar advocates for a more balanced and diverse approach in media reporting, urging the inclusion of perspectives from different sources, including new religious movements themselves.



John Gordon Melton (1942-), American religious scholar who was the founding director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion



Professor Emeritus Susumu Shimazono (1948-), leading Japanese scholar in the field of the sociology of religion



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, April 2023

To present a comprehensive view of the issues at hand, Introvigne discusses the aftermath of the Aum Shinrikyo incident in 1995 and its impact on the perception of scholars in Japan who express sympathy or understanding toward new religious movements. The author points out that, following the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway carried out by Aum Shinrikyo, a peculiar situation arose in Japan. Scholars who participated in symposiums under the auspices of Aum Shinrikyo before the attack, whether Japanese or foreign, were criticized and accused of giving a social endorsement to a criminal group.

The author notes that even when some scholars explained that they were not aware of Aum Shinrikyo's criminal actions when they attended its events, their social credibility was damaged. The consequences for scholars were portrayed as differing between Japan and abroad. Foreign scholars, like Gordon Melton, were said to have faced less severe consequences despite some anti-cult criticism.

In contrast, Japanese scholars, including prominent figures like Professor Emeritus Susumu Shimazono of the University of Tokyo, allegedly had to adopt a different attitude when speaking to the media about new religious movements.

Introvigne suggests that the negative impact of the Aum Shinrikyo incident has created a situation in Japan where scholars sympathetic to new religious movements are not trusted, leading to a lack of neutral and independent organizations similar to those found overseas. The interview also briefly mentions the Dalai Lama's video message to an Aum Shinrikyo event before the sarin gas attack, which is reported by China for propaganda purposes.

Dr. Introvigne shares his impression that, even in Japan, most ordinary believers of Aum were sincere and innocent individuals. However, despite their innocence, these believers were often demonized and blamed for their association with Aum. The scholar acknowledges the bitterness in Japan surrounding scholars of religion and the Aum case.

The Seiron interview also highlights Introvigne's caution and sensitivity when commenting on the [Unification Church](#) in Japan. He explains that he is very careful in his remarks due to the aftermath of the Aum incident. He mentions attending a seminar on religious liberty and the 'cult' issue organized by independent organizations, but expresses potential reluctance to participate if it had been organized by the [Family Federation](#), possibly due to the unique situation in Japan.

Dr. Introvigne suggests that scholars of religion in Japan may be cautious and mindful of their comments about new religious movements, such as the [Unification Church](#), because of the negative repercussions experienced by scholars in the aftermath of the Aum Shinrikyo incident. This cautious approach is presented as a shared sentiment among scholars who navigate the sensitive landscape of discussing religious movements in Japan.

The Italian scholar addresses a concern related to media coverage, specifically focusing on the testimonies of "apostates" in the context of reporting on religious groups. He distinguishes between "former believers" and "apostates", emphasizing that the two categories are different.

A "former believer" is described as someone who has abandoned his faith and left his previous church or religion, a phenomenon that is considered normal as individuals may lose passion for their faith. On the other hand, an "apostate" is characterized as a former believer who actively engages in activities critical

of the denomination they were once a part of.

Introvigne expresses his concern about how Japanese media tends to treat "apostates" and "former believers" as if they were the same. He notes that, in the United States and Europe, many critical books about religious groups are written by apostates. Testimonies of apostates are a peculiar literary genre, often focused more on expressing feelings than objectively presenting facts about the religion they left.

To illustrate the bias in relying solely on the perspective of an apostate, Introvigne uses a parable about a divorce case. The analogy suggests that relying only on one party's perspective (in this case, the ex-wife's story) may introduce emotional biases and may not provide a fair and balanced assessment of the situation.

Overall, Dr. Introvigne encourages a more nuanced approach in media coverage, advocating for a distinction between former believers and apostates and cautioning against relying solely on the emotional testimonies of apostates to understand a particular religion or religious group.



David Bromley

The scholar discusses a more detailed study conducted by David Bromley, an American sociologist of religion, on the distinction between "apostates" and ordinary "former believers" within religious contexts. The key point highlighted is that not all former believers become apostates, and the majority of those who leave a religious organization do not actively attack or criticize their former faith. Introvigne suggests that media often mistakenly uses "former believer" as a synonym for "apostate," contributing to a misleading perception that all individuals who leave a religion harbor resentment or negative feelings towards it.

Massimo Introvigne emphasizes that it is normal for people who leave a religious organization to view that phase of their life differently or as part of their personal growth. However, the media tends to portray apostates as representative of all former believers, creating a distorted image that all individuals leaving a religion have strong negative feelings.



Dr. Eileen Barker, OBE, in 1997

David Bromley's research findings include the observation that people who have experienced forced conversion or deprogramming have a higher likelihood of becoming apostates. The Seiron interview also references Eileen Barker, who likens a new religion to a revolving door, where individuals enter and exit continuously. However, the author notes that the media tends to focus disproportionately on apostates, perpetuating a narrative that all former believers harbor hatred for the religion they left.

Media portrayals often exaggerate the negative sentiments of those who leave a religion, contributing to a distorted public perception of religious organizations like the [Unification Church](#).

More on [article 1](#), [article 2](#), [article 3](#).

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opinion magazine *Seiron* (正論) published in its December 2023 issue a feature article on the **outrageous persecution** of the **Family Federation** (formerly the **Unification Church**) in Japan.

One part of the report by Makiko Takita, well known journalist and editor-in-chief of the magazine, is an interview with Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion and editor-in-chief of **Bitter Winter**, the leading international online magazine on religious freedom and human rights.



The cover front page of *Monthly Seiron* December 2023.



Bitter Winter published this part of the report of *Seiron* on 19th January 2024, as the **third of six parts** of the English version of the original Japanese article.

Read the [whole Bitter Winter article](#). Read more on [article 1](#), [article 2](#), [article 4](#)

In the interview with Dr. Introvigne, he says he is concerned about the legal actions taken against the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification**, formerly the **Unification Church**, in Japan.

The sociologist of religion, famous globally for his work, expresses his worry about the Japanese government's request for a dissolution order against the **Unification Church**, citing that the organization has not committed any crimes in Japan, a democratic country that guarantees freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). He emphasizes that, in his experience working globally to defend freedom of religion or belief, this is the **first time he has seen such a request for dissolution in a democratic country**.

"[...] and it is a great shock to me," the scholar says, expressing his concern about what he perceives as an **unusual and concerning legal action** against the **Unification Church** in Japan.

Introvigne draws comparisons with other countries, mentioning that even in countries where there is criticism of the **Unification Church**, such as the United States and Italy, there is no government action to legally regulate or dissolve the organization. He also contrasts the situation with Russia and China, where religious organizations, including the **Unification Church**, face persecution and dissolution by the government. However, he notes that China and Russia are not democratic regimes, and the criteria for what constitutes a crime differ from those in Japan.



Front page of 2018 English version of *Religious Corporations Act of Japan*.

Massimo Introvigne further discusses the situation in Japan where the government is pursuing the dissolution of the **Unification Church** under the *Religious Corporations Act*. He compares this to the dissolution of an organization called *Artgemeinschaft* in Germany in September 2023.

Introvigne points out that even in democracies, systems for dissolving organizations exist, but their application is typically limited to cases where a crime, punishable under the penal code, has been committed. He provides an example of the dissolution of *Artgemeinschaft* in Germany, which he

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describes as a political organization rooted in Nazism rather than a religious movement. The dissolution of *Artgemeinschaft* was requested based on criminal activities, aligning with the general principle that **dissolutions in democracies are tied to criminal conduct.**

Introvigne emphasizes that the situation in Japan, where the government is seeking to dissolve the **Unification Church** without it having committed any criminal acts, is unique and unusual in a democratic country that upholds freedom of religion. He points out that the current events in Japan are being highlighted in Chinese and Russian media as a form of propaganda, drawing parallels between Japan's actions and those of China in suppressing religious groups. Introvigne explains how the **situation in Japan is being used for propaganda purposes by China and Russia,**



Persecution in China: Tibetan Monks arrested in 2008. Photo (5th April 2008): SFT HQ (Students for a Free Tibet) / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 2.0 Gen. Cropped

"I am the editor-in-chief of a daily web magazine called '**Bitter Winter,**' which covers news about religious freedom violations around the world. I carefully watch the Chinese media, and every week an article about the dissolution of the **Unification Church** in Japan always catches my eye. The articles are full of claims that 'Japan is doing the same thing as China' 'We have been proven right,' 'Cults should be suppressed,' and so on. Similar arguments can be read in the Russian government-affiliated media, and the **current events in Japan are being used for propaganda purposes by China and Russia.** We would do well to keep this in mind."

The Seiron report provides an overview of events surrounding the **Unification Church** in Japan, particularly in the aftermath of the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by an individual with a grudge against the **Unification Church.** Introvigne expresses concerns about the way the government and certain groups have been handling the situation. Certain **important facts about the assassin seem to have been ignored completely by the media.** The general public appears to have been given a **slanted picture of the situation.** The Italian scholar points out,

"I noted that **the man [the assassin] had been interacting with journalists and other opponents of the Unification Church on social media before the incident.** Obviously, I do not believe that they encouraged him to kill Abe, but I wonder if they might have **excited his hostility** to punish the **Unification Church.** Why did the man commit such a heinous act? I do not believe that this has been fully clarified."

And straightaway after the assassination on 8th July 2022, the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* (全国霊感商法対策弁護士連絡会), a group of largely leftwing activist lawyers who have been fierce opponents of the **Unification Church** for decades, called a press conference

where they **blamed the church** for what had happened.

Dr. Introvigne describes the tactic of the network of lawyers as a **“reversal phenomenon”**. **The perceived victim becomes the perpetrator, and the alleged perpetrator is treated as a victim**. The scholar mentions similar cases in South Korea and Germany where so-called anti-cult movements attempted to **shift blame** onto religious organizations,



Kingdom Hall in Hamburg-Alsterdorf, ten days after the killing spree on 9th March 2023: damaged door, flowers and candles. Photo: NordNordWest / Wikimedia Commons. Licence: CC ASA 3.0 Germany

“Last March [2023] in Germany, a former member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses broke into a place of worship of this religion, called Kingdom Hall, and killed eight people with a gun. Then, some members of the anti-cult movement, which opposes Jehovah’s Witnesses, came forward and criticized the religion, saying that the cause of the incident was that ‘the Jehovah’s Witnesses have continued to abuse this man,’ and called for the religious organization to bear the brunt of the blame. The anti-cult movement deflected the blame from the mistakes of the authorities [who had given a license to carry weapons to a mentally disturbed man] and tried to create a campaign against the Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Introvigne **criticizes the Japanese government for joining forces with the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales** (全国霊感商法対策弁護士連絡会) in various procedures related to a dissolution order against the **Unification Church**. He argues that such collaboration between the government and a so-called anti-cult movement is ideologically and politically strange.

The scholar says,

“Only in Japan has the **government totally jumped on the bandwagon**. In Korea and Germany, the media reports on the voices of anti-cult movements, and this can cause a lot of commotion. Sometimes there are campaigns to condemn these groups as ‘cults.’ However, there is no example of a democratic government reacting to such a campaign and moving toward the dissolution of the organization.”

Dr. Massimo Introvigne **denounces the Japanese government for all of a sudden changing its policy** and allowing cases of tortious conduct to be sufficient ground for dissolving a religious organization. He explains,

“If religious corporations can be dissolved for torts under civil law, there is **no such thing as a safe organization**. This shows that this **was not a legal decision, but a political decision**. What the Japanese government has done is a **clear violation of the principle of religious freedom**. It is a move that should be strongly condemned.”





Blatant discrimination: "Colored" drinking fountain from mid-20th century with African-American drinking from water cooler in streetcar terminal, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA. Photo (1939): Russell Lee (1903-1986) / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image

Introvigne contends that the Japanese government's decision to pursue the dissolution of the [Unification Church](#) is a violation of the principle of religious freedom. He expresses concern that this move **may have a ripple effect and set a precedent for private entities to discriminate** against the [Unification Church](#),

"and start saying, 'We will have nothing to do with them.' This is undeniable **religious discrimination**, which is unacceptable in light of international law, which stipulates that there shall be no discrimination based on ideology, creed, religion, or other such grounds."

Introvigne **questions the legitimacy of the government's decision**, stating that it appears to be a political decision rather than a legal one.

In fact, there have already been **instances of discriminatory incidents** in Japan, such as local governments refusing to rent public facilities to independent organizations connected with the [Family Federation](#) or passing resolutions to sever relations with such organizations in local government councils.

And what makes matters worse in Japan, is the fact that there might be **collusion between the Japanese government and the courts**. For more on that particular issue, see [Does Japan Have an Independent Judiciary?](#)

More on [part 2 of the interview](#) (part 4 of the *Seiron* report).

More on [article 1](#), [article 2](#), [article 4](#) in the *Seiron* report.

Featured image above: Dr. Massimo Introvigne in April 2023. Photo: [FOREF](#)

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