

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Landmark 2025 Court Ruling - *Cult* Label Is Defamation

Knut Holdhus
July 30, 2025



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, here speaking in Geneva, Switzerland on 16th June 2025

The new religious movement Soka Gakkai wins key defamation case against anti-cult group in landmark ruling in Italian court June 2025



In a major legal and moral victory for religious freedom in Europe, the Justice Court of Florence has delivered a resounding judgment in favor of Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based new religious movement, affirming the right of religious communities to practice and operate without being subject to defamatory attacks.



Corsico - Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute, the Italian branch of the Soka Gakkai International Nichiren Buddhist organization 2015)

Bitter Winter, the leading international online magazine for human rights and religious freedom, reported the case on 25th July in an article headlined "[Italian Anti-Cult Association Sentenced to Pay Euro 35,000 for Defaming Soka Gakkai](#)". The article was written by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion and editor-in-chief of [Bitter Winter](#).

As he writes, the court ruled on 16th June 2025, that the Italian Association of Cult Victims (AIVS), a

leading anti-cult organization, and its two key figures, must pay €35,247 in damages for defaming the Italian branch of Soka Gakkai. This ruling is not just a legal resolution of a specific conflict; it is a meaningful precedent for all minority religious groups facing discrimination under the guise of "cult-busting."

At the heart of this case lies a profound and often overlooked issue: the power of language to marginalize, stigmatize, and criminalize peaceful belief systems. The court specifically found that the repeated use of the term *seta* - the Italian equivalent of "cult," with strong pejorative implications - to describe Soka Gakkai was not only inappropriate but inherently defamatory.



From the opening of the judicial year 1st May 2021 at the European Court of Human Rights

This follows the 2022 European Court of Human Rights decision in *Tonchev v. Bulgaria*, which determined that similar terminology carries a defamatory weight incompatible with the protection of religious rights under the European Convention on Human Rights.

The implications of this are profound. It challenges the deeply ingrained practices of anti-cult organizations across Europe that frequently weaponize emotionally charged language to delegitimize religious minorities. It also signals that courts are increasingly willing to recognize that such rhetoric is not simply free speech but harmful defamation when it undermines public trust and sows prejudice against legitimate religious organizations.



Matteo Renzi, Prime Minister of Italy 2014-2016

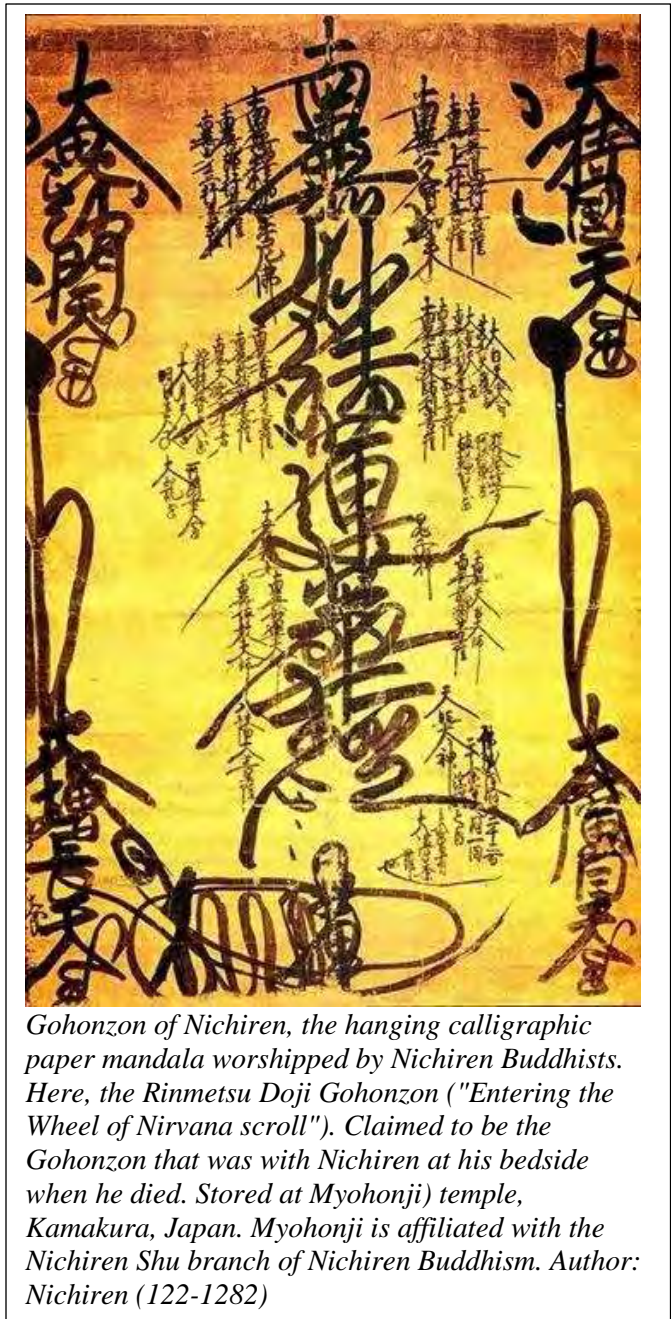
The ruling also exposes the fragility of the factual claims made by AIVS. Among their most inflammatory accusations was the claim that Soka Gakkai secured its *Intesa* - a formal agreement with the Italian government granting legal recognition and access to public funds - through bribery involving former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. The court found this allegation to be not only baseless but factually impossible, as the legislative process began before Renzi's premiership and was supported across political lines, including by those hostile to his administration. This kind of unfounded claim is emblematic of the tactics used by some anti-cult actors who rely on innuendo and conspiracy rather than verifiable facts.

In addition, AIVS accused Soka Gakkai of financial opacity, particularly in how it used state-allocated funds from taxpayer designations. Here, too, the court found the claims entirely false, noting that Soka Gakkai's financial reports are exemplary, even

when compared to other religious groups with similar arrangements. Such transparency undermines any rational basis for AIVS's allegations and highlights the destructive intent behind their campaign.

Perhaps most troubling was AIVS's dissemination of explicitly offensive material, including a YouTube video advocating the burning of the Gohonzon [See editor's note below], Soka Gakkai's central object of devotion, on the grounds that it "brings bad luck". This crosses any reasonable line of criticism or religious commentary and enters the realm of religious hatred and incitement. That such actions were committed in public spaces underscores the importance of legal recourse for minority faiths under threat.

The Florence court's decision should be applauded as a defense of pluralism, dignity, and coexistence. In a time when religious minorities remain vulnerable to social and legal exclusion, this case affirms that they too are entitled to legal protections against defamation, slander, and hate. For Soka Gakkai - and by extension, all communities seeking recognition without persecution - this ruling is more than compensation; it is validation. And for Europe, it is a step closer to upholding its ideals of freedom, tolerance, and justice for all.



Gohonzon of Nichiren, the hanging calligraphic paper mandala worshipped by Nichiren Buddhists. Here, the Rinmetsu Doji Gohonzon ("Entering the Wheel of Nirvana scroll"). Claimed to be the Gohonzon that was with Nichiren at his bedside when he died. Stored at Myohonji) temple, Kamakura, Japan. Myohonji is affiliated with the Nichiren Shu branch of Nichiren Buddhism. Author: Nichiren (122-1282)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[**Editor's note:** The Gohonzon embodies the fundamental law of the universe - Nam-myoho-renge-kyo - and symbolizes the innate Buddha nature present in all people. Practitioners chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and recite sections of the Lotus Sutra while facing the Gohonzon, believing that this practice awakens their inherent enlightenment and empowers them to confront and transform life's difficulties.]

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Italian Anti-Cult Association Sentenced to Pay Euro 35,000 for Defaming Soka Gakkai

07/25/2025 MASSIMO INTROVIGNE

A+ | A-

The Court of Florence established the critical principle that calling a religious movement a "cult" ("setta" in Italian) is defamation in itself.

by Massimo Introvigne



The headquarters of the Italian branch of Soka Gakkai in Rome.

On June 16, 2025, the Justice Court of Florence, in a decision whose grounds have now been published, sentenced the Italian Association of Cult Victims (AIVS), a leading Italian anti-cult association, and its two leaders, to pay Euro 35,247 to the Italian branch of Soka Gakkai for defamation.

They had settled a previous case with Soka Gakkai through a letter of apology in 2020. However, these anti-cultists are, by definition, incorrigible. In 2021, AIVS and its leaders attacked Soka Gakkai again through social media and interviews with Italian daily newspapers.

The Italian branch of Soka Gakkai entered into an "Intesa" (Agreement) with the Italian government in 2015. Intesa is the name given in Italy to concordats with religions other than the Roman Catholic Church (which has a "Concordato"). These agreements give religious organizations certain benefits, including allowing taxpayers to allocate a percentage of their taxes to them.

AIVS claimed that Soka Gakkai had obtained its "Intesa" by bribing then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. The court found the statement defamatory and noted no evidence of bribes. Additionally, proceedings for the "Intesa" were started before Renzi became Prime Minister. The MP who introduced the law ratifying the Intesa was part of the opposition to PM Renzi. The Parliament voted for the law unanimously, including groups and parties vehemently opposed to the Renzi government.

As a consequence of the "Intesa," Soka Gakkai started receiving from the government its percentage of taxes based on the choices indicated by taxpayers on their tax returns. AIVS claimed that Soka Gakkai failed to report how this money was spent. The court characterized this as a blatant lie. Soka Gakkai reports regularly on how its "Intesa" money is spent. Its reports are even regarded as exemplary with respect to those of other religions.



Then Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi signs the "Intesa" with Soka Gakkai, June 27, 2015.

Third, AIVS repeatedly called Soka Gakkai a "setta," the Italian derogatory term to be translated as "cult" (not as "sect," which has a different meaning in English). In an essential part of the decision, which may influence cases concerning other religious minorities, the court stated that "the term 'setta' (cult) has an undeniably negative connotation and is offensive in itself." This aligns with the most recent case law of the European Court of Human Rights, which in 2022 in the case "[Tonchev v. Bulgaria](#)" ruled that the equivalent Bulgarian term "sekti" is inherently offensive.

The court considered AIVS' criticism to be particularly vulgar. AIVS even posted a video on YouTube calling to burn the main object of devotion of Soka Gakkai, the "Gohonzon," claiming it "brings bad luck."



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E

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-Resistente-

The first page of the decision of June 16, 2025 by the Court of Florence.

AIVS' defense was that it did not invent its slander of Soka Gakkai but took it from foreign anti-cult sources. This defense saved AIVS from the interim measures Soka Gakkai had solicited in 2022 to stop the defamation campaign while the main proceedings were pending. The court "strongly disagrees" with this interim decision, reaffirming the principle that repeating defamation taken from another source is still defamation. The fact that the victim has not sued others who spread the defamation first does not authorize anybody to repeat their slanderous statements.

The significant amount AIVS should pay may perhaps persuade anti-cultists to be more cautious in the future. However, a leopard cannot change its spots.

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TAGGED WITH: ANTI-CULT, ITALY, RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, SOKA GAKKAI

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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