FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Massimo Introvigne on Dark Practice Returns to S Korea

Knut Holdhus
November 1, 2026



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



Dr. Massimo Introvigne in April 2023

New cases of abduction and coercion suggest the practice of coercive faith-breaking (deprogramming) is far from over

Part 1 of new 4-part series

Recent abductions, confinement, and coercive de-conversion attempts suggest that a practice once condemned after a young woman's death may be gaining new momentum.

The practice of forcibly breaking the faith [See editor's note 1 below] of members of unpopular religious movements appears to be making a comeback in South Korea. According to new information presented by Italian sociologist of religion Dr. Massimo Introvigne, incidents involving abducting religious believers, confining them, and coercively breaking their faith [See editor's note 1 below] have stopped declining and may now be increasing.

The issue is particularly concerning for members of Shincheonji [See editor's note 2 below], the World Mission Society Church of God [See editor's note 3 below], the Christian Gospel Mission (Providence) [See editor's note 4 below], and other minority religious movements.

In an article published by Bitter Winter on 30th October 2026, Introvigne describes how a network of Protestant pastors, anti-cult activists, and lawyers in South Korea and Japan may be contributing to the renewed activity. He also points to a changing political climate that, in his assessment, has encouraged anti-cult activists to become more confident.

What is coercive deprogramming or faith-breaking? [See editor's note 1 below] It is a practice in which adult members of religious movements are abducted, often by their own parents, and confined against their will until they agree to abandon their faith.

The process may involve isolation from friends and fellow believers, psychological pressure, threats, physical violence, and intensive religious instruction intended to make the individual renounce his or her

religious convictions.

Although the practice originated in the United States, courts in North America and Europe largely brought it to an end before the close of the twentieth century.



Four of the 4,300 Japanese members of the Family Federation who became victims of state-permitted kidnapping, forcible detention and attempted deprogramming (faith-breaking). Here at a conference in Tokyo 10th September 2023. Toru Goto is first from the left, Hirohisa Koide second, Hiromi Nakajima fourth

Japan became one of the countries where it survived longest. More than 4,000 members of the Unification Church, now known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, were reportedly subjected to such practices.

One particularly notorious case involved Toru Goto (後藤徹), who was confined for more than twelve years. In 2014, the Tokyo High Court held those responsible for his confinement liable, and Japan's Supreme Court confirmed the decision in 2015. Following these rulings, coercive faith-breaking (deprogramming) [See editor's note 1 below] in Japan largely ceased.

South Korea, however, followed a different path.

A tragic death that shocked the country

South Korean courts have sometimes punished pastors who directly participated in violent confinement. However, parents who locked up their adult sons and daughters after receiving advice from religious counsellors have frequently avoided prosecution. Police officers called to intervene have also sometimes treated such incidents as private family disputes.

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). The nine commissioners of the Commission are appointed by the President of the United States and the congressional leadership of both political parties

One case brought international attention to the problem.

In December 2017, Shincheonji [See editor's note 2 below] member Gu Ji-in (구지인) was abducted by her parents for the second time. She was taken to a remote accommodation facility, where her father bound and gagged her to prevent her escape.

She suffocated, was declared brain-dead, and died in January 2018.

Her death triggered widespread protests in South Korea and international criticism. Both the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and the US Department of State subsequently addressed the issue.

The tragedy made deprogrammers (faith-breakers) more cautious, and the number of reported cases began to decline.

A disturbing reversal in the statistics

However, figures collected by human rights advocates connected

with Shincheonji [See editor's note 2 below] and shared with Bitter Winter suggest that this downward trend may have come to an end.

Between 1st January 2003, and 15th October 2026, the advocates documented 2,205 cases of coercive conversion involving Shincheonji members.

Age Group	Male	Female	Total	% of Total
20s	4 cases	8 cases	12 cases	70.6%
30s	1 case	3 cases	4 cases	23.5%
40s	0 cases	1 case	1 case	5.9%
Total	5 cases (29.4%)	12 cases (70.6%)	17 cases	100%

Shincheonji deprogramming (faith-breaking) cases between January 1 and October 15, 2026.

The annual number increased from just one recorded case in 2003 to 151 in 2013 and 179 in 2016.

After the death of Gu Ji-in (구지인), the figures fell to 131 in 2018 and 127 in 2019. There was a temporary increase to 191 cases in 2020, when Shincheonji [See editor's note 2 below] was widely blamed in South Korea for the COVID-19 epidemic.

The subsequent decline continued, with 88 cases in 2022, 64 in 2023, 69 in 2024, and 57 in 2025.

But by 15th October 2026, another 55 cases had already been recorded.

The figures suggest that the decline has stopped, even though the year was not yet over.

Of the 55 victims documented in 2026, 42 were women and 13 were men. Seventeen people, or approximately 31 percent, were physically confined. Twelve of those confined were women, and twelve were in their twenties.

Restrictions on communication were reported in 52 cases. These included confiscated mobile phones and isolation from friends and fellow believers. Verbal abuse was also reported in 52 cases.

Among the locations identified by victims was a guesthouse owned by a Protestant church. According to their accounts, the building was designed so that occupants could not open the doors from the inside.

Personal testimonies reveal the human cost



European human-rights and religious-freedom organizations raising concerns about what it sees as a broader deterioration in freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression in South Korea: From a press conference held at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on 7th August 2026, from left to right: Thierry Valle, president of CAP Liberté de Conscience, Márk Nemes, deputy director of CESNUR, Hans Noot, associate director of HRWF, Michael Langhans, executive director of FOREF Germany, Massimo Introvigne, managing director of CESNUR and editor-in-chief of Bitter Winter

In his article, Introvigne also describes several testimonies he examined during a visit to South Korea earlier in October.

One young woman was followed by her parents after they discovered that she attended Shincheonji [See editor's note 2 below]. They forcibly took her from the church and confined her in the family home for three days. During that time, she was reportedly insulted, threatened, deprived of sleep, and subjected to intensive conversion instruction. Her father threatened her with a knife, while her mother forcibly cut her hair.

Another woman was pressured to leave her rented accommodation and return to her parents' home. Her mother allegedly struck her legs with a pole taken from a clothes rack.

The family demanded that she pay them monthly for the rest of her mother's life if she wished to continue attending Shincheonji [See editor's note 2 below]. They also demanded that she sign financial documents, report her daily movements, and install an application allowing them to track her location in real time.

In another case, a male believer was threatened with a knife and told that his ankles would be broken unless he left Shincheonji [See editor's note 2 below]. His family had also hired a lawyer and presented him with documents intended to change his family register and make him relinquish a gift of shares.

Other believers reported economic boycotts organized by local churches and exclusion from professional associations.

A changing political climate

Introvigne believes that the political atmosphere has contributed to the renewed confidence of anti-cult activists.

Following the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) in July 2022, Japan launched an intense campaign against the Family Federation, eventually resulting in its dissolution order.



Two religious heads (Mother Han and Son Hyun-bo) in long-term detention in South Korea in flagrant violation of religious freedom and democratic rights. Illustration

In South Korea, the government of President Lee Jae-myung (이재명) has also pursued action against groups described as "heretical cults". This campaign led to the arrests of Family Federation leader Hak Ja Han (한학자) in September 2025 and Shincheonji Chairman Lee Man-hee in June 2026.

According to Introvigne, pastors who had become more cautious following the Gu Ji-in (구지인) tragedy may now believe that the authorities are more sympathetic to their activities.

A further incident reported by a regional Korean newspaper on 14th October illustrates the difficulties involved. Police located an adult woman and three members of her family living together in a villa, apparently isolated from the outside world for approximately a week while the family attempted to make her change her religious activities.

The woman told police that she was not being confined and did not want anyone punished. However, officers indicated that they would continue monitoring the situation.

For Introvigne, this illustrates a central problem: people subjected to pressure by their own families may be reluctant or unable to speak freely while still under their control.

The renewed reports raise serious questions about the protection of religious freedom in South Korea. The issue also leads to a more troubling question: who is organizing, training, and supporting the people carrying out these coercive faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below] activities?

As Introvigne's investigation suggests, the answer leads to a network extending beyond South Korea's borders.

Source: Based on Massimo Introvigne, "Deprogramming Returns: The Korea-Japan-China Axis of Evil in Action", Bitter Winter, 30th October 2026.

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

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.]

[Editor's note 2: Shincheonji, officially known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee (이만희), who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation.

Shincheonji teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee (이만희) has received divine revelation to interpret it. He teaches that South Korea is the location where the prophecies of the Book of Revelation are actively playing out in real-time, making it the epicenter of the final harvest. Shincheonji focuses on filling the literal 144,000 slots of the 12 Tribes mentioned in Revelation. Once this number of truly sealed, flawless believers is completed, they believe they will rule as kings and priests over the rest of humanity.]

[Editor's note 3: The World Mission Society Church of God (WMSCOG) is a South Korean Christian movement founded in 1964 by Ahn Sahng-hong (안상홍 - 1918 - 1985). Its distinctive teachings include the belief that Ahn Sahng-hong (안상홍) was Christ returned to Earth and that God exists as both God the

Father and God the Mother. The church believes that Zahng Gil-jah (장길자, born 1943) is the literal embodiment of God the Mother. The church emphasizes the Bible, observance of the Saturday Sabbath and biblical festivals, particularly Passover, which it considers essential to salvation. Headquartered in South Korea, it has expanded internationally, establishing congregations in numerous countries. Its members also participate in volunteer activities, including environmental projects and community service.]

[Editor's note 4: The Christian Gospel Mission (CGM), also known as Providence or JMS (Jesus Morning Star), is a South Korean Christian new religious movement founded by Jung Myung-seok (정명석 - also romanized as Jeong Myeong-seok) in the late 1970s. It emphasizes Bible study, personal spiritual development and a distinctive interpretation of Christian scripture, often taught through a series of 30 lessons. Jung has been regarded by followers as a specially chosen messianic figure. The movement has expanded internationally, particularly among young people and university students. It has attracted considerable controversy because of serious sexual abuse allegations against its founder, who was sentenced to 17 years in prison by South Korea's Supreme Court in January 2025.]

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Harassing Faith Minorities: Frankenstein Effect

October 31, 2026 • The News Desk

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Expert scholar warns that South Korean campaigns against minority faiths are unleashing a Frankenstein monster that eventually turns against the campaigners

Part 4 *of 4-part series*

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***Dr. Massimo Introvigne**, here speaking at an internet conference on 24th September 2026. Screenshot from live transmission by HJ International Graduate School for Peace and Public Leadership in New York.*

religious freedom, and the unintended consequences of campaigns against minority religions.

See also A Dark Practice Returns in South Korea 2026

Campaigns against minority religions can have consequences beyond their original targets. In South Korea, where evangelical anti-heresy activists have long criticized religious movements such as the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* and Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below], Dr. Massimo Introvigne argues that the political climate has taken an unexpected turn: some conservative Christian groups that once supported anti-cult campaigns have themselves come under pressure from the authorities.

In an article published by *Bitter Winter* on 27th October, Introvigne presents this development as a warning about the potential consequences of expanding state intervention in religious affairs.

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

His argument is part of a broader analysis of cooperation between Korean anti-cult activists, Japanese campaigners, and Chinese Communist Party-linked organizations. But his concluding concern is domestic as well as international: the methods and ideas used against one religious group may eventually be applied to others.

From minority religions to conservative churches

South Korea's anti-cult movement developed partly out of disputes between established Protestant churches and newer religious movements. Pastors and anti-heresy organizations sought to prevent members from leaving their congregations and joining groups they regarded as theologically alluring.

Over time, some activists supported more direct intervention, including efforts to compel members of minority religions to abandon their beliefs – known as coercive faith-breaking or deprogramming [See editor's note 2 below]. Introvigne has argued that these practices, together with international cooperation among anti-cult campaigners, helped create a climate in which restrictive measures against religious minorities could gain political support.

Under President Lee Jae-myung(이재명), however, Introvigne sees a significant complication. He writes that the government has taken harsh measures against the Family Federation and Shincheonji [See editor's note 1 below] while also turning against conservative evangelical churches whose leaders oppose the president on issues including LGBT-related questions.



***Taken harsh measures** against the Family Federation and Shincheonji as well as turning against conservative evangelical churches: President **Lee Jae-myung** (이재명) of South Korea, here in Busan 30th Sep. 2025. Photo: 首相官邸ホームページ / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 4.0 Int. Cropped*



***Detained and sentenced** for speaking his conservative vies from the pulpit: Pastor **Son Hyun-bo** (손현보) of the Segyero Church in Busan, South Korea. Son is educated within the contry's conservative Presbyterian tradition. Photo: 순복음위드교회 (Full Gospel WITH Church) / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 3.0 Unp. Cropped*

The author cites several examples. Authorities raided *Yoido Full Gospel Church*, which later reached an accommodation with the president. Pastor Kim Jang-hwan (김장환) became the target of investigations, while Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보) was detained and sentenced before being released, according to Introvigne's account. He writes that Son continued to face harassment and notes that members of Son's family spoke publicly in support of Family Federation co-founder Hak Ja Han (한학자

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dropped founder Hak Ja Han (한학자).

These examples form the basis of Introvigne's contention that the political use of anti-heresy ideas may extend beyond the groups initially targeted.

The precise circumstances of each investigation and judicial proceeding differ. The examples should therefore not be treated as proof that all cases have the same legal basis or political motivation. Nevertheless, they raise an important question about whether the same standards of religious freedom and legal protection are being applied consistently.

The danger of selective religious freedom

The central issue is not whether governments should investigate allegations of wrongdoing involving religious organizations. They should be able to do so under fair and generally applicable laws.

The difficulty arises when a religious group is treated as inherently suspect because of its beliefs, its membership, or its position in public controversies. In such circumstances, accusations can acquire a significance beyond the evidence supporting them, and measures initially presented as exceptional can become precedents for broader intervention.

Introvigne's account suggests that anti-cult activism may contribute to this process by creating a distinction between supposedly legitimate religions and movements considered unacceptable. Once that distinction becomes embedded in public policy, the protection of religious liberty risks becoming selective.

A group that supports restrictions against another religious community may assume that its own standing is secure. Yet political alliances can change, and a government may eventually view that group as an opponent for entirely different reasons.



One of the religious organizations being cracked down on in South Korea: ***Yoido Full Gospel Church****, here 4th Dec. 2016. Photo: Striker9498 / Wikimedia Commons. Public domain image*

This is the irony at the heart of Introvigne's conclusion: some conservative Christian activists who helped promote campaigns against minority religions may now find themselves exposed to state scrutiny. The *Yoido Full Gospel Church* has been described as a vocal critic of movements labeled heretical, and has now itself been raided by prosecutors.

His comparison with Mary Shelley's Frankenstein captures the idea that a movement can create forces it cannot ultimately control. In this interpretation, the expansion of anti-cult ideology may produce consequences that its original advocates did not anticipate.

The international dimension

The potential consequences extend beyond South Korea.

In his article, Introvigne argues that the relationships between Korean anti-cult activists, Japanese left-wing campaigners, and *Chinese Communist Party*-linked organizations illustrate how opposition to minority religions can intersect with broader political objectives.

The three groups do not share a common ideological foundation. Korean evangelical activists may be strongly anti-communist, Japanese campaigners may be associated with the political left, and Chinese participants operate within a state system that cracks down on religious activity. Yet the author believes their overlapping opposition to certain religious movements has enabled practical cooperation.

He further argues that this network has implications for China's geopolitical interests, particularly in relation to religious movements that operate internationally, the treatment of refugees fleeing religious persecution, and the Family Federation's historical anti-communist activities.

Family Federation's historical anti-communist activities.

These are substantial claims that point to a wider issue: religious freedom can be affected not only by the actions of individual governments but also by transnational networks that influence public opinion, legal advocacy, and policy debates.

A principle that must apply to everyone

The Family Federation's dissolution in Japan and the prosecutions of religious leaders in South Korea have occurred under different legal circumstances. Neither case should be assessed solely through political alliances or the claims of campaigners. The relevant evidence, applicable law, procedural safeguards, and rights of the people concerned remain essential.

See also A Dark Practice Returns in South Korea 2026



***One of the prosecuted religious leaders** in South Korea. Given a big fine for what was claimed to be unlawful fundraising practices at a large rally in support of former President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열): Reverend **Jeon Kwang-hoon** (전광훈) from Sarang Jeil Church. Photo (March 2024): MBC PD수첩 / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 3.0 Unp*

At the same time, freedom of religion or belief cannot depend on whether a religious organization is popular, politically influential, or accepted by established churches.

International human rights principles protect the right to hold and change religious beliefs, individually or in community with others. Restrictions on religious practice must satisfy the applicable legal standards; disapproval of a group's theology is not, by itself, a sufficient justification for coercive measures.

This principle applies equally to established churches and newer religious movements, to conservative and progressive believers, and to communities with or without political connections.

Introvigne concludes that the alliance he describes has so far achieved important objectives, but he warns that its longer-term stability is uncertain. Political disagreements, including conflicts between President Lee and conservative evangelical leaders, may eventually strain relationships that have been built around a common adversary.

The more fundamental question, however, concerns the consequences for religious liberty. When governments, activists, and political networks cooperate to marginalize disfavored religious movements, the rights of all religious communities can become vulnerable.

The ultimate test of a free society is not whether it protects only those religions that most citizens approve of. It is whether it upholds the same fundamental rights for those whose beliefs are unpopular, unfamiliar, or politically inconvenient.

Source: Massimo Introvigne, "The Triple Alliance: The Chinese Communist Party, Japanese Anti-Cult Lawyers, and Korean Heresy Hunters", Bitter Winter, 27th October 2026.

*The article is **part 4** of 4-part series*

See part 1: Unlikely Alliance Against Religious Minorities

See part 2: Targeted by Hostile Network Close to China

See part 3: 3-Nation Web Attacking the Family Federation

***Text**: Knut Holdhus, editor*

***Featured image** above: Illustration of Frankenstein and his monster, taken from an abridged version of Mary Shelley's novel, appearing in the The Cincinnati Enquirer, 16th January 1910. Illustration: The Cincinnati Enquirer. Public domain image.*

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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*

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Deprogramming Returns: The Korea-Japan-China Axis of Evil in Action

by Massimo Introvigne | Oct 30, 2026 | News Global

Recent abductions of Shincheonji devotees and an agreement signed in a Tokyo law office suggest that a criminal practice may be revived.

by Massimo Introvigne



Korean deprogrammer and convicted felon Pastor Jin Yong-sik signs a cooperation agreement with Japan's National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, represented by attorney Hiroshi Yamaguchi, in attorney Masaki Kito's law firm on January 8, 2025. Source: Christian Portal News.

"Bitter Winter" has recently published the text of a paper presented at the CESNUR 2026 international conference in Taichung, Taiwan, on what I called the "triple alliance" between Korean fundamentalist pastors, Japanese leftist anti-cult lawyers, and the Chinese Communist Party. The paper described how these strange bedfellows, who agree on nothing except their hatred of "cults," cooperated in the campaigns that led to the nification Church (now Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) in Japan and to the arrests in South Korea of Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon and of Shincheonji's Chairman Lee Man-hee.

One question remained open. The Korean partners of the alliance include pastors who were, and in some cases still are, professional deprogrammers. Do their friendships in Japan, their continued support from the Chinese Communist Party, and their new protectors in the Korean government mean that deprogramming is coming back?

"Bitter Winter" has covered deprogramming in both Japan and Korea for years. The practice consists of kidnapping adult members of disfavored religious movements, usually at the request and with the active participation of their parents, and confining them until they renounce their faith. Born in the United States, the practice was stopped by courts in North America and Europe before the end of the 20th century. It survived in Japan, where more than 4,000 members of the Unification Church were victims, until the case of Toru Goto, who was confined for more than twelve years. In 2014, the Tokyo High Court held his captors liable, and in 2015 the Supreme Court confirmed the decision. After that, deprogramming in Japan should have ceased, and with a few exceptions it did.

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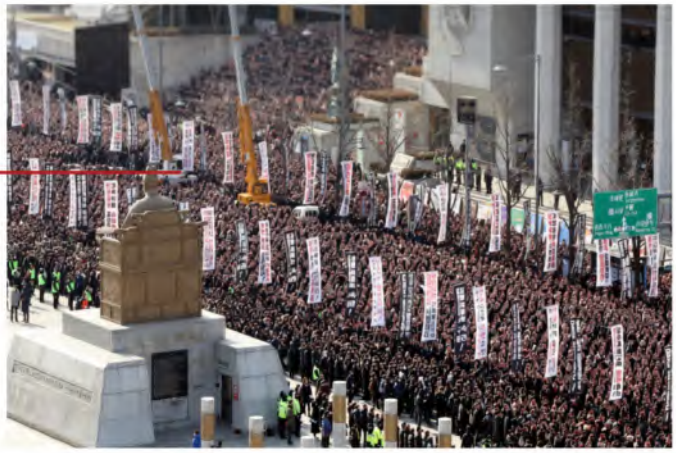
A Defendant Who Was Not Even in the Country: The AROPL Case Gains a New Absurd Chapter

Korea is a different story. Its case law has always been ambiguous. Courts sentence deprogrammers who are caught using open violence, while parents who simply lock up an adult son or daughter at the suggestion of a pastor are often left alone, and police officers called by victims sometimes dismiss the incidents as "family affairs." Thousands of members of Shincheonji, the World Mission Society Church of God, the Christian Gospel Mission (Providence), and other groups have been victimized. Some died. In December 2017, Shincheonji devotee Gu Ji-in was abducted by her parents for the second time and taken to a remote lodge, where her father bound and gagged her to stop her from escaping. She suffocated, was declared brain-dead, and died in January 2018. The case sparked mass protests in Korea and severe international criticism, including reports from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and the U.S. Department of State. Deprogrammers became more cautious, and the number of cases started to decrease.



Protests after the death of Gu Ji-in.

Then the climate changed. The assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022, by a man who blamed the Unification Church for his family's misfortunes, unleashed a campaign that ended with the dissolution of the church, ordered by the Tokyo District Court in March 2025 and now final. In Korea, President Lee Jae-myung's government launched a crusade against "heretical cults" that led to the arrest of Mother Han in September 2025 and of Chairman Lee Man-hee in June 2026. Heresy hunters, who for years had been on the defensive after the Gu Ji-in tragedy, suddenly felt that the government was on their side. Some apparently concluded that the old methods were acceptable again.

Data collected by human rights advocates connected with Shincheonji, and shared with "Bitter Winter," show what has happened. From January 1, 2003, to October 15, 2026, they documented 2,205 cases of coercive conversion of Shincheonji members. The annual figures grew from a single case in 2003 to 151 in 2013 and 179 in 2016. After Gu Ji-in's death, they declined to 131 in 2018 and 127 in 2019. The exception was 2020, with 191 cases, the year when Shincheonji was scapegoated in Korea for the COVID-19 epidemic. Deprogrammers prosper in the shadow of public campaigns against their targets. The decline then resumed, with 88 cases in 2022, 64 in 2023, 69 in 2024, and 57 in 2025. In 2026, however, 55 cases had already been recorded by October 15, with two and a half months still to go. The downward trend has stopped and is reversing.

Of the 55 victims in 2026, 42 are women and 13 are men. In 17 cases, which is 30.9% of the total, the victims were physically confined. Twelve of the 17 confined victims were in their twenties, and twelve were women. Restrictions on the freedom to communicate, such as seized phones and isolation from friends and co-religionists, were reported in 52 cases (94.5%), and verbal abuse in 52 cases as well. Among the documented sites of confinement is a guesthouse owned by a Protestant

utside, it looks like an ordinary holiday home with a

view of the hills. According to the victims, it is built so that nobody can open the doors from the inside. Hospitality, Korean heresy-hunting style.

Age Group	Male	Female	Total	% of Total
20s	4 cases	8 cases	12 cases	70.6%
30s	1 case	3 cases	4 cases	23.5%
40s	0 cases	1 case	1 case	5.9%
Total	5 cases (29.4%)	12 cases (70.6%)	17 cases	100%

Deprogramming cases targeting Shincheonji believers in Korea in 2026.

Testimonies I examined in Korea earlier this month tell the rest of the story. For obvious reasons, "Bitter Winter" will not reveal names, ages, or places that might identify the victims and expose them to further retaliation. One young woman's parents followed her until they discovered she attended Shincheonji. They took her by force from the church and confined her for three days in the family home, where she was insulted, threatened, deprived of sleep, and subjected to "conversion education." Her father threatened her with a knife, and her mother cut her hair by force. Another woman was compelled to leave the room she was renting and to move back with her parents, where her mother struck her legs with a pole from a clothes rack. The family demanded that, as the price for continuing to attend Shincheonji, she pay them a monthly sum for the rest of her mother's life, sign documents transferring financial obligations, report her daily schedule in detail, and install an app allowing them to track her location in real time. Her mother also chased her with a kitchen knife, stating that the two of them would die together. A male devotee's family hired a lawyer, presented him with legal documents to modify his family register and waive a gift of shares, and threatened him with a knife, promising to break his ankles if he did not leave Shincheonji. Other members reported boycotts of their businesses organized by local churches and ostracism by their professional associations.

These incidents are not confined to confidential reports. On October 14, 2026, a regional Korean newspaper reported that an adult woman living on her own had failed to show up for work, and a coworker reported her missing. Her parents' and sister's phones were also switched off. Location tracking led the police to a villa where all four family members had been living together for about a week, cut off from the outside world, with the aim of persuading the youngest daughter to change her "religious [redacted]pot, the woman told the police that she was not confined and did not want anybody punished. The police commented that one statement was not enough and that they would keep monitoring her wishes over time. Those familiar with deprogramming know that victims who are still in the hands of their families often say exactly what their families want them to say.

Who trains the families? In Korea, deprogrammers rarely carry out the kidnappings themselves. They instruct the parents, who abduct their adult children and bring them to a church, a guesthouse, or a "counseling center," where the pastors take over. Families who protest in front of Shincheonji churches are part of the same system. Between October 2025 and October 15, 2026, Shincheonji documented 24 such protests, with banners demanding that sons and daughters be sent home for "counseling," sometimes displaying the names and personal information of the devotees, even though the protesting parents were in contact with their children without difficulty. Some banners were signed by a "heresy counseling" center. Reporting these protests and promoting them is a website run by Ms. O Myung-ok, a rabid anti-cult activist whose activities were mentioned in a Church of Almighty God refugee case in Italy, where the Court of Rome noted in a decision of June 14, 2024, that she was a "special agent" of China.



A staged "parents' protest" against Shincheonji.

This brings us back to Pastor Jin Yong-sik, the central node of the triple alliance. Jin is the senior pastor of Ansan Sangnok Church, which belongs to the Hapdong branch of the Presbyterian Church in Korea, and the president of the Korea Christian Heresy Counseling Center Association, known in Korean as Hansanghyeop. He also presides over the World Association Against Heresy, where Chinese Communist Party anti-cultists cooperate with and offer their support to Korean heresy hunters. He is credited with systematizing the methods of "heresy counseling" in Korea and with building a national network of counseling centers, which, according to the association's own media, now number 25. He is also a

On October 27, 2008, the Korean Christian magazine "Church & Faith," which is sympathetic to the anti-cult cause, reported that the Third Division of the Supreme Court of Korea had confirmed Jin's sentence to ten months in prison, suspended for two years, for aiding night-time joint confinement and committing night-time joint coercion under the Act on the Punishment of Violence. The victims were members of the World Mission Society Church of God.

The appellate court whose decision the Supreme Court upheld called the acts of Jin and his co-defendants "grave crimes violating physical liberty and religious freedom under the pretext of recommending conversion." It added that they deserved severe punishment, also because they had never shown repentance. It rejected the defense's claim that the acts were justified as socially acceptable behavior. Two members of Jin's church received suspended sentences of six and four months.



Deprogrammer Pastor Jin Yong-sik.

Some victims had been committed to a mental institution, and their families declared that they had followed Jin's advice to send them to a psychiatric hospital or a sanatorium. Two psychiatrists were convicted of confinement on appeal and fined. In a parallel civil case, on October 9,

[redacted] Court dismissed the defendants' appeal, confirming that Jin and the two church members should each pay 7 million won in damages to one of the victims, and that all defendants, including a psychiatrist and the hospital, were jointly liable for 20 million won. The civil court explained that trying to convert someone against her will could never be a legitimate purpose, and that confining her and having her committed to a psychiatric hospital were means far too harsh to be tolerated. A 2012 investigation later revealed that Jin's deprogramming business had earned him more than one billion won.

As readers of "Bitter Winter" know, the conviction did not end Jin's career. It globalized it. He hosted the secret meeting at Mokwon University in Daejeon in August 2025, where Korean anti-cultists, a Japanese scholar, and Chinese Communist Party delegates called for decisive action against the Family Federation and other "cults."

"Christian Portal News," a Korean anti-cult outlet, had also reported on a "Korea-China Anti-Heresy Experts Academic Forum" organized in China at Northeastern University in Shenyang by Jin's associations on July 21, 2023. It was attended by Chen Dequan and Zhang Chunli, two of the Chinese protagonists of the triple alliance who were also at the Mokwon University secret meeting.



The meeting in Shenyang on July 21, 2023. Source: Christian Portal News.

Since 2023, Jin has toured the world lecturing against Shincheonji and the Unification Church while supporting China's repression of The Church of Almighty God and Falun Gong. The third corner of the triangle, the Chinese Communist Party, is never far away.

But what about the second corner, Japanese anti-cultism? Jin's network has a Japanese branch, and its leader is the second key figure of this story, Pastor Jang Cheong-ik. Jang is the senior pastor of Tonari Church of [redacted] director of the Japan Christian Heresy Counseling Center, and the representative of a "Heresy & Cult Hotline 110." He came to Japan as a missionary of GMS, the mission arm of Jin's own Hapdong denomination. "Church & Faith" reported on November 15, 2010, that the Japan Christian Heresy Counseling Center had been inaugurated on November 9 of that year with a thanksgiving service at a Korean church in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The magazine explained that the center had been founded to counter the Korean "heresies" that had entered Japan, starting with the Unification Church, and to convert the souls who had fallen into them.





Jin's agent in Japan, Pastor Jang Cheong-ik.

The preacher at the service was none other than Jin Yong-sik, at that time chairperson of the national council of Korean heresy counseling centers, who had been definitively convicted two years earlier. His sermon was [redacted]o heresy counseling?" According to the magazine, he explained that about forty false Christs were active in Korea and that some two million of Korea's 8.6 million Christians had fallen into heresies, and he defined "heresy counseling" (i.e., deprogramming) as a gospel movement saving these souls from the road to perdition. Jang told the audience that he became aware of the problem after meeting a young Unification Church member during campus evangelism, and that protecting Japanese souls who had become the "prey" of Korean heresies was part of a Korean missionary's mission. The center would rely on seven research members, four in the Kanto region and three in Kansai, and would translate Korean anti-heresy literature into Japanese.

The Tokyo center was never an independent initiative. A Korean Christian weekly reported at the time that Jin's Korean center and the Council of Korean Churches in Japan had launched it jointly. Hansanghyeop's statements and its national list of directors include a "Japan (Tokyo) Counseling Center Director," and in 2019 the two organizations jointly launched the "Heresy & Cult Hotline 110." In short, it is a branch office of Jin's deprogramming business in Korea.

After the Abe assassination, Jang's center joined the campaign against the Unification Church led in Japan by the leftist lawyers, and in 2025 Jang railed against the "connection" between Japanese politicians and the church, the favorite theme of the lawyers' network.

The crucial document is an article published by "Christian Portal News" on January 13, 2025. It reported that on January 8, 2025, Hansanghyeop, represented by Jin Yong-sik, and the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, represented by attorney Hiroshi Yamaguchi, signed an agreement for "the relief of victims of heretical and pseudo-religious groups and the prevention of damage." Yamaguchi is one of the historical founding fathers of the lawyers' network, which, as investigative journalist Masumi Fukuda has documented, was established in 1987 by attorneys belonging to the Communist and Socialist parties. Hansanghyeop proposed the agreement to the lawyers through the mediation of Pastor Jang.





Korean heresy hunters and Japanese left-leaning lawyers' meeting at Masaki Kito's law office on January 8, 2025. Kito also appears in the picture.

The venue was as significant as the signatories. The ceremony took place in Tokyo's Chiyoda district, in the offices of Link Law Firm, the firm of attorney Masaki Kito, another leading figure in the Japanese anti-cult movement and in the legal offensive against the Unification Church. The photographs published by the Korean outlet show Jin and Yamaguchi signing and shaking hands. Behind them stood Pastor Jang and the directors of the heresy counseling centers in Gwangju and in Incheon and Goyang, along with the head of the anti-heresy institute of the Kosin Presbyterian denomination. Attorney Hiroshi Watanabe, whom readers of my CESNUR paper may remember from the Seoul press conference he held with deprogrammer Pastor Oh Myeong-hyeon two weeks after Abe's assassination, also attended. One would expect a network of lawyers to check the criminal record of the persons they sign agreements with. Perhaps they did and found nothing objectionable.

According to the article, Jin opened the ceremony by repeating his estimate of forty self-proclaimed messiahs in Korea and added that their victims were two million. In this arithmetic, every member of a disfavored religious movement is a "victim" and, one may add, a potential target of deprogramming. Jin lamented that Korea, while guaranteeing religious freedom, had no legal instruments to prevent the damage caused by "pseudo-religions," and asked for help from Japanese lawyers, whose experience and precedents he hoped to use to obtain a law regulating such groups in Korea. The article's subtitle confirmed that supporting legislation was one of the agreement's main purposes.

Yamaguchi described the legal campaign against the Unification Church in Japan, from the law passed at the end of 2022 to the government's 2023 request to dissolve the church, and answered a question by Jin about the "right to ask questions" exercised by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, a power introduced after the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo attack and used against the Unification Church for the first time. Then came the most interesting part. Yamaguchi explained that, although legal and administrative measures in Japan had been [redacted]astors in charge of "heresy counseling" (most of whom had been involved in deprogramming before the Toru Goto Supreme Court decision) were aging, and there was "a serious shortage of 'counseling personnel.'" He said he envied the systematic way in which Korea runs its "counseling centers."

In Japan, "counseling" by pastors of former members of the Unification Church was the euphemism used for decades to describe deprogramming. The ministers who confined Toru Goto and thousands of others also called their activity "counseling." Those who did the job in the 1980s and 1990s are now old, and some of them are dead. Yamaguchi's lament about the aging of counseling pastors sounds like nostalgia for an era the Goto decision was supposed to have closed. His envy of the Korean centers, coming from the lawyer who had just signed an agreement with the man who built them, invites an obvious conclusion. Japan lacks trained "counselors"; Korea has 25 centers full of them, and the agreement provides for the two organizations to share information and seminars and to carry out "relief and prevention activities" jointly. Read together, these statements suggest Korean deprogrammers are training a new generation of Japanese ones.

The lawyers also asked for information about the "counseling" activities

conducted in Korea on major groups, and specifically about the case of Jeong Myeong-seok, the leader of the Christian Gospel Mission (Providence), including the reactions of members to the Supreme Court decision against him and copies of the verdict, which Hansanghyeop promised to provide. Watanabe asked about a group of ex-members of the Christian Gospel Mission reportedly formed after the Netflix documentary "In the Name of God: A Holy Betrayal," and Jin promised his full cooperation. The new targets, it seems, are already being selected.

Pastor Jang had the final word. He told "Christian Portal News" that the joint action of Korean and Japanese experts would make prevention and "rescue ministry" more efficient, called the agreement a breakthrough in "citizens' diplomacy," and said it would greatly help the Japanese "victims" of Korean heresies. "Rescue" is the word deprogrammers throughout the world have always used for what courts call kidnapping and confinement. Jin's 2010 sermon in Tokyo had already defined heresy counseling as rescuing souls from perdition. The agreement's vocabulary is cautious, as one would expect from a text drafted in a law firm, but those who know the history of deprogramming in Korea and Japan will have no difficulty decoding it.

The two Korean articles, the confidential data on Shincheonji victims, and the conclusions of my CESNUR 2026 paper fit together. In Korea, a government campaign against "heretical cults" has given new legitimacy to the heresy counseling centers, and the number of coercive conversion cases has stopped falling. Among those who preside over this network is a pastor whom the Supreme Court found guilty of crimes against the physical liberty and religious freedom of his victims, and who cooperates with the Chinese Communist Party's anti-religious apparatus. In Japan, the lawyers who obtained the dissolution of the Unification Church have formally allied with him and his Tokyo branch, in a law office whose senior partner is one of the campaign's protagonists, and have publicly complained that Japan no longer has enough "counselors."

Deprogramming is regarded as a crime in all democratic countries, and for good reason. Its victims are adults who have done nothing except choose a religion their families and their pastors dislike. In Korea, where the courts never fully closed the door, the practice may return in full swing under the protection of President Lee's anti-heresy crusade. In Japan, the Goto decision should be a sufficient barrier, but ten years ago few would have predicted that a democratic country would dissolve a religious organization because a gunman hated it. Governments, international organizations, and the human rights bodies that once denounced the calvary of Toru Goto and the death of Gu Ji-in should watch closely. The triple alliance has already shown that it can achieve its aims. Allowing it to reopen the guesthouses with doors that cannot be opened from the inside would be a tragedy for religious liberty in East Asia.

China, Japan, Religious Liberty, Shincheonji, South Korea



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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