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Japan, Misunderstanding the Unification Church: An Interview with Masumi Fukuda

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A candid account of the path that led a non-religious journalist to uncover inconvenient truths about the anti-cult campaigns following Shinzo Abe's assassination.

by Marco Respinti



Masumi Fukuda.

In 2025, award-winning journalist Masumi Fukuda published "Sacrifice to the Nation" (Tokyo: Asuka Shinsha), a book that quickly became a bestseller—already in its third printing—and has significantly reshaped how many Japanese understand the controversies surrounding the Unification Church, now known as the Family Federation. "Bitter Winter" has just published a [serialized review](#) of the book, which we now supplement with an interview with the courageous journalist.

Bitter Winter: You are not a Family Federation believer, and when you started your investigation, you had no sympathy for this organization either. What prompted you to challenge a position advocated by virtually all the most powerful media in Japan?

Masumi Fukuda: The reason I, someone with no particular interest in religion, decided to investigate the Family Federation was a chance encounter with one of its members. While writing a book on political correctness in the United States, I interviewed Mr. B, an editorial committee member at Sekai Nippo who was knowledgeable about the subject. He struck me as a very likable person. Almost a year later, former Prime Minister Abe was assassinated, and an intense wave of criticism against the Family Federation began. The image of the church as an embodiment of absolute evil, repeated endlessly in the media, did not align with my impression of Mr. B. I was confused. About a month after the incident, I finally mustered the courage to contact him. He told me, "When I heard from you, I was so happy I cried. Right now, even my right to live feels threatened. If it were only me, I could endure it. But when I think of this burden falling on my daughter..." His words horrified me. I resolved to find out why the church was being subjected to such extreme vilification. As soon as I began my research, I discovered numerous incidents and facts surrounding the church that the media had never mentioned and that ordinary people knew nothing about. These revelations overturned the conventional understanding of the church. It was being profoundly misunderstood and unfairly denigrated. I felt this was worth writing about.

Of course, in an atmosphere where society treated the church as absolute evil, I knew that writing from as fair and neutral a standpoint as possible would provoke intense backlash. I hesitated. But I also knew things the public did not. My desire to write overcame my fear. In a clichéd expression, perhaps it was simply the "spirit of a journalist."

BW: In your book, you call Japan "a country where a terrorist's wish came true." Can you explain what you mean?

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MF: The lay-judge trial of Tetsuya Yamagami, the terrorist who assassinated former Prime Minister Abe, recently concluded. His testimony and the examination of his actions made clear that he was not a direct victim of the Family Federation, nor had he suffered “religious abuse” from his mother. Yet he harbored an irrational resentment toward the church and hoped that by attacking Abe, he could inflict some damage on it. To fulfill this terrorist’s wish, the government, MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), and even the judiciary moved in concert, and the Tokyo District Court ultimately issued an order to dissolve the Family Federation. At his trial, when asked how he felt about the dissolution order, Yamagami replied, “I’m grateful.” This means the state effectively carried out the wish of a man who committed a heinous act of terrorism. That is why I describe contemporary Japan as “a country that fulfilled a terrorist’s wish.”

BW: You have investigated the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales in depth. What is this organization, and why was it created?

MF: The National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLASS), founded in 1987, presents itself as a group dedicated to helping victims of “spiritual sales” allegedly conducted by the former Unification Church—although in reality these sales were carried out by companies run by individual members. In truth, the organization was created to block the enactment of an anti-espionage law then promoted by the International Federation for Victory over Communism (IFVOC), an organization affiliated with the former Unification Church. The NNLASS is mainly composed of left-leaning lawyers affiliated with the Communist Party or the former Socialist Party. Before the organization was founded, Hiroshi Yamaguchi, who later served for many years as its secretary-general, wrote in *Center News*, the journal of the Socialist-Party-affiliated Social and Cultural Legal Center, that “spiritual sales” were an organized activity of the Unification Church used to fund IFVOC’s efforts to enact a national secrets law. Another lawyer, speaking candidly at a symposium, declared that the Unification Church and IFVOC “must be crushed,” calling them “Japan’s largest right-wing groups,” and insisting that their funding sources must be cut off and the media mobilized against them. In short, NNLASS devised a strategy that achieved two goals at once: eliminating the funding base for the anti-espionage law and simultaneously destroying the right-wing new religions they regarded as enemies. By condemning the sale of vases and pagodas of spiritual value as fraudulent, they generated massive social criticism. As a result, the stigma of the Unification Church as an “anti-social organization,” a “cult,” and a “great evil” became deeply entrenched throughout Japanese society.



Attorney Hiroshi Yamaguchi. Screenshot.

BW: You also cover deprogramming and forced conversion. International human rights organizations and the United Nations widely condemned this practice. However, there are still people in Japan defending and justifying it. Why?

MF: A widespread rumor took hold that “Unification Church members are mind-controlled and cannot leave the church easily, so breaking this mind control requires protective persuasion, even if somewhat rough methods are used.” In reality, leaving the church is simple—one merely stops attending—and many members have left naturally. For professional deprogrammers and certain Christian pastors, however, abducting and confining believers became a lucrative business. This is one reason these abuses persisted for so long. They instilled false fears in believers’ families, claiming that their children would become criminals, commit Aum-Shinrikyō-type atrocities, or that corpses were buried under church facilities. After inflaming anxiety, they induced families to carry out the abduction and confinement themselves, assuring them it was not a crime but a “family matter” or “protective persuasion.” Families then paid hefty fees to the deprogrammers and pastors involved.

BW: We hear a lot about the alleged suffering of second-generation members of the Family Federation. You researched this issue. What are your conclusions?

MF: I did not interview former second-generation believers who had left the

church and were critical of it or of their parents. For a time, such individuals appeared constantly in the media, repeating their grievances, so I saw no need to interview them again. (I did request an interview with Sayuri Ogawa, but she declined). Instead, I spoke with active second-generation believers—voices the media ignored. Many told me they had struggled with faith at some point, but later studied the doctrine for themselves, reached their own understanding, and chose to inherit their parents' faith. Most said their parents sometimes made large donations out of altruism and that they respected them. They insisted they had been raised with love and were not abused. Some even argued that because their parents practiced a doctrine emphasizing the family, child abuse was likely less common than in average households. Although I did not conduct statistical surveys, my impression is that second-generation believers who are critical or who have left the church are a minority, and that the overwhelming majority remain. Concerns unique to second-generation believers should be addressed, but these are family matters, and it is questionable whether the parents' faith is the cause. The church need not do more than offer consultation. Meanwhile, former second-generation believers are now being incited by the media and>NNLASS to demand the return of their parents' donations, the dissolution of the church, and even state compensation. These claims are misguided. If the state responded to every such dispute, it would create a "big government"—essentially a communist society. Parents' right to educate their children in their own faith is explicitly guaranteed in Article 18(4) of the ICCPR, which Japan has ratified. If a child wishes to reject the inherited faith, they may do so at age eighteen.

BW: In your book, you mention false accusations and even fabricated statements. Can you mention some specific cases?

MF: I use the expression "false accusations orchestrated by the Public Security Police," and two cases exemplify this: the Shinsei Incident of 2009 and the Stalking Prevention Law case of 2011. Both appear to have targeted members of the former Unification Church, and in both cases, the Public Security Police launched investigations on the suspicion of organizational involvement. The>NNLASS may also have influenced these investigations behind the scenes—first, the Shinsei incident. Police raided Shinsei, a seal retailer run by members of the former Unification Church, and seized a customer list. Using this list, police launched an unprecedented victim-finding operation. Investigators contacted each of the more than 300 Shinsei customers on the list, persistently urging them to file complaints. As a result of this victim-finding operation, five people finally filed complaints. The company's president, director, and five sales staff were arrested on suspicion of violating the Specified Commercial Transactions Act (intimidation and confusion). They were accused of intimidating and confusing consumers into buying their products, but even investigators have stated they "don't know" what "intimidation" or "confusion" means. In the end, the five salespeople accepted a summary indictment and were fined, but the president and director were asked to go to trial. The president was found guilty and given a two-year prison sentence, suspended for four years, and the director received a one-year and six-month prison sentence, also suspended for four years. However, the police were unable to find any organizational ties between Shinsei and the former Unification Church, and the public security authorities' original aim of indicting the former Unification Church itself proved unsuccessful. I believe that the managers and salespeople of Shinsei were victims of unjust false accusations.

In the early morning hours of February 2011, a male believer was suddenly arrested at his home on suspicion of violating the Stalking Prevention Law. The believer had attended a mass wedding ceremony organized by the Unification Church in 2007, and his fiancée, Ms. B, disappeared just before they were due to begin their married life. In the case of the former Unification Church, the disappearance of one member of a couple during this period almost always constitutes abduction and confinement. The believer filed a missing person report with the police, but it was rejected because the couple had not yet registered their marriage.

The male believer continued searching for B but was unable to locate her, so he came up with a plan and attached a GPS-equipped mobile phone to the bottom of B's father's car. This led to the discovery that the father's car was stopping at an apartment building near Ogikubo in Suginami Ward. Professional deprogrammer Takashi Miyamura used this apartment building to hold believers captive, and from then on, the male believer began to have repeated near misses with B as he tracked her father's car. In October 2010, the two encountered each other at a sauna facility in Ogikubo, and when B saw the male believer, she called the police. The male believer was shocked by the complete change in her personality and left the scene. Two months later, the male believer was arrested. He refused a summary indictment, insisting that he had done nothing wrong, and instead chose to go to trial. However, even though the abduction and confinement of B was the cause of the incident, the term "kidnapping and confinement" became completely taboo in

court, and it was determined that he had been stalking her simply for romantic gratification. In 2012, he was found guilty and sentenced to three months in prison, suspended for four years. The male believer fought the case all the way to the Supreme Court, but ultimately his guilty verdict was not overturned. Nine years later, when another believer visited B's mother to return her personal belongings that had remained at the church facility, the mother said something surprising: "The public security police came and asked if I wanted to sue him, so I got scared and did. I want to apologize to him." So why did the public security police get involved in this case? The lawyer representing the male believer said, "I think it was because they suspected that the former Unification Church had organized involvement behind the incident. But when they looked into it, it was his personal choice, and there was no sign of organized involvement anywhere. The public security police must have been taken aback." This scenario is the same as in the "Shinsei" incident.

In the trial seeking the order to dissolve the Unification Church, there are suspicions that some of the statements by former members submitted by MEXT as evidence of harm caused by the church were fabricated or falsified. The report reveals the sloppy nature of evidence gathering, including cases in which the "victims" who signed the statements themselves claimed that "I did not write them and that the contents are false," cases in which they were surprised to find themselves included in the evidence for the request for a dissolution order without their knowledge, and cases in which statements by former members of other religious groups were mixed in. The case of a 91-year-old female former member is particularly egregious. She never wrote a statement, and she does not want her donations returned. She told her daughter that her statement was likely written by her sons, who forced her to leave the church, and by MEXT. The statement is 34 pages long and contains approximately 250 pages of documents written in small 9-10-point type. It appears that MEXT officials forced her to sign and stamp the document without even reading it to her. When witnesses were questioned about these allegations in the first trial, MEXT remained silent and made no rebuttals. In January 2025, Satoshi Hamada, who was a member of the House of Councilors at the time, questioned the Ministry about the issue. Still, the Ministry again did not deny the allegations. On September 5, 2025, a total of four church members and former members filed a complaint with the Tokyo District Public Prosecutors' Office against six MEXT employees who had been involved in preparing the statements, accusing them of forgery of a private document bearing a seal, among other charges.



Satoshi Hamada. Credits.

BW: You conclude that the dissolution case against the Family Federation is based on fabrications. What led you to this conclusion?

MF: The fundamental principle of a trial is to determine facts based on objective evidence. However, the Tokyo District Court abandoned this fundamental principle and, through a series of unbelievable inferences, made the damage appear enormous, using that as a basis for issuing the dissolution order. The spirit of judicial independence and the separation of powers have been lost, and in that, an extremely political decision was made to pander to the government and the media; this is clearly a trial of national policy. It is a veritable judicial fabrication. To list some specific problems, (1) many of the statements by former members submitted by MEXT appear to have been fabricated or falsified; (2) many of the former members who testified for MEXT

were abducted, confined, and left the church, raising strong doubts about the credibility of their testimony; (3) the testimonies are decades old; (4) since the church's compliance declaration in 2009, the number of lawsuits over large donations has dramatically decreased, and the Tokyo District Court decision states that "the number of reports of victimization has decreased significantly in recent years," but goes on to make the highly implausible inference that "there is a considerable amount of latent hidden damage"; (5) even settlements and negotiations are considered to be illegal; and (6) the grounds for dissolution of religious corporations and requests for dissolution orders are violations of international law, yet the decision completely ignores them. This no longer constitutes a judgment (or, in this case, a decision). It is not a trial in the first place.

Japan, Religious Liberty, Unification Church



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Marco Respinti is an Italian professional journalist, member of the [International Federation of Journalists \(IFJ\)](#), author, translator, and lecturer. He has contributed and contributes to several journals and magazines both in print and online, both in Italy and abroad. Author of books and chapter in books, he has translated and/or edited works by, among others, Edmund Burke, Charles Dickens, T.S. Eliot, Russell Kirk, J.R.R. Tolkien, Régine Pernoud and Gustave Thibon. A Senior fellow at the [Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal](#) (a non-partisan, non-profit U.S. educational organization based in Mecosta, Michigan), he is also a founding member as well as a member of the Advisory Council of the [Center for European Renewal](#) (a non-profit, non-partisan pan-European educational organization based in The Hague, The Netherlands). A member of the Advisory Council of the [European Federation for Freedom of Belief](#), in December 2022, the [Universal Peace Federation](#) bestowed on him, among others, the title of Ambassador of Peace. From February 2018 to December 2022, he has been the Editor-in-Chief of [International Family News](#). He serves as Director-in-Charge of the academic publication [The Journal of CESNUR](#) and [Bitter Winter: A Magazine on Religious Liberty and Human Rights](#).



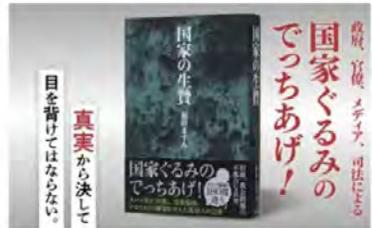
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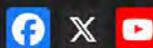
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