

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Being Free During Japan's Ongoing Inquisition

Knut Holdhus
June 3, 2026



Nozomi Kojima (right), representative of the Association of Second-Generation Believers Protecting the Human Rights of Believers, and Itaq (center), a second-generation member of Happy Science, attend a talk event on the afternoon of May 31, 2026 in Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo



Second-generation believers raise concerns over treatment of religious minorities as they wonder if they will stay free to live their faith in climate where more and more become "subjects of surveillance"

Tokyo, 1st June 2026 - Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

What Is Being Suppressed Is "Religious Faith"

Second-Generation Believers Hold Talk Event

by editorial staff of [Sekai Nippo](#)

A talk event titled "How to Remain Free in an Age of Inquisition" (organized by Jokyo Publishing) was held in Tokyo on 31st May 2026. Participants, including second-generation members [See editor's note 1 below] of religious organizations, exchanged views on religion and freedom of belief in contemporary society.

Nozomi Kojima (小嶋希晶), a second-generation believer of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)) and representative of the Association of Second-Generation Believers Protecting the Human Rights of Believers, spoke at the event. Referring to the intense media criticism of the [religious organization](#) over issues such as large donations following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), Kojima said:

"It is important to focus on victims, but people also have the freedom to make donations, and not everyone involved is unhappy. The media could have reported on the issue in a more balanced way. Because of biased reporting, there have been cases of people being fired from their jobs, bullied at university, and even driven to suicide."

According to Kojima, second-generation believers from religious organizations other than the [Family Federation](#) have also begun supporting the association's activities. She stated:

"Being dissolved when it is not even clear whether there are legitimate grounds for dissolution is

not someone else's problem. Some people feel a sense of crisis, wondering whether the religious organization they belong to could be targeted next."



Professor Masaki Nakamasa
(Dec. 2025)

Participating online, Masaki Nakamasa (仲正昌樹), a professor at Kanazawa University and a former member of the [religious organization](#), commented:

"One should not judge a religion based on feelings that it is 'creepy' or on speculation that it might harm others. Such judgments should remain matters of personal subjective opinion. Restraining those impulses is the essence of a modern liberal society."

He continued:

"What is abnormal about Japan's litigation of the former [Unification Church](#) is the introduction of the idea that something must be done about a 'dangerous religion'. If this is left unchecked, more and more people will gradually become subjects of surveillance."

Itaq, a rapper and second-generation believer of Happy Science (幸福の科学) [See editor's note 2 below], argued:

"In contemporary Japanese society, the object of suppression is not so much a particular organization as the religious faith that exists in people's hearts."

He suggested that faith is often criticized because:

"People fear that it may disrupt social order."

At the same time, he emphasized:

"Faith is also what can present new possibilities for improving society. It is unacceptable for the state to attempt to suppress that spirit."

[Editor's note 1: The term 宗教二世 (shūkyō nisei, literally "second-generation religious believer") generally refers to people who were raised in a religion by parents who belonged to a religious organization, rather than joining it themselves as adults.]



Master Ryuho Okawa speaking at
Osaka Shoshinkan, Japan, 15th
February 2015

[Editor's note 2: Happy Science (幸福の科学, Kōfuku no Kagaku) is a Japanese new religious movement founded in 1986 by Ryuho Okawa ((大川 隆法 - 1956 - 2023). It teaches that spiritual truth can be discovered through the study of universal laws governing happiness, personal growth, and the development of the soul. The movement's central concept is the pursuit of happiness through the principles of love, wisdom, self-reflection, and progress.

Okawa claimed to receive spiritual messages from a wide range of historical, religious, and even contemporary figures, including founders of major world religions and notable public figures. These claimed revelations became a major part of Happy Science's teachings and publishing activities. The organization has produced hundreds of books, lectures, films, and educational materials, making it one of Japan's most prolific religious publishing enterprises.

Happy Science presents itself as a universal religion that incorporates elements of Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, New Thought spirituality, and other traditions. It teaches reincarnation, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of

spiritual beings and higher-dimensional worlds. Followers engage in study, prayer, meditation-like practices, and attendance at lectures and ceremonies.

The movement has expanded internationally, establishing branches in numerous countries. It has also

been involved in politics through the Happiness Realization Party, founded in 2009, which advocates conservative, nationalist, and economically liberal policies, though it has achieved limited electoral success.

Scholars generally classify Happy Science as a new religious movement rather than a traditional Buddhist sect. It has attracted both devoted followers and substantial criticism. Critics have questioned its spiritual claims, organizational practices, and political activities, while supporters view it as a source of moral guidance, spiritual meaning, and personal development.]

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Beyond Dissolution: A Religious Purge In Japan?

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Religious purge looming in modern Japan as hostile activists who are advisors to the government want to go much further than mere dissolution

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Settlements

Bitter Winter, the world's leading online magazine on human rights and religious liberty, published on 1st June 2026 an [article](#) by international human rights lawyer Patricia Duval. She examines developments in Japan following the dissolution order issued against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). Her central argument is that the controversy has moved beyond questions of organizational misconduct and entered a broader struggle over the right of believers to continue practicing their faith.



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

See also [How to Remain Free in an Age of Inquisition](#)

According to Duval, the measures advocated by some activist lawyers and hardliner opponents of the [religious organization](#) risk extending far beyond the dissolution of a legal entity and could affect fundamental freedoms protected under international human rights standards. Duval writes,

“Under the influence of such a lobby, several measures have been proposed or already implemented, particularly regarding the continued religious practice of individual believers or groups of believers, as well as the ‘issue’ of minors raised in their parents’ faith, which is considered ‘child abuse related to religious belief’.”

The [article](#) situates the debate within the wider framework of religious liberty,

“This form of witch hunt – or religious purge – in a modern democracy, disguised as a campaign against ‘cults’, poses a real threat to freedom of conscience and the freedom to practice the religion of one’s choice, as well as to the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, all of which are protected by the treaties Japan committed to uphold after the end of World War II.”



Not content with a mere dissolution order, pursuing policies that would restrict the religion itself, its adherents, and its ability to function as a community of believers: Leading exponents of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales: attorneys Hiroshi Yamaguchi (left) and Masaki Kito (right). *Bitter Winter* / Screenshot.

Duval argues that these rights remain applicable even when a religious organization loses its legal status. She contends that some critics of the [Family Federation](#) are not merely seeking remedies for specific alleged abuses but are pursuing policies that would restrict the religion itself, its adherents, and its ability to function as a community of believers.

A major theme of the [article](#) is the distinction between punishing unlawful conduct by individuals and suppressing the religious activities of an entire faith community. Duval



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maintains that international human rights principles generally require these two issues to be treated separately. In her view, the dissolution decision has been followed by calls for additional measures that would limit fundraising, communal worship, religious education within families, and the ability of believers to organize themselves. She characterizes these proposals as elements of a broader anti-heresy campaign.

The Reaction to the Dissolution Order

Duval begins by noting that opponents of the [Family Federation](#) welcomed the Tokyo High Court's [dissolution order](#) issued in March 2026. However, she says many critics quickly expressed dissatisfaction because the [decision](#) did not amount to a complete prohibition of the religion in Japan.

According to the [article](#), some anti-[Federation](#) activists serving as advisors to the government argued that the dissolution of the [organization](#) was only a first step. They maintained that believers could continue gathering, teaching their faith, and engaging in missionary activities even after the legal entity had been dissolved. For these critics, Duval writes, this remaining religious activity represented an unresolved problem.

She argues that certain opponents view the [Family Federation](#) differently from traditional religious groups that may occasionally engage in misconduct. In their assessment, the issue is not simply problematic practices that could be corrected but rather the doctrines of the religion itself. These critics reportedly regard the [Federation's](#) teachings as inherently problematic, calling it "heretical", and its evangelizing efforts as a form of psychological manipulation they label as "mind control" [[See editor's note 1 below](#)].

Duval contends that this perspective advocated by hostile lobbyists has encouraged proposals aimed not only at regulating organizations but also at restricting the activities of individual believers and informal groups of worshippers. She further argues that those lobbyists have increasingly focused on children raised within the faith, with some critics characterizing such religious upbringing as a form of abuse. In her view, these developments raise serious questions regarding religious freedom in a democratic society.

The Anti-Heresy Alliance



From an information stand organized by International Federation for Victory over Communism (IFVOC) in Japan in the 1970s, during the Cold War period. IFVOC was founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) in 1968 in Seoul, South Korea. Photo: IFVOC

A significant portion of the [article](#) examines the role of the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* (NNLASS). Duval describes the activist network as having historical connections with leftwing lawyers who opposed what was then called the [Unification Church](#) during the Cold War period, when [Church](#) members were active in campaigns against communism in East Asia.

She explains that NNLASS later cooperated with Protestant pastors who regarded the [Unification Church](#) as a theological rival. According to the [article](#), this alliance

continued for decades and became involved in efforts to coerce members to leave the [Church](#).

Duval discusses the controversial practice of faith-breaking [\[See editor's note 2 below\]](#), commonly referred to as “deprogramming”, whereby believers were allegedly abducted or confined by relatives and pressured to renounce their faith through coercive counseling and religious instruction. She states that Japanese authorities long treated these incidents as private family matters rather than religious freedom concerns.



From header of the [webpage](#) of the Human Rights Committee, a subpage on the site of the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner

The [article](#) notes that international attention was eventually drawn to the issue. Duval points out that the *United Nations Human Rights Committee* urged Japan in 2014 to take stronger action against such practices. She presents this history as an important backdrop for understanding current debates about the treatment of [Family Federation](#) members.

Calls for Stronger Restrictions

Following the High Court's [dissolution decision](#), Duval writes, NNLASS publicly welcomed the [ruling](#) while arguing that additional legal reforms were necessary.

According to the [article](#), the lawyers contend that fundraising associated with the [Family Federation](#) should continue to be regulated even if conducted by informal groups or individual believers rather than by a recognized religious corporation. Their position rests on the argument that [Federation](#) members allegedly influence potential donors in ways that compromise genuine freedom of choice, “leading them to make donations as instructed.”

Duval strongly disputes this characterization. She argues that it is based on the theory of “mind control” [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#), which she describes as lacking scientific credibility and having been rejected by courts in many jurisdictions. From her perspective, the notion that believers can fundamentally alter another person's value system through religious persuasion does not provide a sound basis for restricting religious activity.



From the UN webpage for the [1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](#),

The [article](#) therefore criticizes proposals by the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* (NNLASS) to amend donation laws in ways that would apply not only to organizations but also to ordinary believers acting independently. Duval argues that such measures would effectively prevent adherents from supporting their own religious community financially. The Paris-based human rights lawyer explains,

“Even if the [Church](#) had committed wrongdoing

Even if the Church had committed wrongdoing, only the individuals involved could be punished, and the practice of religion should not be affected.

Yet>NNLASS lawyers want to go further than dissolution and prevent the religious practice by individuals or groups of faithful, and forbid the raising of necessary donations to fund their activities, in violation of the right to 'establish and maintain religious institutions' protected by international human rights instruments, in particular the [1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](#), Article 6(f): 'The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief includes the freedom to solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions!'

See also [How to Remain Free in an Age of Inquisition](#)

Text: *Knut Holdhus, editor*

Featured image above: *Attorney Patricia Duval speaking at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland 16th June 2025. She is an attorney admitted to the Paris Bar with a Master's degree in Public Law from the University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. She specializes in international human rights law and has extensive experience advocating for the rights of religious and belief minorities before national and international bodies.*

Her work has included engagement with institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union, and the United Nations. In addition to her legal practice, she has authored numerous academic publications on freedom of religion or belief. Photo: Screenshot from video recording by UPF. Image resolution improved by Grok xAI, June 2026.

[Editor's note 1: In Japan, the **"mind-control" myth** has been a powerful tool used to stigmatize and suppress new religious movements (NRMs), particularly since the 1980s. The concept suggests that NRMs manipulate or "brainwash" their followers, depriving them of free will and rational thought. This narrative gained traction after the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack, when public fear of dangerous cults intensified. Although Aum was an extreme and violent exception, the incident cast suspicion on all NRMs, allowing critics, media, and the government to label diverse groups as manipulative or psychologically coercive.

The "mind-control" myth serves multiple social and political functions. It simplifies complex questions of belief, making it easier to portray converts as victims rather than as individuals exercising spiritual agency. This framing justifies legal and social intervention, including the coercive **"deprogramming"** of believers – sometimes involving confinement or psychological pressure to force renunciation of faith. Lawyers, ex-member groups, and certain media outlets have used the idea of mind control to construct NRMs as threats to family stability and national order, reinforcing social conformity and Japan's preference for established, non-controversial religions such as Buddhism and Shinto.

In recent years, the myth resurfaced following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose attacker cited resentment toward the [Family Federation](#). A public outrage largely created by media reignited scrutiny of NRMs, and politicians and journalists revived "mind-control" rhetoric to explain fundraising and recruitment practices. Critics argue that this framing discourages genuine religious tolerance and critical examination of Japan's restrictive religious climate. Overall, the "mind-control" myth functions less as a scientific or psychological

concept and more as a moral panic – a cultural weapon used to delegitimize minority faiths and to reaffirm mainstream social norms about religion, obedience, and the boundaries of acceptable belief.]

[Editor's note 2: 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: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp. Cropped*

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.]

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