

# Bitter Winter's Deep Analysis of Tokyo High Court's Unification Church Decision

Larry Moffitt  
April 2, 2026

Dear Colleague,

This is the deepest dive analysis you will find on the Tokyo High Court's decision to dissolve the Unification Church and confiscate all its property, assets and member's donations, despite there being no criminal laws broken by the church, written by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, founder and editor of Bitter Winter online magazine.

Christian, Buddhist and Confucian leaders in Japan and Korea are only now awakening to the reality that a government that can easily dismantle an "inconvenient" religion, can and will use the legal precedents of that case to attach any religion.

Attached here is:

- 1.** An academic compilation of all six articles, prepared for the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) by Dr. Introvigne. Perfect for you to digest and share with anyone who wants all the information in one document.
- 2.** All six Bitter Winter articles individually, as seen on their website, formatted as PDFs. Easy to read and selectively share with anyone who wants to know a particular aspect of the case without being inundated with information. The articles, with links to the Bitter Winter website, are attached as PDFs at the bottom of this email.

Below is an idea of the content of each article. PDF articles are attached at the bottom.

Very respectfully,  
Larry Moffitt

**Part 1** In Part One of this six-installment series, Dr. Introvigne points out that the court reconstructed the theology and practices of the movement founded by Reverend Moon based on selective quotes and hostile sources.  
March 26, 2026 [The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 1. A Caricatural View of the Church](#)

**Part 2** In Part Two Dr. Introvigne points to a key theme behind the court's decision, which is the discredited pseudo-scientific theory that so-called "cults" victimize their members through "mental manipulation."  
March 27, 2026 [The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 2. The Ghost of "Brainwashing"](#)

**Part 3** In Part Three Dr. Introvigne exposes the High Court's lack of evidence that court cases and out of court settlements of persons who donated to the FFWPU were sufficient reason to dissolve the FFWPU, particularly since these cases dropped dramatically after the 2009 Compliance Declaration, issued by the FFWPU to all its members.  
March 28, 2026 [The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 3. "Spiritual Sales" and Excessive Donations](#)

**Part 4** In Part Four, Dr. Introvigne examines in detail the "2009 Compliance Declaration", issued by FFWPU Japan, after which court cases and civil settlements dropped dramatically. However, the High Court cited that FFWPU believers still continued to give donations to the FFWPU after 2009 and claimed that the root cause of offering large donation lies in the Church and its doctrines itself. Thus the High Court's conclusion, the FFWPU needs to be dissolved.  
March 30, 2026 [The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 4. The 2009 "Compliance Declaration"](#)

**Part 5** Part Five in this *Bitter Winter* series focuses on the High Court's "unusual" interpretation of Japan's international obligations to protect religious freedom under the ICCPR, an interpretation is not in line with ICCPR Article 18(3).  
March 31, 2026 [The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 5. Violating International Law](#)

**Part 6** In the final article of this series, Dr. Introvigne exposes the High Court claims that FFWPU Japan members' religious freedom will not be affected or inhibited after dissolution of FFWPU as a religious organization and the liquidation of all its assets, However, in fact, both NNLASS and the Japanese Federation of Bar Associations are already pushing for new laws to be enacted to completely eliminate all assets and practices of the FFWPU Japan or of any religious organization that might in the future, be dissolved.  
April 1, 2026 [The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 6. Who Will Protect the Believers?](#)

# Bitter Winter

A magazine on religious liberty and human rights

<https://bitterwinter.org/the-tokyo-high-court-unification-church-decision-1-a-caricatural-view-of-the-church/>

## The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 1. A Caricatural View of the Church

by Massimo Introvigne | March 26, 2026 | Op-Eds Global | Article 1 of 6

The court reconstructed the theology and practices of the movement founded by Reverend Moon based on selective quotes and hostile sources.



*Tokyo High Court in Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan*

On March 4, the Tokyo High Court announced its decision to uphold the Tokyo District Court's verdict ordering the dissolution of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly known as the Unification Church and still often referred to by that name) as a religious corporation. What follows is an analysis of the voluminous decision. The text is often repetitive, and my analysis proceeds by examining its six main themes rather than following its arguments in the order in which they are presented.

The decision first presents in its own way the nature and aims of the Unification Church. Second, it discusses the methods through which the Church allegedly pursues its aims, i.e., mental manipulation. Third, it examines at length the reported fruits of mental manipulation: “spiritual sales” and excessive donations. Fourth, it denies that the objectionable and “socially unacceptable” collection of donations ceased after the Church’s internal reforms in 2009. Fifth, it answers the objections that the procedure was unfair and violated international law. Sixth, it insists that the dissolution is consistent with the constitutional and international protection of freedom of religion or belief.

The first theme is a somewhat caricatural presentation of the Unification Church. Scholars of religion know that reconstructing the history, theology, and practice of a religious organization is a difficult task, particularly when the group is comparatively new and still evolving. Any such reconstruction is as good as its sources. The High Court’s description of the Church is suspiciously similar to presentations by Japanese anti-cult scholars and to the maliciously selective use of Church texts by the main anti-Unification-Church organization in Japan, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, which is repeatedly quoted. The Unification Church has been studied by numerous international scholars, including Eileen Barker, George Chryssides, David Bromley, and others. Their works are conveniently ignored.

The decision reports that the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon and his widow, Mother Hak Ja Han, are referred to as “the ‘True Parents,’ on the understanding that they are the Second Advent Messiah (Savior) and the True Parents of humankind.” Their message, we read, is about the “restoration of all things”: “Through the exercise of faith and by offering all things to God, human beings are said to recover the love and heart befitting their original status as children of God, thereby restoring the proper relationship among God, humanity, and all creation.”

These statements, although simplified, are not incorrect. Yet the court quickly shifts from this theological basis to a harsh interpretation: “offering all things to God” means mandating that members give as much money as possible to the Church. It emphasizes quotes where Reverend Moon urges generous giving, including his statement that “money’s ultimate purpose is to serve God for the sake of humanity.” In the court’s view, such excerpts prove a systematic effort to extract donations.

The court then presents the Unification Church doctrine of Japan as the Mother Nation and Korea as the Father Nation, in the position respectively of Eve and Adam. Within Unification theology, several nations, including the United States, play symbolic roles. However, the court oversimplifies this intricate worldview to a single practical claim: that the doctrine serves to pressure Japanese believers into financially supporting the Church’s Korean headquarters.

Another doctrine the High Court focuses on is “ancestral karma.” This is the teaching that some of our ancestors are (in the words of the decision) “suffering in the spirit world or hell,” and their situation negatively affects their descendants. The Unification Church proposes specific “ancestral liberation” rituals to liberate these souls. Donations normally accompany the performance of such rituals.

The impression the decision wants to convey is that the theology of the Unification Church is just a pretext to collect donations in Japan to support Reverend Moon and, after his death, Mother Han in Korea. The text gives more than a nod to a certain anti-Korean animosity present in Japanese society. It reports, from journalistic sources and without examining accuracy or context, alleged remarks made in 2023 by Mother Han in reaction to the persecution of the Church after the assassination of Shinzo Abe, mentioning the war crimes committed by Japan against Korea and other countries, which is certainly a sensitive argument for the Japanese.

This reconstruction is so selective that it skews towards caricature. The Unification Church was founded in Korea, and its headquarters are there. However, the Korean center supports missionary and other activities worldwide. Such centralized systems of collecting and allocating funds are certainly not unique to the Unification Church. A part of the donations collected by the Catholic Church internationally goes to the Vatican and is redistributed from there. The same is true for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, and of countless other religious organizations. Centralization is not proof of exploitation—it is a practical method for coordinating international work.

The decision implies that the Unification Church milks Japanese believers to enrich the Korean leaders. This malicious reconstruction ignores the fact that the Korean headquarters supports a massive missionary activity in dozens of countries. It also downplays the fact that the Church's donations are not used solely for missionary activities. They support a large and successful network of charitable institutions and schools serving local communities, with admirable results in Africa, some of them largely funded by Japanese believers, and elsewhere. I visited some of these institutions in Africa, where none of the students are or have become members of the Church. The Unification Church has also supported impressive peace education initiatives. Mother Han is well-known as “the Mother of Peace.



*Students in one of the technical schools supported by Family Federation believers from Japan and other countries in Africa.*

The High Court decision mentions these activities only in passing, highlighting “political activities aimed at opposing communism,” which, of course, are the *bête noire* of the left-leaning attorneys of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales and the main reason the Network was established in 1987.

The court also implies that the “ancestral liberation” rituals are a mere money-making enterprise. Here, the decision dangerously encroaches on the sphere of theology and seems to endorse one of the oldest claims of Protestant opponents of the Unification Church, who labeled it “heretical.” The Catholic Church teaches that souls after death can go to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory. The latter, Purgatory, is the temporary residence of those who are not sentenced to Hell but need a time of purification before they can enter Heaven. This is a time of suffering, which their descendants and friends can alleviate through rituals (“Masses for the dead”) and donations, thereby obtaining “indulgences” for their deceased loved ones and, at the same time, acquiring merits and benefits for themselves.

In the 16th century, this doctrine was sometimes preached mechanically, making the amount of monetary offerings by the descendants correspond to the time after which the souls of their deceased relatives would be allowed to leave Purgatory. This was the *casus belli* used by Martin Luther to deny not only the doctrine of indulgences but the existence of Purgatory and ultimately the divine authority of the Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation had started.

While the Catholic Church has repudiated the excesses of its 16th-century preachers, it still maintains its doctrines of Purgatory, indulgences, and Masses for the dead (for which donations are collected). For Protestants, any reference by a non-Catholic religious organization to ancestors who can be liberated from their sufferings through rituals and donations immediately evokes the Catholic “heresy” that ignited Luther’s righteous indignation. In both Korea and Japan, the Unification Church’s “ancestral liberation” looked to Protestants as a return to the Catholic doctrine of indulgences they hated with a vengeance.

These theological debates are well-known and not without interest. They are not, however, the provinces of secular courts of law. Surely, there are illegal ways of collecting donations that courts may object to. What they cannot do is assess the validity of doctrines like karma, the afterlife, or the spiritual state of ancestors.

The Tokyo High Court’s ruling, however, repeatedly crosses that boundary. It treats theological concepts as evidence of wrongdoing, interprets religious terms most cynically, and relies heavily on sources that are openly antagonistic to the movement. The outcome is a skewed depiction influenced by decades of anti-cult activism.

If courts start to treat religious doctrines with suspicion whenever they involve donations, many mainstream traditions could become vulnerable. Catholic Masses for the dead, Buddhist memorial offerings, Shinto rites, and countless other rituals in world religions involve financial contributions. To single out one group’s beliefs as illegitimate simply because they include significant donations opens a door that no constitutional democracy should ever open.

The Tokyo High Court ruling raises deep concerns about the line between legitimate legal oversight and unwarranted intrusion into religious belief. These concerns will not fade with this decision and will influence the future of religious freedom in Japan and internationally for many years to come.

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Bitter Winter links: [Japan](#), [Religious Liberty](#), [Religious Persecution](#), [Unification Church](#)



**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.

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<https://bitterwinter.org/the-tokyo-high-court-unification-church-decision-2-the-ghost-of-brainwashing/>

## The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 2. The Ghost of “Brainwashing”

by Massimo Introvigne | March 27, 2026 | Op-Eds Global | Article 2 of 6

A key theme of the decision is the discredited pseudo-scientific theory that “cults” victimize their members through “mental manipulation.”



*The myth of “brainwashing.” AI elaboration from cartoons of the 1970s*

In the first article of this series, I presented the High Court’s malicious and caricatural reconstruction of the Unification Church as a money-making enterprise rather than a bona fide religion. A second central theme of the decision is mental manipulation as the main tool through which the Church allegedly pursues its aims.

The High Court decision reiterates this theme across twelve different paragraphs, repeatedly emphasizing that the Unification Church employs techniques “restricting the free will” and

placing its “victims” “in a state in which it is difficult to make an appropriate judgment.” The court believes these techniques are so effective that victims find it “difficult to withdraw from the Appellant’s [Unification Church] doctrine.” Ultimately, the free will of the believer is not only “restricted” but “suppressed.” The court states that this extreme outcome is achieved through specialized techniques of “psychological influence.”

The decision avoids using the word “brainwashing” but largely reproduces its logic. The idea that certain religious groups have mysterious techniques capable of overriding individual choice has a long and troubled history. It has been used for centuries to discredit unpopular minorities, and modern scholarship consistently rejects it as pseudoscience. Yet, the High Court treats it as fact, as if mentioning mental manipulation explains why thousands of Japanese citizens voluntarily joined and supported the Unification Church for decades.

The notion that religious conversion must be the result of some hidden coercive force is far older than the contemporary anti-cult movement. In the nineteenth century, critics of the Latter-day Saints insisted that no rational person could embrace Mormonism unless subjected to “mesmeric” influence. Long before that, Roman authors described early Christians as victims of sorcery, while Chinese imperial officials accused unauthorized religious movements of using black magic to ensnare followers. Medieval European polemicists recycled the same accusations against groups they labeled “heretical.” The pattern is always the same: when a religion appears too unfamiliar, too demanding, or too threatening to established institutions, its converts are portrayed as dupes rather than agents.

Modern anti-cult ideology replaced the vocabulary of magic with the vocabulary of psychology. After the Korean War, Western intelligence agencies became fascinated with the idea that Communist regimes had developed techniques to forcibly “convert” prisoners. The term “brainwashing” itself was coined not by scientists but by a journalist with intelligence ties, and it entered public discourse through sensationalist accounts rather than empirical research. The U.S. government later acknowledged that these early theories were speculative and politically motivated. Nevertheless, they provided a template for later claims that new religious movements use similar methods.

Anti-cult activists in the 1960s and 1970s revived the brainwashing narrative to explain why young people were joining new religious movements. Their theories gained traction among anxious parents and the media, but they fared poorly under legal scrutiny. The decisive moment came in 1990, when a U.S. federal court examined the scientific status of “coercive persuasion” in the “Fishman” case. After reviewing extensive expert testimony, the court concluded that such theories lacked empirical foundation. It ruled that “Theories regarding the coercive persuasion practiced by religious cults are not sufficiently established to be admitted as evidence in federal courts of law.” The judge also excluded expert testimony based on these models, finding that they did not meet minimal standards of scientific reliability.

European jurisprudence reached similar conclusions. In 2010, the European Court of Human Rights noted that “there is no generally accepted and scientific definition of what constitutes ‘mind control.’” It further observed that many behaviors cited as evidence of coercion—intense

commitment, deference to leaders, communal living, enthusiastic proselytism—are common across a wide range of religious traditions. The Italian Constitutional Court had already abolished the crime of “plagio,” a Fascist-era statute akin to “brainwashing,” in 1981, declaring it incompatible with both scientific knowledge and religious liberty.



*Father Emilio Grasso, a Catholic priest, was accused of “plagio” in the case that led to the declaration of the non-constitutionality of the relevant Italian statute in 1981.*

These legal precedents matter because they reflect a broad international recognition: claims of “psychological manipulation” in religious contexts are too vague, too ideologically loaded, and too easily abused to serve as a basis for state intervention. They allow courts to substitute their own value judgments for the lived experiences of believers. They also create a dangerous asymmetry: mainstream religions are assumed to attract followers through legitimate persuasion, while minority religions are presumed guilty of manipulation unless proven otherwise.

The Tokyo High Court’s decision falls squarely into this pattern. It asserts that the Unification Church uses “psychological influence.” Still, it never defines the term, never explains how such influence differs from ordinary religious exhortation, and never demonstrates that members were deprived of their capacity to choose. Instead, it relies on the assumption—common in

anti-cult discourse—that intense religious commitment is inherently suspicious. When believers donate generously, the court interprets this not as an expression of faith but as evidence of manipulation. When they accept theological teachings about sacrifice, providence, karma, or the ancestors, the court treats these beliefs as tools of coercion rather than as sincere convictions.

This approach is deeply problematic. All religions encourage giving, often in strong terms. Many emphasize the spiritual value of sacrifice, the importance of supporting the community, or the moral duty to contribute to a larger mission. If such exhortations are reinterpreted as “psychological influence,” then the boundary between legitimate religion and illicit manipulation becomes impossible to draw. The High Court’s reasoning would apply equally to Protestant tithing, Catholic appeals for contributing to the Vatican’s “Peter’s Pence,” Buddhist fundraising for temple construction, or Shinto requests for offerings. The difference lies not in the methods but in the evaluator’s approval or disapproval of the underlying theology.

Moreover, the court’s analysis ignores the most basic principle of religious freedom: adults are entitled to make commitments that others may find excessive, irrational, or incomprehensible. The state does not have the authority to declare that certain beliefs are too strange to be sincerely held, or that certain forms of devotion are incompatible with free will. To do so is to treat devotees of religious minorities as inherently less capable of agency than members of majority faiths.

The High Court’s reliance on “psychological influence” thus represents a step backward, reviving a discredited concept in both academic and legal circles for decades. It allows the court to pathologize religious commitment, reinterpret voluntary acts as coerced, and justify extreme state intervention based on speculative, unscientific assumptions. In doing so, it risks undermining the very foundations of freedom of religion or belief in Japan.

A legal system committed to constitutional principles should not rely on theories that courts elsewhere have rejected as pseudoscience. The Tokyo High Court’s decision, by embracing the language of “psychological influence,” crosses a line that democratic societies have long recognized as dangerous. The consequences will extend far beyond the Unification Church unless this reasoning is challenged.

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Bitter Winter links: [Japan](#), [Religious Liberty](#), [Religious Persecution](#), [Unification Church](#)



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## The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 3. “Spiritual Sales” and Excessive Donations

by Massimo Introvigne | March 28, 2026 | Op-Eds Global | Article 3 of 6

Ultimately, the reason for the dissolution was the alleged manipulation of donors. Is there really enough evidence that it happened?



*“Spiritual sales”: some of the items Japanese members of the Unification Church (rather than the Church itself) were accused of selling at excessive prices, claiming they would bring good luck.*

The High Court decision affirming the dissolution of the Unification Church as a religious organization describes it as a profit-driven enterprise that uses psychological manipulation. The court argues that this manipulation leaves victims in a position where they are compelled to donate large sums of money, either directly or by purchasing artifacts such as seals, miniature pagodas, and other items at prices far exceeding their actual worth. Opponents called these “spiritual sales,” although later they extended the term to include donations where no physical objects were sold.

First, the Court references three criminal rulings from 2007 to 2009 involving executives and salespersons of companies that sold seals and other items. It highlights the decision regarding

Shinsei Ltd., which was the only case to impose, in addition to fines, prison sentences of two years for the company’s director and one year and six months for the sales manager, both with a four-year probation period.

Importantly, these individual believers’ criminal convictions are not taken into account when assessing grounds for dissolution. The judgment merely references these cases as context, possibly to imply that the Church is “anti-social,” though this is not explicitly stated. Clearly, not all crimes committed by members of a religious organization can justify dissolving the entire organization. Otherwise, cases involving pedophile priests should be grounds to dissolve the Roman Catholic Church.

Furthermore, the court extensively discusses the activities of a company founded in 1971 by Unification Church followers as Kosei Shoji Co., Ltd., which later renamed itself Sekai no Shiawase Co., Ltd., and eventually became Happy World Co., Ltd. (“Happy World”). Its business involved selling ginseng products, marble vases, pagodas, and seals. Although it acknowledges that in 1977 the Kobe District Court acquitted its director and other executives of all criminal charges filed against them, the High Court identifies the company as the main culprit in the “spiritual sales.”

Happy World indeed engaged in aggressive and objectionable practices to sell its products. This is also acknowledged by scholars who are members of the Unification Church, such as Michael L. Mickler in his book “The Unification Church Movement” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. 26). The decision acknowledges that the Unification Church did try to rein in Happy World as early as 1987: “In April 1987, Happy World sent a document to the Ministry of Health and Welfare and to the National Consumer Affairs Center stating that, effective as of the end of March of that year, it had notified its affiliated dealers that the sale of goods in a manner likely to give rise to misunderstandings commonly referred to as ‘spiritual sales’ was to be completely prohibited.” Eventually, Happy World ceased its operations altogether.

The cases involving Happy World and other companies go back over twenty years. They are revisited through the decision to portray the Church negatively. However, the dissolution decision is not based on these cases but on 26 civil judgments and several in-court and out-of-court settlements.

The question is whether, in the absence of criminal verdicts, civil decisions are enough to order the dissolution of a religious organization. The High Court acknowledges that Japanese case law has consistently answered this question in the negative. Subsequent Japanese governments have also maintained this interpretation. In 1994 and 1998, they resisted pressure from the anti-cult Lawyers’ Network to seek the Unification Church’s dissolution. In 2012, the Network sued the government for its refusal to initiate a dissolution case, but the government won. After Shinzo Abe’s assassination, Prime Minister Kishida initially said that pursuing a dissolution was impossible because there were no criminal convictions against the Church. However, as the High Court recalls, within 24 hours, Kishida reversed his stance and announced that civil verdicts were enough to pursue dissolution.

The High Court asserts it does not base its decision on Kishida’s opinion but instead on a Supreme Court ruling from March 3, 2025. This ruling concerned a non-penal fine imposed on the Church’s then President Tanaka for failing to fully respond to questions from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). In that ruling, which appeared intended to influence the Tokyo District Court’s then-upcoming first-degree decision on dissolution, the Supreme Court emphasized that civil torts are sufficient grounds for dissolving a religious organization.

Neither the Supreme Court nor the High Court clarified why they reversed decades’ worth of case law. It seems that this unconventional interpretation of the Religious Corporation Act was tailored specifically to target the Unification Church. Perhaps this was done without considering the possible effects on numerous other religious groups, most of which have never been accused of any crimes but could still face civil lawsuits. One of Japan’s most prominent Buddhist monks remarked in an interview that this argument for dissolution threatens all religions and temples.



*A victim of deprogramming:  
Unification Church member  
Dr. Hirohisa Koide tells his  
story at the United Nations  
in Geneva in 2025.*

In addition to the 26 civil judgments, the High Court noted that the Church had settled several civil cases. It summarized the verdicts and settlements through calculations as evidence of illegal solicitation of donations.

This approach is inherently flawed. A settlement differs fundamentally from a verdict. In a settlement, parties, without admitting the opposing arguments, agree on a compromise to avoid prolonged litigation. Any law school undergraduate would see that comparing settlements with

court decisions is illogical. Moreover, this position may deter religious corporations from settling civil cases in the future, fearing that their settlements could be used as evidence in later dissolution proceedings.

Perhaps because of widespread domestic and international criticism, the High Court decided to address the Unification Church’s objection that “with respect to the cases involving judicial settlements and out-of-court settlements... most of the attorneys who accepted those cases were members of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, and such attorneys have habitually made false allegations and fabricated evidence, so their assertions lack credibility. Christian pastors hostile to the Appellant [the Unification Church] as heretical and professional deprogrammers have caused parents of believers of the Appellant to abduct and confine such believers, have gone to the places of confinement to persuade them to withdraw from the Appellant, and have forcibly made them renounce their faith, with the result that such ‘apostates’ came to harbor hostility and hatred toward the Appellant and to make false allegations and statements without hesitation; because the plaintiffs and claimants in the settlement cases are such ‘apostates,’ their allegations and statements lack credibility.”

Actually, deprogrammed “apostates” not only hold “hostility” toward the Unification Church, but in several documented cases, they were told they might face re-confinement if they refused to sue the Church.

This is a serious and important issue, on which entire books have been written, raising doubts about the entire argument that, because the Church lost some civil cases and settled others, it should be dissolved. The High Court’s response is, with all due respect, absurd.

The court states that “if the allegations and statements of the plaintiffs, claimants, or their attorneys in the settlement cases truly lacked all credibility, then there would be no possibility that tortious conduct had occurred. In that event... it is difficult to think that the Appellant [the Unification Church] would nevertheless have agreed to judicial or out-of-court settlements. It must be said that no reasonable explanation has been provided for the fact that the Appellant did in fact agree to such settlements.”

This restates the flawed argument that settling is an admission of guilt and that, if the Church were innocent, it would not have settled. The High Court never considered that the Church, as the judges describe it, “had no choice but to agree to out-of-court settlements,” not because it was guilty, but because it was a target of a hostile social and judicial environment. In this climate, the Church knew that the stories the alleged “victims” were made to tell by deprogrammers and lawyers would be believed, regardless of their truth or falsehood.

The High Court’s bias is evident in its cavalier reliance on settlements to determine guilt. The Church has been dissolved without any criminal conviction. Overriding previous case law, civil decisions, and settlements were deemed sufficient for dissolution.

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## The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 4. The 2009 “Compliance Declaration”

by Massimo Introvigne | March 30, 2026 | Op-Eds Global | Article 4 of 6

After 2009, the number of incidents involving alleged improper solicitation of donations dropped to nearly zero. But the court maintains the problem still exists.



*Reverend Moon and Mother Han praying for the Church and the world in 2009, the year of the “Declaration of Compliance.”*

The High Court’s ruling to dissolve the Unification Church as a religious organization is grounded in the claim that it engaged in illegal solicitation of donations. However, the Church argues that such solicitation ceased in 2009, except in very few cases. Therefore, dissolving the organization in 2026, based on practices the Church had largely eliminated 17 years earlier, seems unreasonable.

The decision highlights how, although the Church had implemented measures since 1987 to address the problematic activities of the company Happy World (discussed in the previous article of this series), it became increasingly aware in the early 20th century that “spiritual sales” and pressure to donate put its members at risk of criminal and civil actions. While the court states that the criminal sentence against believers in the Shinsei Ltd. case (also covered earlier) was the immediate trigger for the Church’s response, it is also true that, in 2008, the Act on Specific Commercial Transactions was amended to become significantly stricter, primarily to protect consumers better.

As a result, in 2009, the Church issued a “Compliance Declaration,” which the verdict discusses at length not as a single document but as a plurality of official instructions sent to members in 2009, followed by interpretive texts in subsequent years. The latest guidelines, confirming that these directives were in full force and including new instructions, were sent to members in 2022 and 2023 in the wake of the Abe assassination and the controversies that followed.

The court recognizes that these directives were comprehensive. They included detailed instructions not to encourage or solicit donations by linking them to the karmic relationships of ancestors, and to avoid receiving donations that are disproportionate to the followers’ economic circumstances. The directives also specified that donations should come from individuals who have adequately studied the Unification doctrine, and that the recipient should be clearly identified as the Unification Church. Additionally, there were rules against soliciting donations from devotees with mental health issues or who appeared senile. Regarding donations from older people, members were advised to consider factors such as their decision-making ability, faith, living circumstances, and family situation to prevent issues arising from unreasonable donations.

If anything, as the High Court acknowledges, measures taken after the Abe assassination were even more strict, and the Church established an Independent Compensation Committee, including nationally renowned lawyers, to quickly reimburse dissatisfied donors.

And when, following the emotional reactions to Abe’s shooting, the government passed a new law on religious donations, the Church immediately vowed to comply, even though many experts criticized the law as a threat to religious liberty. Parenthetically, the High Court decision uses this 2023 law retroactively to evaluate the Church’s actions before it was enacted. It claims, unconvincingly, that this is not a case of retroactive law enforcement because the 2023 statute clarified and interpreted provisions that were implicitly included in earlier laws.

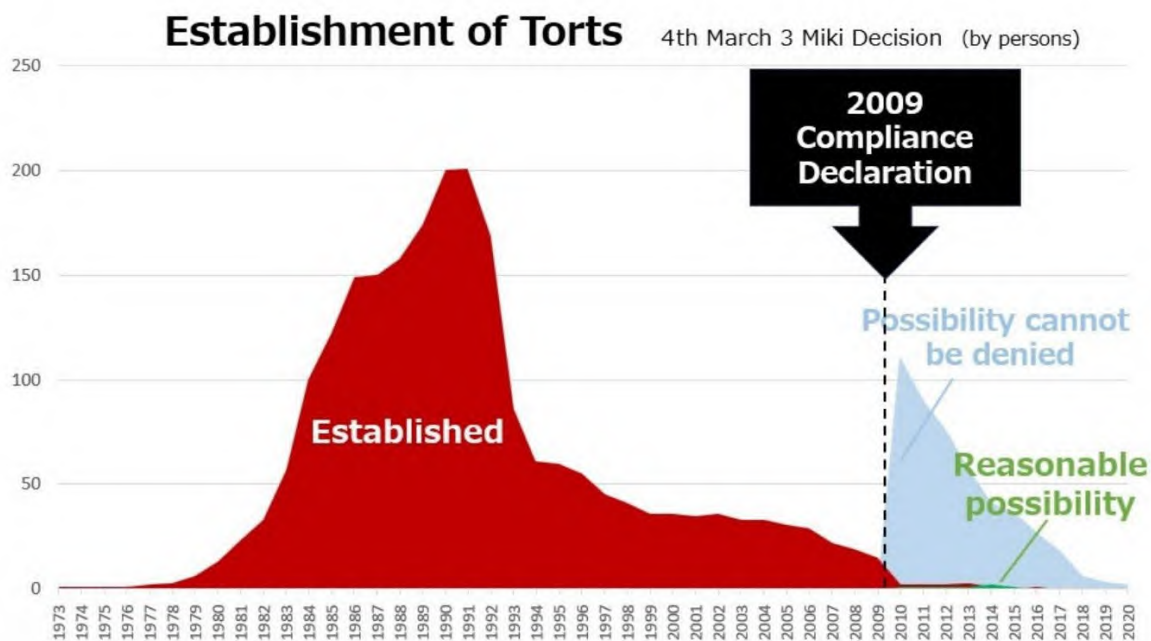
The measures introduced by the Church to end “spiritual sales” and improper solicitation of donations should have closed the case. Since it is illogical to dissolve a religious corporation for sins, whether real or perceived, committed more than fifteen years ago, and that it has since learned not to repeat, the logical conclusion is that the Church should not be dissolved.

Contrary to common reasoning, the High Court holds that the Compliance Declaration and its guidelines failed to adequately address the problem of illicit solicitation of donations. To support this claim, the court contradicts its own calculations. The ruling mainly depends on counting

cases where the Church lost civil lawsuits. It lists three cases where donors successfully sued the Church over donations or travel expenses to Korea—costs that a former believer later regretted—dating from after the 2009 Compliance Declaration, specifically between 2010 and 2013. No cases of donations after 2013 are mentioned. Additionally, the High Court cites a single settlement involving a donor who, after being a Church member for just five months in 2016, received a refund.

Clearly, four cases over 15 years do not indicate a trend. They merely show that the mechanism mandated by the Compliance Declaration took some years to be firmly established. Meanwhile, the cases decreased to a handful and eventually to zero.

However, the High Court introduces two new, unusual categories. The first includes cases where there is “a considerable possibility” that donations were unlawfully solicited after the Compliance Declaration. In this category, the High Court identified only two cases: a 2024 Supreme Court decision overturning previous rulings favorable to the Unification Church and a settlement. In the two cases, relatives attempted a complicated reconstruction of donations made by a deceased believer and a believer who had allegedly lost mental capacity.



The different categories of torts considered by the High Court decision (Miki decision). Source: Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama.

To reach significant numbers, the High Court constructs a second new category, the “cases in which it cannot be denied that there is a possibility” that donations were solicited through illicit means after the Compliance Declaration. The difference with the previous category is that here there is a mere “possibility” rather than “a considerable possibility.” Here, the High Court lists settlements involving 138 former members. To claim a veneer of fairness, it states that “cases in which settlement was concluded after the Shooting Incident [the Abe assassination] in this case are not included, because it cannot be ruled out that, in light of the heightened social criticism

directed at the Appellant [the Unification Church], the Appellant may have agreed to settlement even in cases where the claimants' allegations did not necessarily have sufficient basis."

However, the 138 listed cases—about ten per year from 2010 to 2023—are not clearly cases of illicit post-2009 solicitation of donations. If they were, the High Court would have included them in its first list of post-2009 (but pre-2014) wrongdoings, which listed only three civil decisions and one settlement. According to the court's own words, the 138 cases "do not permit a conclusive finding." Whether donations were made after 2009 and solicited through improper means "cannot be ruled out," but the opposite cannot be ruled out either. In summary, this is purely speculation, and no decision should have been based on it.

The numbers being thus inconclusive, the High Court resorts to three other arguments to prove that the illicit solicitation of donations continued after the Compliance Declaration of 2009. The first is that the amount of donations received by the Unification Church fluctuated but did not substantially decline after 2009. Of course, this is not evidence of any wrongdoing. If anything, it proves that, notwithstanding all social criticism, most members remained steadfast in the faith. To support dissolution, the court should not prove that donations were collected, but that they were collected through illicit means.

The second argument is that, after 2009, the church continued to set "numerical targets" or quotas for expected donations and evaluated pastors based on whether they met these quotas. The High Court admits that the system was gradually "mitigated" and that meeting the donation quota was only one of several criteria used to evaluate pastors (according to the church, affecting their overall performance by 10%). However, it maintains that the church could establish high numerical targets for donations again in the future—which is, again, speculation—and it appears to consider budgeting donations in advance as inherently objectionable.

Here, the court falls into the common mistake of treating practices shared by many denominations as unique when controversial organizations adopt them. Donations are the primary source of income for most churches. A budget forecast that does not account for donations would not make sense for a church. The High Court's wording is not neutral; it maliciously redefines budget forecasts as "quotas." Regarding the evaluation of pastors, all churches today require them to be wise managers, not just spiritual leaders. A pastor who cannot collect donations would not be effective, although this should not be the only way to judge his work—and it isn't in the Unification Church.

The third argument exposes the High Court's true purpose. It repeatedly states that the improper solicitation of donations is likely to happen again, because their "root cause lies in the Church itself." It suggests that as long as the Church promotes the universal mission of the True Parents, along with sacrifice, devotion, and helping suffering ancestors, it will inevitably continue to gather large donations and prompt believers to solicit contributions unlawfully. Therefore, dissolution becomes unavoidable.

It seems that the court's only satisfaction would be a public admission that the church's theology is flawed and inherently abusive, coupled with a pledge to modify or eliminate core elements of

the Unification doctrine. The decision ultimately circles back, showing it does not address abuses that are mostly corrected but rather seeks to suppress the church based on its fundamental nature and beliefs.

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Bitter Winter links: [Japan](#), [Religious Liberty](#), [Religious Persecution](#), [Unification Church](#)



**Massimo Introvigne** 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.

# Bitter Winter

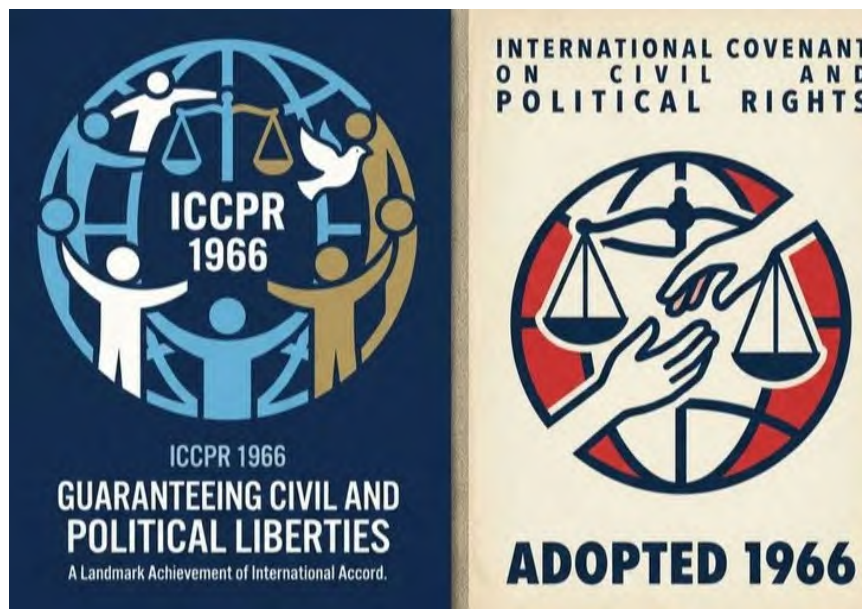
A magazine on religious liberty and human rights

<https://bitterwinter.org/the-tokyo-high-court-unification-church-decision-5-violating-international-law/>

## The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 5. Violating International Law

by Massimo Introvigne | March 31, 2026 | Op-Eds Global | Article 5 of 6

Restricting freedom of religion or belief on the grounds of “social acceptability” and “public welfare” is prohibited by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.



*Posters celebrating the adoption of the ICCPR by the UN General Assembly in 1966. It entered into force ten years later, in 1976.*

In 1978, Japan signed the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and ratified it in 1979.

There are several ICCPR issues in the Tokyo High Court decision upholding the dissolution of the Unification Church as a religious corporation. Some concern the right to a fair trial and to

public hearings. Under Article 14.1 of the ICCPR, serious reasons should justify the decision to conduct the proceedings without public hearings. The High Court defends its decision not to hold public hearings on constitutional grounds. Academic experts disagree, and doubts remain.

The right to a fair trial was also violated by the Ministry's introduction of statements that the Unification Church attorneys believe are false. The High Court offers a rather weak answer to this objection, focusing on a case where an alleged victim's attorney reported that his client had felt "threatened" by the Church into donating. In an audio recording submitted by the Church, the alleged victim stated that the "threat" was a fabrication by the attorney. The High Court answered that in the recording, the supposed victim was having a conversation with "active believers" of the Unification Church. He "may have said something to them that differed from what the claimant had told the attorney." Even in this case, why only what he supposedly told the attorney should be accepted as true is not explained.

The main violation of the ICCPR concerns Article 18 on freedom of religion or belief, which Japanese authorities and courts are accused of violating.

The UN Human Rights Committee, the body charged with interpreting the ICCPR on behalf of the United Nations, has repeatedly examined Japan's constitutional and statutory limitations on freedom of religion. The ICCPR lists specific grounds for restricting freedom of religion or belief, and this list is definitive rather than merely suggestive. "Public welfare" is not included.

Article 12 of the Japanese Constitution states that human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, are protected insofar as they are used "for public welfare." Article 81 of the 1951 Religious Corporation Act provides that courts can order the dissolution of a religious corporation when "in violation of laws and regulations, the religious corporation commits an act which is clearly found to harm public welfare substantially."

As noted by attorney Patricia Duval in her in-depth study of the issue, from its very first report to the Committee in 1980, the Japanese government has defended the Constitution's "public welfare" limitation on rights with a simple assurance: the notion is interpreted narrowly and is not used to impose unreasonable restrictions.

For more than four decades, the Committee has rejected that explanation. In every review cycle, it has warned that the "public welfare" clause is too vague and too broad, and that it risks allowing limitations on freedoms that go beyond what the Covenant permits. The Committee has repeatedly reminded Japan that any restriction on freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or expression must meet the strict tests set out in articles 18(3) and 19(3) of the ICCPR. This concern appears consistently in its concluding observations, including those issued in 2008, 2014, and most recently in 2022.

Patricia Duval concludes that Japanese authorities have long been aware—for more than 45 years—that their domestic legal framework does not fully align with the Covenant's standards. Despite this, they have not undertaken the reforms needed to bring national law into conformity with the obligations they accepted at the international level.

After the first-instance decision against the Unification Church was rendered, in 2025, the United Nations, through four of its Special Rapporteurs, warned Japan that “The civil tort rulings on which the dissolution decision was based rely on the violations of ‘social appropriateness’ which were deemed to constitute a serious harm to ‘public welfare.’ As previously noted by the Human Rights Committee, the concept of ‘public welfare’ is vague and open-ended and may permit restrictions exceeding those permissible under the ICCPR... Any restrictions on the exercise of Article 18 rights must comply strictly with the limitations set out in Article 18.3 of the ICCPR, as interpreted by the UN Human Rights Committee.”



*The four UN Special Rapporteurs who signed the 2025 statement criticizing the dissolution: from the left, above, Nazila Ghanea (freedom of religion or belief), and Nicolas Levrat (minority issues), below, Farida Shaheed (right to education), and Gina Romero (rights of children).*

The High Court decision repeats more than twenty times that the activities of the Unification Church “exceeded the bounds deemed socially acceptable” in Japanese society and should therefore be considered as harming “public welfare.”

The court is aware of the objection that “social acceptability” and “public welfare” are outside the list of permitted grounds for restricting religious liberty under Article 18.3 ICCPR.

Its answer rests on two arguments. The first is that “social acceptability” is just a criterion among others used to determine whether an act falls outside the sphere of “public welfare.” As for “public welfare” in itself, the court argues that it is implicitly, although not explicitly, included in the list of Article 18.3.

The High Court writes that “conduct that constitutes a tort under Article 709 of the Civil Code and is clearly recognized as significantly harming the public welfare may be understood as

conduct that infringes ‘public safety, public order, public health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others,’ as referred to in Article 18(3) of the ICCPR.”

However, the High Court of Tokyo is not the proper authority to decide whether Japanese law violates international law. This assessment should come from a supra-national authority, namely the UN Human Rights Committee in the case of the ICCPR. The Committee has already expressed itself more than once. It has told Japan that the interpretation the High Court relies on is wrong. “Public welfare” is not part of the list of permitted restrictions of religious liberty of Article 18.3. It is an abusive addition to it and should be eliminated from Japanese law.

The second argument of the High Court is that the dissolution of a religious corporation is not a limitation of religious liberty. Therefore, it falls outside of the scope of the ICCPR. As a rationale for this strange claim, the High Court offers that “a dissolution order merely deprives a religious corporation of its legal personality and carries no legal effect whatsoever, prohibiting or restricting the religious activities of believers.”

I will address the factual truth of this statement in the next article of this series. Here, I focus on the violation of the ICCPR and the High Court’s obvious misconstruction of the meaning of “freedom of religion” in the Covenant. It is a common argument used by totalitarian states such as China (which has signed the ICCPR, although it has not ratified it—but it applies to Hong Kong and Macau) that restricting the public activity of certain religious organizations does not violate freedom of religion or belief since believers remain free to believe privately. This is not what the ICCPR is all about. Article 18.1 protects “freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest... religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

“In community” means that corporate religious liberty of churches and organizations is protected, not only individual freedom of belief. To guarantee such corporate liberty, states should make sure that the preconditions for public worship, practice, and missionary activity are not restricted. In Japan, when a religious corporation is dissolved, its assets, including places of worship and bank accounts, are transferred to a liquidator. Believers are thus deprived of the material preconditions to enjoy the freedom of religion of Article 18.1. I will explore this issue further in the next and final article of this series.

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Bitter Winter links: [Japan, Religious Liberty, Religious Persecution, Unification Church](#)



**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.

# Bitter Winter

A magazine on religious liberty and human rights

<https://bitterwinter.org/the-tokyo-high-court-unification-church-decision-6-who-will-protect-the-believers/>

## The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 6. Who Will Protect the Believers

by Massimo Introvigne | April 1, 2026 | Op-Eds Global | Article 6 of 6

Restricting freedom of religion or belief on the grounds of “social acceptability” and “public welfare” is prohibited by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.



*A few hours after the dissolution decision was announced, believers all over Japan were prevented from entering the premises of their local churches. AI-generated.*

In 1978, Japan signed the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and ratified it in 1979.

The High Court recognizes that dissolving the Unification Church as a religious corporation could significantly affect the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of believers. Although the decision cites a few hundred ex-members who claim to have suffered due to their past ties with

the Church, the actual number of devotees whose religious freedom and daily lives are now at risk is much greater.

The court solemnly proclaims that it does not want to interfere with the individual religious liberty of believers. They “are not prevented from continuing an unincorporated religious organization or from newly forming one, nor are they prevented from performing religious acts or newly preparing facilities and materials for use in such acts. That is, a dissolution order is not attended by any legal effect whatsoever prohibiting or restricting the religious acts of believers.”

The decision even attempts to argue that the corporate freedom of religion of the believers’ community will still be protected: “They are not prevented from continuing the ‘Family Federation for World Peace and Unification’ as a religious organization without legal personality, nor are they prevented from establishing a new religious organization. Thus, it cannot be said that they would be unable to conduct religious activities as an organization.”

Since the religious corporation ceases to exist, the employment contracts between it and its pastors and other employees “are generally understood to terminate” (although they may continue for a while as employees of the corporation’s liquidator, but without carrying out religious activities). However, the High Court notes that “although the employment contracts between the employees and the appellant [the Unification Church] as a juridical person would legally terminate, it remains possible that those employment relationships could continue as employment contracts between the employees and the religious organization in its non-incorporated form.” In the worst case scenario, the High Court assumes that these pastors and other employees would find comfort in the prospect of surviving on “unemployment insurance and public assistance.”

As for the social discrimination of believers, the High Court virtuously comments that “there is no justification for the appellant’s believers to be subjected to social discrimination, exclusion, or persecution as a result of the dissolution order against the appellant. (Needless to say, social discrimination, exclusion, or persecution against the appellant’s believers is impermissible under any circumstances, regardless of the reasons).”

With all these noble words, the court admits that the result of the dissolution order is that, without waiting for the outcome of the recourse filed by the Church with the Supreme Court (a Japanese legal anomaly), a liquidator will immediately take possession of the assets of the religious corporation, including places of worship, offices, and bank accounts. It euphemistically calls these “some impediments” that may affect the believers as “indirect” consequences of the dissolution order.

Immediately means immediately. Within hours of the announcement of the dissolution decision, lawyers and police officers appeared at the majority of the 260 Unification Church places of worship throughout Japan, seized all assets, confiscated the keys, and told believers they would not be allowed to enter the premises. As reported by attorney Patricia Duval in a statement at the United Nations in Geneva, a devotee revealed that “Even before the High Court’s decision was made public, approximately 1,000 lawyers and police officers appeared to have

collaborated to ensure that the liquidation process went smoothly. Despite assurances from the government and the courts that religious freedom would be protected even after the corporation's dissolution, we quickly found ourselves unable to practice our religion. The simultaneous dispatch of liquidators to churches across the country resembled a massive investigation into a criminal organization. Churches across the country were closed during the dissolution, leaving believers without a place of worship.”

Even before the dissolution, local city councils and hotels refused to rent rooms to Unification Church members, claiming they were part of an “anti-social” organization. If they cannot use the premises seized by the liquidator nor rent other places, where should they gather for their religious activities? Are these just “impediments”? What about the High Court's assurance that believers “would not be prevented from performing religious acts”? Who is protecting the followers from “social discrimination”?



*Family Federation members protesting for religious liberty in Hiroshima, 2024.*

Although the latter question remains unanswered, another question has an easy answer. Who is actively promoting discrimination against Unification Church believers? Both the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales and the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, which have long-standing enmity toward the Church, issued statements after the dissolution order.

Unbelievably, the Network argues that the harsh measures imposed on Unification Church believers following the dissolution are insufficient. It calls for new laws restricting their rights to proselytize and collect donations, whether as individual believers or on behalf of any newly established organizations. It also wants ex-members who speak publicly against the Church (those sociologists call “apostates”) to be protected from “defamation and slander.” The law provides broad protection against defamation. However, it appears the Network seeks an additional safeguard—a specific shield that would prevent independent journalists and scholars from exposing the apostates’ assertions when they deem those claims false.

The Network insists that “only a very small portion of victims have reported their damages.” The statement implies that every second- or third-generation member is a “victim,” although most of them “have not yet spoken out.” In fact, every child born to parents who believe in the Unification Church’s teachings is a potential victim.

The number of victims is therefore limitless. The Religious Corporation Act and the Articles of Incorporation of the Church state that once a dissolved entity’s liquidation is finished and victims (and their lawyers) have been paid, any remaining assets should be transferred to an entity designated by the original organization. Lawyers are creating a system to ensure that no assets are left behind, as new claims from additional “victims” will continue to arise, potentially forever.

In the unlikely event that anything remains, the High Court has already included in its decision malicious comments about Tenchi Seikyo, the religious organization legally incorporated since 1987, which, since 2009, the Unification Church has indicated should receive its residual assets in the event of dissolution. Essentially, the High Court noted that Tenchi Seikyo and its Head Priest had consistently maintained friendly relations with the Unification Church and cannot be considered truly independent from the Church. Naturally, a church would want its assets to pass to a friendly religious organization. It would be strange for it to designate a hostile group.

The Network claims that “unless some provision is made,” some assets of the dissolved Unification Church may end up with Tenchi Seikyo, which is accused (without evidence) of having also victimized “many victims of the Unification Church.” The Japan Federation of Bar Associations recognized that the provision for transferring the residual assets to Tenchi Seikyo is legally valid, and states that “it is essential to take legal measures, such as establishing an exception to the rules regarding the distribution of remaining assets in the case of dissolution by order, before the liquidation procedures are completed.” It also asks for further legislation to “tackle the fundamental problems related to the antisocial religious activities that lie beneath the surface” and extend the “protection” of “second-generation members” to other “religious groups.”

These comments are very interesting because they show that the left-leaning anti-Unification-Church lawyers, who started their politically motivated campaigns against the Unification Church in 1987, are not happy with just dissolving the organization. They also need to keep working, finding new targets for their efforts.

While the High Court claims that those who believe in the message of Reverend Moon and Mother Han as the True Parents “are not prevented from continuing an unincorporated religious organization or from newly forming one,” the militant lawyers call for measures to eradicate any group that will continue to promote this belief. They also hope to use the High Court decision as a precedent to target other groups. Most unfortunately, the High Court’s comments attacking the Unification Church theology directly and promoting the pseudo-scientific theory of mind control offer a solid foundation for these campaigns. The battle for religious liberty in Japan is entering a new phase.

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Bitter Winter links: [Japan](#), [Religious Liberty](#), [Religious Persecution](#), [Unification Church](#)



**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.

## A Death Penalty: The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision

Massimo Introvigne  
*CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)*  
maxintrovigne@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the March 4, 2026, Tokyo High Court decision ordering the dissolution of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly known as the Unification Church) as a religious corporation. Drawing on the court’s extensive ruling, the study identifies six core themes: the court’s selective and often caricatural reconstruction of Unification theology; its reliance on the discredited notion of “mental manipulation”; its treatment of “spiritual sales” and donations; its dismissal of the Church’s 2009 compliance reforms; its cavalier handling of procedural fairness and international law; and its claim that dissolution is compatible with constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. The analysis demonstrates that the High Court repeatedly crosses the boundary between legal evaluation and theological judgment, treating doctrines such as “offering all things to God” and “ancestral liberation” as evidence of coercion rather than as religious beliefs. It further shows that the court revives brainwashing theories long rejected by international scholarship and jurisprudence, asserting that believers’ free will is “restricted” or “suppressed” without defining the mechanisms involved. The decision relies on civil judgments and settlements rather than criminal convictions—contrary to decades of Japanese case law—and interprets settlements as implicit admissions of guilt. Finally, the article argues that the ruling violates international law and poses a systemic threat to religious liberty in Japan, as its logic could be applied to many mainstream traditions whose practices involve significant donations or centralized financial structures. The Tokyo High Court’s reasoning, shaped by anti-cult activism and political pressures following the Abe assassination, marks a significant departure from established legal standards and raises profound concerns for the future of freedom of religion or belief in Japan.

**KEYWORDS:** Unification Church, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, Dissolution of the Unification Church in Japan, National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, Brainwashing.

### *Introduction*

On March 4, 2026, the Tokyo High Court announced its decision to uphold the Tokyo District Court’s verdict ordering the dissolution of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly known as the Unification Church and still often referred to by that name) as a religious corporation. What follows is an analysis of the voluminous decision (Tokyo High Court 2026; unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from this decision). The text is often repetitive, and my

analysis proceeds by examining its six main themes rather than following its arguments in the order in which they are presented.

The decision first introduces in its own way the nature and aims of the Unification Church. Second, it discusses the methods through which the Church allegedly pursues its aims, i.e., mental manipulation. Third, it examines at length the reported fruits of mental manipulation: “spiritual sales” and excessive donations. Fourth, it denies that the objectionable and “socially unacceptable” collection of donations ceased after the Church’s internal reforms in 2009. Fifth, it answers the objections that the procedure was unfair and violated international law. Sixth, it insists that the dissolution is consistent with the constitutional and international protection of freedom of religion or belief.

### *1. A Caricatural Presentation of the Unification Church*

The first theme is a somewhat caricatural presentation of the Unification Church. Scholars of religion know that reconstructing the history, theology, and practice of a religious organization is a difficult task, particularly when the group is comparatively new and still evolving. Any such reconstruction is as good as its sources. The High Court’s description of the Church is suspiciously similar to presentations by Japanese anti-cult scholars and to the maliciously selective use of Church texts by the main anti-Unification-Church organization in Japan, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, which is repeatedly quoted. The Unification Church has been studied by numerous international scholars, including Eileen Barker, George Chryssides, David Bromley, and others. Their works are conveniently ignored.

The decision reports that the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012) and his widow, Mother Hak Ja Han, are referred to as “the ‘True Parents,’ on the understanding that they are the Second Advent Messiah (Savior) and the True Parents of humankind.” Their message, we read, is about the “restoration of all things”:

Through the exercise of faith and by offering all things to God, human beings are said to recover the love and heart befitting their original status as children of God, thereby restoring the proper relationship among God, humanity, and all creation.

These statements, although simplified, are not incorrect. Yet the court quickly shifts from this theological basis to a harsh interpretation: “offering all things to

God” means mandating that members give as much money as possible to the Church. It emphasizes quotes where Reverend Moon urges generous giving, including his statement that “money’s ultimate purpose is to serve God for the sake of humanity.” In the court’s view, such excerpts prove a systematic effort to extract donations.

The court then presents the Unification Church doctrine of Japan as the Mother Nation and Korea as the Father Nation, in the position respectively of Eve and Adam. Within Unification theology, several nations, including the United States, play symbolic roles. However, the court oversimplifies this intricate worldview to a single practical claim: that the doctrine serves to pressure Japanese believers into financially supporting the Church’s Korean headquarters.

Another doctrine the High Court focuses on is “ancestral karma.” This is the teaching that some of our ancestors are (in the words of the decision) “suffering in the spirit world or hell,” and their situation negatively affects their descendants. The Unification Church proposes specific “ancestral liberation” rituals to liberate these souls. Donations normally accompany the performance of such rituals.

The impression the decision wants to convey is that the theology of the Unification Church is just a pretext to collect donations in Japan to support Reverend Moon and, after his death, Mother Han in Korea. The text gives more than a nod to a certain anti-Korean animosity present in Japanese society. It reports, from journalistic sources and without examining accuracy or context, alleged remarks made in 2023 by Mother Han in reaction to the persecution of the Church after the assassination of Shinzo Abe, mentioning the war crimes committed by Japan against Korea and other countries, which is certainly a sensitive argument for the Japanese.

This reconstruction is so selective that it skews towards caricature. The Unification Church was founded in Korea, and its headquarters are there. However, the Korean center supports missionary and other activities worldwide. Such centralized systems of collecting and allocating funds are certainly not unique to the Unification Church. A part of the donations collected by the Catholic Church internationally goes to the Vatican and is redistributed from there. The same is true for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, and of countless other religious organizations. Centralization is not proof of exploitation—it is a practical method for coordinating international work.

The decision implies that the Unification Church milks Japanese believers to enrich the Korean leaders. This malicious reconstruction ignores the fact that the Korean headquarters supports a massive missionary activity in dozens of countries. It also downplays the fact that the Church's donations are not used solely for missionary activities. They support a large and successful network of charitable institutions and schools serving local communities, with admirable results in Africa, some of them largely funded by Japanese believers, and elsewhere. I visited some of these institutions in Africa, where none of the students are or have become members of the Church. The Unification Church has also sponsored impressive peace education initiatives. Mother Han is well-known as “the Mother of Peace.”

The High Court decision mentions these activities only in passing, highlighting “political activities aimed at opposing communism,” which, of course, are the *bête noire* of the left-leaning attorneys of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales and the main reason the Network was established in 1987 (Fukuda 2023, 52–3).

The court also implies that the “ancestral liberation” rituals are a mere money-making enterprise. Here, the decision dangerously encroaches on the sphere of theology and seems to endorse one of the oldest claims of Protestant opponents of the Unification Church, who labeled it “heretical.” The Catholic Church teaches that souls after death can go to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory. The latter, Purgatory, is the temporary residence of those who are not sentenced to Hell but need a time of purification before they can enter Heaven. This is a time of suffering, which their descendants and friends can alleviate through rituals (“Masses for the dead”) and donations, thereby obtaining “indulgences” for their deceased loved ones and, at the same time, acquiring merits and benefits for themselves.

In the 16th century, this doctrine was sometimes preached mechanically, making the amount of monetary offerings by the descendants correspond to the time after which the souls of their deceased relatives would be allowed to leave Purgatory. This was the *casus belli* used by Martin Luther (1483–1546) to deny not only the doctrine of indulgences but the existence of Purgatory and ultimately the divine authority of the Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation had started.

While the Catholic Church has repudiated the excesses of its 16th-century preachers, it still maintains its doctrines of Purgatory, indulgences, and Masses for

the dead (for which donations are collected). For Protestants, any reference by a non-Catholic religious organization to ancestors who can be liberated from their sufferings through rituals and donations immediately evokes the Catholic “heresy” that ignited Luther’s righteous indignation. In both Korea and Japan, the Unification Church’s “ancestral liberation” looked to Protestants as a return to the Catholic doctrine of indulgences they hated with a vengeance.

These theological debates are well-known and not without interest. They are not, however, the provinces of secular courts of law. Surely, there are illegal ways of collecting donations that courts may object to. What they cannot do is assess the validity of doctrines like karma, the afterlife, or the spiritual state of ancestors.

The Tokyo High Court’s ruling, however, repeatedly crosses that boundary. It treats theological concepts as evidence of wrongdoing, interprets religious terms in the most cynical way, and relies heavily on sources that are openly antagonistic to the movement. The outcome is a skewed depiction influenced by decades of anti-cult activism.

If courts start to treat religious doctrines with suspicion whenever they involve donations, many mainstream traditions could become vulnerable. Catholic Masses for the dead, Buddhist memorial offerings, Shinto rites, and countless other rituals in world religions involve financial contributions. To single out one group’s beliefs as illegitimate simply because they include significant donations opens a door that no constitutional democracy should ever open.

The Tokyo High Court ruling raises deep concerns about the line between legitimate legal oversight and unwarranted intrusion into religious belief. These concerns will not fade with this decision and will influence the future of religious freedom in Japan and internationally for many years to come.

## *2. Mental Manipulation: The Return of “Brainwashing”*

A second central theme of the decision is mental manipulation as the main tool through which the Church allegedly pursues its aims.

The High Court decision reiterates this theme across twelve different paragraphs, repeatedly emphasizing that the Unification Church employs techniques “restricting the free will” and placing its “victims” “in a state in which it is difficult to make an appropriate judgment.” The court believes these

techniques are so effective that victims find it “difficult to withdraw from the Appellant’s [Unification Church] doctrine.” Ultimately, the free will of the believer is not only “restricted” but “suppressed.” The court states that this extreme outcome is achieved through specialized techniques of “psychological influence.”

The decision avoids using the word “brainwashing” but largely reproduces its logic. The idea that certain religious groups have mysterious techniques capable of overriding individual choice has a long and troubled history. It has been used for centuries to discredit unpopular minorities, and modern scholarship consistently rejects it as pseudoscience (see Introvigne 2022). Yet, the High Court treats it as fact, as if mentioning mental manipulation explains why thousands of Japanese citizens voluntarily joined and supported the Unification Church for decades.

The notion that religious conversion must be the result of some hidden coercive force is far older than the contemporary anti-cult movement. In the nineteenth century, critics of the Latter-day Saints insisted that no rational person could embrace Mormonism unless subjected to “mesmeric” influence (Ward 1855, 230). Long before that, Roman authors described early Christians as victims of sorcery, while Chinese imperial officials accused unauthorized religious movements of using black magic to ensnare followers (Wu 2017, 155–58). Medieval European polemicists recycled the same accusations against groups they labeled “heretical.” The pattern is always the same: when a religion appears too unfamiliar, too demanding, or too threatening to established institutions, its converts are portrayed as dupes rather than agents.

Modern anti-cult ideology replaced the vocabulary of magic with the vocabulary of psychology. After the Korean War, Western intelligence agencies became fascinated with the idea that Communist regimes had developed techniques to forcibly “convert” prisoners. The term “brainwashing” was coined not by scientists but by a journalist with ties to intelligence (Hunter 1951), and it entered public discourse through sensationalist accounts rather than empirical research. The U.S. government later acknowledged that these early theories were speculative and politically motivated. Nevertheless, they provided a template for later claims that new religious movements use similar methods.

Anti-cult activists in the 1960s and 1970s revived the brainwashing narrative to explain why young people were joining new religious movements. Their theories gained traction among anxious parents and the media, but they fared poorly under legal scrutiny. The decisive moment came in 1990, when a U.S. federal court

examined the scientific status of “coercive persuasion” in the *Fishman* case. After reviewing extensive expert testimony, the court concluded that such theories lacked empirical foundation. It ruled that “Theories regarding the coercive persuasion practiced by religious cults are not sufficiently established to be admitted as evidence in federal courts of law” (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990). The judge also excluded expert testimony based on these models, finding that they did not meet minimal standards of scientific reliability.

European jurisprudence reached similar conclusions. In 2010, the European Court of Human Rights noted that “there is no generally accepted and scientific definition of what constitutes ‘mind control’” (European Court of Human Rights 2010, 129). It further observed that many behaviors cited as evidence of coercion—intense commitment, deference to leaders, communal living, enthusiastic proselytism—are common across a wide range of religious traditions. The Italian Constitutional Court had already abolished the crime of “plagio,” a Fascist-era statute akin to “brainwashing,” in 1981, declaring it incompatible with both scientific knowledge and religious liberty (Corte Costituzionale 1981).

These legal precedents matter because they reflect a broad international recognition: claims of “psychological manipulation” in religious contexts are too vague, too ideologically loaded, and too easily abused to serve as a basis for state intervention. They allow courts to substitute their own value judgments for the lived experiences of believers. They also create a dangerous asymmetry: mainstream religions are assumed to attract followers through legitimate persuasion, while minority religions are presumed guilty of manipulation unless proven otherwise.

The Tokyo High Court’s decision falls squarely into this pattern. It asserts that the Unification Church uses “psychological influence.” Still, it never defines the term, never explains how such influence differs from ordinary religious exhortation, and never demonstrates that members were deprived of their capacity to choose. Instead, it relies on the assumption—common in anti-cult discourse—that intense religious commitment is inherently suspicious. When believers donate generously, the court interprets this not as an expression of faith but as evidence of manipulation. When they accept theological teachings about sacrifice, providence, karma, or the ancestors, the court treats these beliefs as tools of coercion rather than as sincere convictions.

This approach is deeply problematic. All religions encourage giving, often in strong terms. Many emphasize the spiritual value of sacrifice, the importance of supporting the community, or the moral duty to contribute to a larger mission. If such exhortations are reinterpreted as “psychological influence,” then the boundary between legitimate religion and illicit manipulation becomes impossible to draw. The High Court’s reasoning would apply equally to Protestant tithing, Catholic appeals for contributing to the Vatican’s “Peter’s Pence,” Buddhist fundraising for temple construction, or Shinto requests for offerings. The difference lies not in the methods but in the evaluator’s approval or disapproval of the underlying theology.

Moreover, the court’s analysis ignores the most basic principle of religious freedom: adults are entitled to make commitments that others may find excessive, irrational, or incomprehensible. The state does not have the authority to declare that certain beliefs are too strange to be sincerely held, or that certain forms of devotion are incompatible with free will. To do so is to treat devotees of religious minorities as inherently less capable of agency than members of majority faiths.

The High Court’s reliance on “psychological influence” thus represents a step backward, reviving a discredited concept in both academic and legal circles for decades. It allows the court to pathologize religious commitment, reinterpret voluntary acts as coerced, and justify extreme state intervention based on speculative, unscientific assumptions. In doing so, it risks undermining the very foundations of freedom of religion or belief in Japan.

A legal system committed to constitutional principles should not rely on theories that courts elsewhere have rejected as pseudoscience. The Tokyo High Court’s decision, by embracing the language of “psychological influence,” crosses a line that democratic societies have long recognized as dangerous. The consequences will extend far beyond the Unification Church unless this reasoning is challenged.

### 3. *“Spiritual Sales” and Donations*

The High Court decision affirming the dissolution of the Unification Church as a religious organization describes it as a profit-driven enterprise that uses psychological manipulation. The court argues that this manipulation leaves victims

in a position where they are compelled to donate large sums of money, either directly or by purchasing artifacts such as seals, miniature pagodas, and other items at prices far exceeding their actual worth. Opponents called these “spiritual sales,” although later they extended the term to include donations where no physical objects were sold.

First, the Court references three criminal rulings from 2007 to 2009 involving executives and salespersons of companies that sold seals and other items. It highlights the decision regarding Shinsei Ltd., which was the only case to impose, in addition to fines, prison sentences of two years for the company’s director and one year and six months for the sales manager, both with a four-year probation period.

Importantly, these individual believers’ criminal convictions are not taken into account when assessing grounds for dissolution. The judgment merely references these cases as context, possibly to imply that the Church is “anti-social,” though this is not explicitly stated. Clearly, not all crimes committed by members of a religious organization can justify dissolving the entire organization. Otherwise, cases involving pedophile priests should be grounds to dissolve the Roman Catholic Church.

Furthermore, the court extensively discusses the activities of a company founded in 1971 by Unification Church followers as Kosei Shoji Co., Ltd., which later renamed itself Sekai no Shiawase Co., Ltd., and eventually became Happy World Co., Ltd. (“Happy World”). Its business involved selling ginseng products, marble vases, pagodas, and seals. Although it acknowledges that in 1977 the Kobe District Court acquitted its director and other executives of all criminal charges filed against them, the High Court identifies the company as the main culprit in the “spiritual sales.”

Happy World indeed engaged in aggressive and objectionable practices to sell its products. This is also acknowledged by scholars who are members of the Unification Church, such as Michael L. Mickler (Mickler 2022, 26). The High Court decision acknowledges that the Unification Church did try to rein in Happy World as early as 1987:

In April 1987, Happy World sent a document to the Ministry of Health and Welfare and to the National Consumer Affairs Center stating that, effective as of the end of March of that year, it had notified its affiliated dealers that the sale of goods in a manner likely to give

rise to misunderstandings commonly referred to as “spiritual sales” was to be completely prohibited.

Eventually, Happy World ceased its operations altogether.

The cases involving Happy World and other companies go back over twenty years. They are revisited through the decision to portray the Church negatively. However, the dissolution decision is not based on these cases but on 26 civil judgments and several in-court and out-of-court settlements.

The question is whether, in the absence of criminal verdicts, civil decisions are enough to order the dissolution of a religious organization. The High Court acknowledges that Japanese case law has consistently answered this question in the negative. Subsequent Japanese governments have also maintained this interpretation. In 1994 and 1998, they resisted pressure from the anti-cult Lawyers’ Network to seek the Unification Church’s dissolution. In 2012, the Network sued the government for its refusal to initiate a dissolution case, but the government won. After Shinzo Abe’s assassination, Prime Minister Kishida initially said that pursuing a dissolution was impossible because there were no criminal convictions against the Church. However, as the High Court recalls, within 24 hours, Kishida reversed his stance and announced that civil verdicts were enough to pursue dissolution.

The High Court asserts it does not base its decision on Kishida’s opinion but instead on a Supreme Court ruling from March 3, 2025. This ruling concerned a non-penal fine imposed on the Church’s then President Tanaka for failing to fully respond to questions from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). In that ruling, which appeared intended to influence the Tokyo District Court’s then-upcoming first-degree decision on dissolution, the Supreme Court emphasized that civil torts are sufficient grounds for dissolving a religious organization (Nakayama 2025).

Neither the Supreme Court nor the High Court clarified why they reversed decades’ worth of case law. It seems that this unconventional interpretation of the Religious Corporation Act was tailored specifically to target the Unification Church. Perhaps this was done without considering the possible effects on numerous other religious groups, most of which have never been accused of any crimes but could still face civil lawsuits. One of Japan’s most prominent Buddhist monks remarked in an interview that this argument for dissolution threatens all religions and temples (*Bitter Winter* 2025).

In addition to the 26 civil judgments, the High Court noted that the Church had settled several civil cases. It summarized the verdicts and settlements through calculations as evidence of illegal solicitation of donations.

This approach is inherently flawed. A settlement differs fundamentally from a verdict. In a settlement, parties, without admitting the opposing arguments, agree on a compromise to avoid prolonged litigation. Any law school undergraduate would see that comparing settlements with court decisions is illogical. Moreover, this position may deter religious corporations from settling civil cases in the future, fearing that their settlements could be used as evidence in later dissolution proceedings.

Perhaps because of widespread domestic and international criticism, the High Court decided to address the Unification Church's objection that

with respect to the cases involving judicial settlements and out-of-court settlements... most of the attorneys who accepted those cases were members of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, and such attorneys have habitually made false allegations and fabricated evidence, so their assertions lack credibility. Christian pastors hostile to the Appellant [the Unification Church] as heretical and professional deprogrammers have caused parents of believers of the Appellant to abduct and confine such believers, have gone to the places of confinement to persuade them to withdraw from the Appellant, and have forcibly made them renounce their faith, with the result that such "apostates" came to harbor hostility and hatred toward the Appellant and to make false allegations and statements without hesitation; because the plaintiffs and claimants in the settlement cases are such "apostates," their allegations and statements lack credibility.

Actually, deprogrammed "apostates" not only hold "hostility" towards the Unification Church, but in several documented cases, they were told they might face re-confinement if they refused to sue the Church.

This is a serious and important issue, on which entire books have been written, raising doubts about the entire argument that, because the Church lost some civil cases and settled others, it should be dissolved. The High Court's response is, with all due respect, absurd.

The court states that

if the allegations and statements of the plaintiffs, claimants, or their attorneys in the settlement cases truly lacked all credibility, then there would be no possibility that tortious conduct had occurred. In that event... it is difficult to think that the Appellant [the Unification Church] would nevertheless have agreed to judicial or out-of-court settlements. It must be said that no reasonable explanation has been provided for the fact that the Appellant did, in fact, agree to such settlements.

This restates the flawed argument that settling is an admission of guilt and that, if the Church were innocent, it would not have settled. The High Court never considered that the Church, as the judges describe it, “had no choice but to agree to out-of-court settlements,” not because it was guilty, but because it was a target of a hostile social and judicial environment. In this climate, the Church knew that the stories the alleged “victims” were made to tell by deprogrammers and lawyers would be believed, regardless of their truth or falsehood.

The High Court’s bias is evident in its cavalier reliance on settlements to determine guilt. The Church has been dissolved without any criminal conviction. Overriding previous case law, civil decisions and settlements were deemed sufficient for dissolution.

#### 4. *The 2009 “Compliance Declaration”*

The High Court’s ruling to dissolve the Unification Church as a religious organization is grounded in the claim that it engaged in illegal solicitation of donations. However, the Church argues that such solicitation ceased in 2009, except in very few cases. Therefore, dissolving the organization in 2026, based on practices the Church had largely eliminated 17 years earlier, seems unreasonable.

The decision highlights how, although the Church had implemented measures since 1987 to address the problematic activities of the company Happy World, it became increasingly aware in the early 20th century that “spiritual sales” and pressure to donate put its members at risk of criminal and civil actions. While the court states that the criminal sentence against believers in the Shinsei Ltd. case was the immediate trigger for the Church’s response, it is also true that in 2008, the Act on Specific Commercial Transactions was amended to become significantly stricter, primarily to protect consumers better.

As a result, in 2009, the Church issued a “Compliance Declaration,” which the verdict discusses at length not as a single document but as a plurality of official instructions sent to members in 2009, followed by interpretive texts in subsequent years. The latest guidelines, confirming that these directives were in full force and including new instructions, were sent to members in 2022 and 2023 in the wake of the Abe assassination and the controversies that followed.

The court recognizes that these directives were comprehensive. They included detailed instructions not to encourage or solicit donations by linking them to the karmic relationships of ancestors, and to avoid receiving donations that are disproportionate to the followers' economic circumstances. The directives also specified that donations should come from individuals who have adequately studied the Unification doctrine, and that the recipient should be clearly identified as the Unification Church. Additionally, there were rules against soliciting donations from devotees with mental health issues or who appeared senile. Regarding donations from older people, members were advised to consider factors such as their decision-making ability, faith, living circumstances, and family situation to prevent issues arising from unreasonable donations.

If anything, as the High Court acknowledges, measures taken after the Abe assassination were even more strict, and the Church established an Independent Compensation Committee, including nationally renowned lawyers, to quickly reimburse dissatisfied donors (see Respinti 2025).

And when, following the emotional reactions to Abe's shooting, the government passed a new law on religious donations, the Church immediately vowed to comply, even though many experts criticized the law as a threat to religious liberty (see Introvigne 2023). Parenthetically, the High Court decision uses this 2023 law retroactively to evaluate the Church's actions before it was enacted. It claims, unconvincingly, that this is not a case of retroactive law enforcement because the 2023 statute clarified and interpreted provisions that were implicitly included in earlier laws.

The measures introduced by the Church to end "spiritual sales" and improper solicitation of donations should have closed the case. Since it is illogical to dissolve a religious corporation for sins, whether real or perceived, committed more than fifteen years ago, and that it has since learned not to repeat, the logical conclusion is that the Church should not be dissolved.

Contrary to common reasoning, the High Court holds that the Compliance Declaration and its guidelines failed to adequately address the problem of illicit solicitation of donations. To support this claim, the court contradicts its own calculations. The ruling mainly depends on counting cases where the Church lost civil lawsuits. It lists three cases where donors successfully sued the Church over donations or travel expenses to Korea—costs that a former believer later regretted—dating from after the 2009 Compliance Declaration, specifically

between 2010 and 2013. No court decisions on donations after 2013 are mentioned. Additionally, the High Court cites a single settlement involving a donor who, after being a Church member for just five months in 2016, received a refund.

Clearly, four cases over 15 years do not indicate a trend. They merely show that the mechanism mandated by the Compliance Declaration took some years to be firmly established. Meanwhile, the cases decreased to a handful and eventually to zero.

However, the High Court introduces two new, unusual categories. The first includes cases where there is “a considerable possibility” that donations were unlawfully solicited after the Compliance Declaration. In this category, the High Court identified only two cases: a 2024 Supreme Court decision overturning previous rulings favorable to the Unification Church and a settlement. In the two cases, relatives attempted a complicated reconstruction of donations made by a deceased believer and a believer who had allegedly lost mental capacity.

To reach significant numbers, the High Court constructs a second new category, the “cases in which it cannot be denied that there is a possibility” that donations were solicited through illicit means after the Compliance Declaration. The difference with the previous category is that here there is a mere “possibility” rather than “a considerable possibility.” Here, the High Court lists settlements involving 138 former members. To claim a veneer of fairness, it states that

cases in which settlement was concluded after the Shooting Incident [the Abe assassination] in this case are not included, because it cannot be ruled out that, in light of the heightened social criticism directed at the Appellant [the Unification Church], the Appellant may have agreed to settlement even in cases where the claimants’ allegations did not necessarily have sufficient basis.

However, the 138 listed cases—about ten per year from 2010 to 2023—are not clearly instances of illicit post-2009 solicitation of donations. If they were, the High Court would have included them in its first list of post-2009 (but pre-2014) wrongdoings, which listed only three civil decisions and one settlement. According to the court’s own words, the 138 cases “do not permit a conclusive finding.” Whether donations were made after 2009 and solicited through improper means “cannot be ruled out,” but the opposite cannot be ruled out either. In summary, this is purely speculation, and no decision should have been based on it.

The numbers being thus inconclusive, the High Court resorts to three other arguments to prove that the illicit solicitation of donations continued after the Compliance Declaration of 2009. The first is that the amount of donations received by the Unification Church fluctuated but did not substantially decline after 2009. Of course, this is not evidence of any wrongdoing. If anything, it proves that, notwithstanding all social criticism, most members remained steadfast in the faith. To support dissolution, the court should not prove that donations were collected, but that they were collected through illicit means.

The second argument is that, after 2009, the church continued to set “numerical targets” or quotas for expected donations and evaluated pastors based on whether they met these quotas. The High Court admits that the system was gradually “mitigated” and that meeting the donation quota was only one of several criteria used to evaluate pastors (according to the church, affecting their overall performance by 10%). However, it maintains that the church could establish high numerical targets for donations again in the future—which is, again, speculation—and it appears to consider budgeting donations in advance as inherently objectionable.

Here, the court falls into the common mistake of treating practices shared by many denominations as unique when controversial organizations adopt them. Donations are the primary source of income for most churches. A budget forecast that does not account for donations would not make sense for a church. The High Court’s wording is not neutral; it maliciously redefines budget forecasts as “quotas.” Regarding the evaluation of pastors, all churches today require them to be wise managers, not just spiritual leaders. A pastor who cannot collect donations would not be effective, although this should not be the only way to judge his work—and it isn’t in the Unification Church.

The third argument exposes the High Court’s true purpose. It repeatedly states that the improper solicitation of donations is likely to happen again, because their “root cause lies in the Church itself.” It suggests that as long as the Church promotes the universal mission of the True Parents, along with sacrifice, devotion, and helping suffering ancestors, it will inevitably continue to gather large donations and prompt believers to solicit contributions unlawfully. Therefore, dissolution becomes unavoidable.

It seems that the court’s only satisfaction would be a public admission that the church’s theology is flawed and inherently abusive, coupled with a pledge to modify

or eliminate core elements of the Unification doctrine. The decision ultimately circles back, showing it does not address abuses that are mostly corrected but rather seeks to suppress the church based on its fundamental nature and beliefs.

## 5. *Violations of International Law*

In 1978, Japan signed the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and ratified it in 1979.

There are several ICCPR issues in the Tokyo High Court decision upholding the dissolution of the Unification Church as a religious corporation. Some concern the right to a fair trial and to public hearings. Under Article 14.1 of the ICCPR, serious reasons should justify the decision to conduct the proceedings without public hearings. The High Court defends its decision not to hold public hearings on constitutional grounds. Academic experts disagree, and doubts remain.

The right to a fair trial was also violated by the Ministry's introduction of statements that the Unification Church attorneys believe are false. The High Court offers a rather weak answer to this objection, focusing on a case where an alleged victim's attorney reported that his client had felt "threatened" by the Church into donating. In an audio recording submitted by the Church, the alleged victim stated that the "threat" was a fabrication by the attorney. The High Court answered that in the recording, the supposed victim was having a conversation with "active believers" of the Unification Church. He "may have said something to them that differed from what the claimant had told the attorney." Even in this case, why only what he supposedly told the attorney should be accepted as true is not explained.

The main violation of the ICCPR concerns Article 18 on freedom of religion or belief, which Japanese authorities and courts are accused of violating.

The UN Human Rights Committee, the body charged with interpreting the ICCPR on behalf of the United Nations, has repeatedly examined Japan's constitutional and statutory limitations on freedom of religion. The ICCPR lists specific grounds for restricting freedom of religion or belief, and this list is definitive rather than merely suggestive. "Public welfare" is not included.

Article 12 of the Japanese Constitution states that human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, are protected as far as they are used "for public welfare." Article 81 of the 1951 Religious Corporation Act provides that

courts can order the dissolution of a religious corporation when “in violation of laws and regulations, the religious corporation commits an act which is clearly found to harm public welfare substantially.”

As noted by attorney Patricia Duval in her in-depth study of the issue, from its very first report to the Committee in 1980, the Japanese government has defended the Constitution’s “public welfare” limitation on rights with a simple assurance: the notion is interpreted narrowly and is not used to impose unreasonable restrictions (Duval 2025a).

For more than four decades, the Committee has rejected that explanation. In every review cycle, it has warned that the “public welfare” clause is too vague and too broad, and that it risks allowing limitations on freedoms that go beyond what the Covenant permits. The Committee has repeatedly reminded Japan that any restriction on freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or expression must meet the strict tests set out in articles 18(3) and 19(3) of the ICCPR. This concern appears consistently in its concluding observations, including those issued in 2008, 2014, and most recently in 2022.

Patricia Duval concludes that Japanese authorities have long been aware—for more than 45 years—that their domestic legal framework does not fully align with the Covenant’s standards. Despite this, they have not undertaken the reforms needed to bring national law into conformity with the obligations they accepted at the international level (Duval 2025b).

After the first-instance decision against the Unification Church was rendered, in 2025, the United Nations, through four of its Special Rapporteurs, warned Japan that,

The civil tort rulings on which the dissolution decision was based rely on the violations of “social appropriateness,” which were deemed to constitute a serious harm to “public welfare.” As previously noted by the Human Rights Committee, the concept of “public welfare” is vague and open-ended and may permit restrictions exceeding those permissible under the ICCPR... Any restrictions on the exercise of Article 18 rights must comply strictly with the limitations set out in Article 18.3 of the ICCPR, as interpreted by the UN Human Rights Committee (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2025).

The High Court decision repeats more than twenty times that the activities of the Unification Church “exceeded the bounds deemed socially acceptable” in Japanese society and should therefore be considered as harming “public welfare.”

The court is aware of the objection that “social acceptability” and “public welfare” are outside the list of permitted grounds for restricting religious liberty under Article 18.3 ICCPR.

Its answer rests on two arguments. The first is that “social acceptability” is just a criterion among others used to determine whether an act falls outside the sphere of “public welfare.” As for “public welfare” in itself, the court argues that it is implicitly, although not explicitly, included in the list of Article 18.3.

The High Court writes that,

a conduct that constitutes a tort under Article 709 of the Civil Code and is clearly recognized as significantly harming the public welfare may be understood as a conduct that infringes “public safety, public order, public health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others,” as referred to in Article 18(3) of the ICCPR.

However, the High Court of Tokyo is not the proper authority to decide whether Japanese law violates international law. This assessment should come from a supra-national authority, namely the UN Human Rights Committee in the case of the ICCPR. The Committee has already expressed itself more than once. It has told Japan that the interpretation the High Court relies on is wrong. “Public welfare” is not part of the list of permitted restrictions of religious liberty of Article 18.3. It is an abusive addition to it and should be eliminated from Japanese law.

The second argument of the High Court is that the dissolution of a religious corporation is not a limitation of religious liberty. Therefore, it falls outside of the scope of the ICCPR. As a rationale for this strange claim, the High Court offers that,

A dissolution order merely deprives a religious corporation of its legal personality and carries no legal effect whatsoever, prohibiting or restricting the religious activities of believers.

I will address the factual truth of this statement in the next paragraph. Here, I focus on the violation of the ICCPR and the High Court’s obvious misconstruction of the meaning of “freedom of religion” in the Covenant. It is a common argument used by totalitarian states such as China (which has signed the ICCPR, although it has not ratified it—but it applies to Hong Kong and Macau) that restricting the public activity of certain religious organizations does not violate freedom of religion or belief since believers remain free to believe privately. This is not what the ICCPR is all about. Article 18.1 protects

freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest... religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

“In community” means that corporate religious liberty of churches and organizations is protected, not only individual freedom of belief. To guarantee such corporate liberty, states should make sure that the preconditions for public worship, practice, and missionary activity are not restricted. In Japan, when a religious corporation is dissolved, its assets, including places of worship and bank accounts, are transferred to a liquidator. Believers are thus deprived of the material preconditions to enjoy the freedom of religion of Article 18.1.

#### 6. *Will the Believers’ Religious Liberty Be Protected?*

The High Court recognizes that dissolving the Unification Church as a religious corporation could significantly affect the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of believers. Although the decision cites a few hundred ex-members who claim to have suffered due to their past ties with the Church, the actual number of devotees whose religious freedom and daily lives are now at risk is much greater.

The court solemnly proclaims that it does not want to interfere with the individual religious liberty of believers. They

are not prevented from continuing an unincorporated religious organization or from newly forming one, nor are they prevented from performing religious acts or newly preparing facilities and materials for use in such acts. That is, a dissolution order is not attended by any legal effect whatsoever prohibiting or restricting the religious acts of believers.

The decision even attempts to argue that the corporate freedom of religion of the believers’ community will still be protected:

They are not prevented from continuing the “Family Federation for World Peace and Unification” as a religious organization without legal personality, nor are they prevented from establishing a new religious organization. Thus, it cannot be said that they would be unable to conduct religious activities as an organization.

Since the religious corporation ceases to exist, the employment contracts between it and its pastors and other employees “are generally understood to terminate” (although they may continue for a while as employees of the corporation’s liquidator, but without carrying out religious activities). However, the High Court notes that,

although the employment contracts between the employees and the appellant [the Unification Church] as a juridical person would legally terminate, it remains possible that those employment relationships could continue as employment contracts between the employees and the religious organization in its non-incorporated form.

In the worst-case scenario, the High Court assumes that these pastors and other employees would find comfort in the perspective of surviving on “unemployment insurance and public assistance.”

As for the social discrimination of believers, the High Court virtuously comments that

there is no justification for the appellant’s believers to be subjected to social discrimination, exclusion, or persecution as a result of the dissolution order against the appellant. (Needless to say, social discrimination, exclusion, or persecution against the appellant’s believers is impermissible under any circumstances, regardless of the reasons).

With all these noble words, the court admits that the result of the dissolution order is that, without waiting for the outcome of the recourse filed by the Church with the Supreme Court (a Japanese legal anomaly), a liquidator will immediately take possession of the assets of the religious corporation, including places of worship, offices, and bank accounts. It euphemistically calls these “some impediments” that may affect the believers as “indirect” consequences of the dissolution order.

Immediately means immediately. Within hours of the announcement of the dissolution decision, lawyers and police officers appeared at the majority of the 260 Unification Church places of worship throughout Japan, seized all assets, confiscated the keys, and told believers they would not be allowed to enter the premises. As mentioned by attorney Patricia Duval in a statement at the United Nations in Geneva, a devotee reported that

Even before the High Court’s decision was made public, approximately 1,000 lawyers and police officers appeared to have collaborated to ensure that the liquidation process went smoothly. Despite assurances from the government and the courts that religious freedom would be protected even after the corporation’s dissolution, we quickly found ourselves unable to practice our religion. The simultaneous dispatch of liquidators to churches across the country resembled a massive investigation into a criminal organization. Churches across the country were closed during the dissolution, leaving believers without a place of worship (Duval 2026).

Even before the dissolution, local city councils and hotels refused to rent rooms to Unification Church members, claiming they were part of an

“anti-social” organization. If they cannot use the premises seized by the liquidator nor rent other places, where should they gather for their religious activities? Are these just “impediments”? What about the High Court’s assurance that believers “would not be prevented from performing religious acts”? Who is protecting the followers from “social discrimination”?

Although the latter question remains unanswered, another has an easy answer. Who is actively promoting discrimination against Unification Church believers? Both the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales and the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, which have long-standing enmity toward the Church, issued statements after the dissolution order.

Unbelievably, the Network argues that the harsh measures imposed on Unification Church believers following the dissolution are insufficient. It calls for new laws restricting their rights to proselytize and collect donations, whether as individual believers or on behalf of any newly established organizations. It also wants ex-members who speak publicly against the Church (those sociologists call “apostates”) to be protected from “defamation and slander.” The law provides broad protection against defamation. However, it appears the Network seeks an additional safeguard—a specific shield that would prevent independent journalists and scholars from exposing the apostates’ assertions when they deem those claims false.

The Network insists that “only a very small portion of victims have reported their damages.” The statement implies that every second- or third-generation member is a “victim,” although most of them “have not yet spoken out.” In fact, every child born to parents who believe in the Unification Church’s teachings is a potential victim (National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales 2026).

The number of victims is therefore limitless. The Religious Corporation Act and the Articles of Incorporation of the Church state that once a dissolved entity’s liquidation is finished and victims (and their lawyers) have been paid, any remaining assets should be transferred to an entity designated by the original organization. Lawyers are creating a system to ensure that no assets are left behind, as new claims from additional “victims” will continue to arise, potentially forever.

In the unlikely event that anything remains, the High Court has already included in its decision malicious comments about Tenchi Seikyo, the religious

organization legally incorporated since 1987, which, since 2009, the Unification Church has indicated should receive its residual assets in the event of dissolution. Essentially, the High Court noted that Tenchi Seikyo and its Head Priest had consistently maintained friendly relations with the Unification Church and cannot be considered truly independent from the Church. Naturally, a church would want its assets to pass to a friendly religious organization. It would be strange for it to designate a hostile group.

The Network claims that “unless some provision is made,” some assets of the dissolved Unification Church may end up with Tenchi Seikyo, which is accused (without evidence) of having also victimized “many victims of the Unification Church” (National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales 2026).

The Japan Federation of Bar Associations recognizes that the provision for transferring the residual assets to Tenchi Seikyo is legally valid. It states that,

it is essential to take legal measures, such as establishing an exception to the rules regarding the distribution of remaining assets in the case of dissolution by order, before the liquidation procedures are completed.

It also asks for further legislation to “tackle the fundamental problems related to the anti-social religious activities that lie beneath the surface” and extend the “protection” of “second-generation members” to other “religious groups” (Japan Federation of Bar Associations 2026).

These comments are very interesting because they show that the left-leaning anti-Unification-Church lawyers, who started their politically motivated campaigns against the Unification Church in 1987, are not happy with just dissolving the organization. They also need to keep working, finding new targets for their efforts.

While the High Court claims that those who believe in the message of Reverend Moon and Mother Han as the True Parents “are not prevented from continuing an unincorporated religious organization or from newly forming one,” the militant lawyers call for measures to eradicate any group that will continue to promote this belief. They also hope to use the High Court decision as a precedent to target other religious organizations. Most unfortunately, the High Court’s comments attacking the Unification Church theology directly and promoting the pseudo-scientific theory of mind control offer a solid foundation for these campaigns. The battle for religious liberty in Japan is entering a new phase.

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