

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Peter Zoehrer - Media's Language Harmful and Stigmatizing

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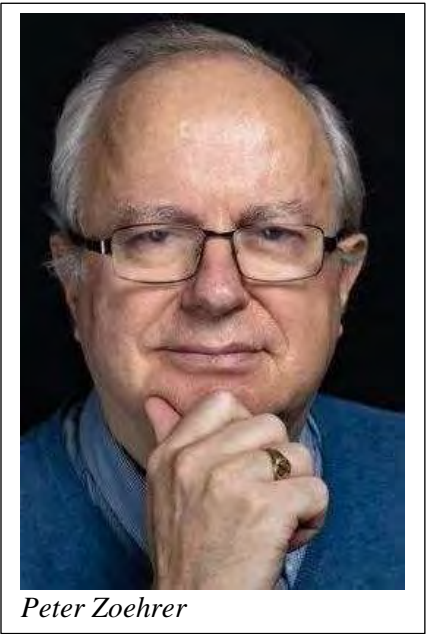


Copy of alarmist article (1982) using the word "Sekten" (cults) in an Austrian weekly

Media often remain silent on harmful impact of religious persecution and discriminate against unpopular groups by calling them "cults"

The Fragile Balance of Press Freedom and Religious Liberty

The Harmful Impact of the Stigmatizing Language



Part 1 of an article by Peter Zoehrer, journalist and Executive Director of [FOREF Europe](#), [originally published](#) 7th May 2025 by [Forum for Religious Freedom Europe \(FOREF\)](#), [republished 9th May 2025](#) by [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#), and by [Bitter Winter](#) on [16th May 2025](#).

On World Press Freedom Day, on 3rd May, we celebrate journalism's role in holding power to account and amplifying the voices of the vulnerable. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) enshrines freedom of expression as a pillar of democracy. But this freedom is not without consequence. When media outlets stigmatize religious minorities, they don't just shape narratives - they shape realities.

The right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), protected under Article 18 of the UDHR, is not in tension with press freedom - it is bound to it. When one is compromised, both suffer.

Across democratic societies, peaceful faith communities are increasingly targeted not by the state alone, but by a media culture that recycles old prejudices in new packaging. Labels like "Sekte" (in German, and similar expressions in languages other than English) or "cult" - lacking legal or academic definition - are used to delegitimize entire belief systems. These terms carry historical weight and modern danger: they incite fear, provoke hostility, and open the door to discrimination, violence, and even legal erasure.

Austria: When a Broadcaster Crosses the Line

One recent example in Austria reveals how public broadcasting can blur the line between journalism and defamation. In a 2-minute-13-second report, ORF Mittagsjournal - Austria's national broadcaster - used the word "Sekte" (cult) twelve times to describe the [Unification Church](#), a legally recognized faith

community under Austrian law with no record of misconduct. Its members contribute to society through peacebuilding, education, and interfaith dialogue.



ORF justified its language by citing a Japanese court ruling dissolving a related group over alleged civil violations. But it omitted critical facts: that the [Church](#) is protected under Austrian law; that no wrongdoing has been reported locally; and that the Japanese decision has been condemned by leading international human rights advocates. Among them are participants of the [IRF Roundtable](#), [Human Rights Without Frontiers](#), and speakers at the [IRF Summit 2025](#), all of whom see the ruling as a violation of international FoRB standards.

Austria's 1998 Recognition Act guarantees equal protection to recognized religious communities. By ignoring this and repeating stigmatizing language, ORF helped legitimize prejudice. A [Church](#) spokesperson formally requested a correction - none was issued. Such reporting doesn't just misinform; it emboldens hate. In neighboring Germany, neo-Nazi extremists recently attacked Hare Krishna devotees - violence fueled by decades of media framing minority faiths as dangerous "cults".

A European pattern

Austria is not alone. In Germany, state and media actors have long labeled groups like Scientology and others as "anti-democratic" without judicial basis. These designations have led to surveillance, job loss, and social ostracism.



In France, considered a threat to public order: Christian Science. Here, one of their reading rooms, this one located downtown in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA. Photo: Artaxerxes / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

In France, the discredited 1995 Parliamentary Report on Sects listed 172 groups - from Christian Scientists to Antoinists - as threats to public order, despite no criminal evidence.



Today, MIVILUDES, the state's anti-cult task force, continues to issue alerts that the media repeat without question, shaping both public sentiment and policy.

These terms have no legal precision - yet they carry devastating weight. Despite multiple rulings by the European Court of Human Rights affirming the rights of minority religions, stigmatizing labels remain embedded in public discourse.

To be continued. Part 2 coming soon

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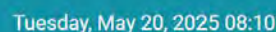
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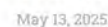
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I have been observing this organization from an anti-perspective for 25 years, and I have written several related articles about this organization. However, what constantly strikes me in the midst of this, is the gap between public perception and the actual situation.

Initially,



Yoshifu Arita in 2014. Photo: 碧庵 / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 3.0 Unp.](#) Cropped



Eito Suzuki, born as Kiyofumi Tanaka. Photo: Mikkabie / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int.](#) Cropped



Masaki Kito from National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales. Photo: Screenshot / Bitter Winter

Individuals like Yoshifu Arita, Eito Suzuki, and Professor Kimiaki Nishida who are close friends of lawyer Masaki Kito [leading activist lawyer], appeared on television and discussed this issue. To me, it seemed like one of different groups was merely expressing its own opinions, and I expected that discussions from different angles would eventually emerge. However, it appears that there hasn't been any sign of brakes being applied, and the conversation swiftly moved in one direction before anyone could stop it.

I could understand the intention of the *National Network of Lawyers against Spiritual Sales* (NNLASS) to influence public opinion and push the government to file a dissolution request. However, usually there should be discussions involving both sides and opposing views with room for direction adjustments and corrections. However, the information circulating publicly seems to excessively emphasize one particular perspective. To me it appears as if the opinion of one group dominates the entire discourse.



Hans Küng (1928-2021). Photo (2011): UNED / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 2.0 Gen.](#) Cropped

To borrow the words of theologian Hans Küng from the *Second Vatican Council*, "Half a truth is also half a lie."

Especially in matters of religion, we must not allow it to result in the same kind of sensationalism as scandals involving celebrities or politicians that stir up public opinion. We should act more carefully. This issue, in particular, has escalated since the assassination of former Prime Minister Abe, but until that time, a significant amount of misinformation had already accumulated. Therefore, it should be viewed as a deeper-seated issue than what is currently being considered.

Misinformation and its source led to the death of former Prime Minister Abe.

There had been a narrative suggesting that former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had a "deep relation" with the [Unification Church](#), which led an individual, who believed in it, to take extreme actions and ultimately resulted in the assassination of Prime Minister Abe.

In my opinion, the term "relation" itself is broad and may include various types of relation such as "neighborly relationships", "friendship", "acquaintance", and even "conflict", "hostility", and "a relationship with others".

Therefore, I deliberately wrote three articles with the strong title "Mr. Abe had no relation with the [Unification Church](#)." Now, one year has passed since that tragic shooting incident, and I believe everyone can see that what I was saying was correct.

So, it is important to look at who was speaking the truth and who was spreading falsehoods about this issue and consider changing our sources of information. False information and unreliable sources have led to irreversible consequences. The tragedy that has already



Shinzo Abe in 2017. Photo: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 2.0 Gen.](#) Cropped

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occurred cannot be undone, but we can change false information and information sources. If we don't even do that, then that is "below standard human morality".

① Video message by former Prime Minister Abe sent to UPF (Universal Peace Federation)

There were individuals who have propagated the idea that former Prime Minister Abe had deep involvement with [Unification Church](#)-related organizations based on the fact that he sent a video message to UPF gatherings. However, it's important to note that UPF stands for *Universal Peace Federation*, an international NGO with consultative status at the *United Nations Economic and Social Council*.

Prominent figures from around the world, including former President Trump and other leaders of major countries, have sent messages to UPF events. Figures like Vice President Pence and Secretary Pompeo of the *U.S. Republican Party* have even attended UPF events in South Korea. In this context, we must recognize that this was considered acceptable on a global scale. Thinking of the situation, we may say that Abe's sending a video indicates comparably nothing special relation. In other words, the attempt to sensationalize and present Abe's video message as a special relationship has been exaggerated and should be corrected.

② Full text of the video message sent to UPF

When you look at the full text of the video message, it neither praises the [Unification Church](#) nor venerates Mrs. [Hak Ja Han](#). Only a part of the polite expression directed towards UPF, "I pay my respects to President [Hak Ja Han](#) and everyone who has worked tirelessly for the peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula," was isolated and became widely known. In fact, I have never seen a Japanese person who doesn't include polite words when giving greetings. It's perfectly normal to use polite expressions, and it is a mistake to claim that "Abe had a relationship with the [Unification Church](#)" based solely on this video message.

③ The story that former Prime Minister Abe received 50 million yen as payment from UPF

Eito Suzuki has claimed that former Prime Minister Abe received 50 million yen as appearance fee from UPF, but there is no evidence to support this claim whatsoever. Despite mentioning "inside information", no substantiation for the appearance fee has emerged. UPF has also denied this allegation.

Nevertheless, false information continues to be disseminated by individuals influenced by Eito Suzuki's statements, and this misinformation is still being believed by some.



*Eito Suzuki, born as Kiyofumi Tanaka.
Photo: Mikkabie / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int.](#)
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④ Testimony by Eito Suzuki regarding former Prime Minister Abe's invitation of chairman Tokuno from the Unification Church to the Prime Minister's residence

Eito Suzuki, who claims to have inside information from the religious group, said, "In early June 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe invited Mr. Eiji Tokuno, the President of the [Unification Church / Family Federation](#) for World Peace and Unification, along with the wife of the Chairman [Yong-cheon Song](#), to the Prime Minister's Residence"



Eiji Tokuno in April 2023. Photo: [FOREF](#)

However, the Prime Minister's daily schedule is meticulously recorded. When examining the Prime Minister's schedule for early June 2016, it appears highly unlikely on any day except the 3rd and the 8th of June, and even if Mr. Tokuno was invited to the Prime Minister's Residence on either of those days, the meeting would have lasted only 20 minutes. It would be difficult to imagine that a close and deep relationship could develop in just 20 minutes. Furthermore, Mr. Tokuno himself has stated that he was not invited to the Prime Minister's

Residence.

Amidst the proliferation of such rumors, former Prime Minister Abe met his tragic end. However, the erroneous information and its sources have remained unchanged and uncorrected, frequently causing a sensation whenever these rumors are associated with the [Unification Church](#). In reality, there should be a stern call for, "Enough!"

However, there doesn't seem to be any such consideration concerning the [Unification Church](#) issue, and it appears to be continuing just like before. Of course, as someone who upholds an orthodox Christian doctrine, I have been observing the [Unification Church](#) from an anti-position. However, the current situation is drastically different from what I know, and it has left me astonished.

There have been situations in the past where the public outcry led the government to take action, and this is not something new. However, this time, it involves a "religious" issue. In the cases of the Recruit scandal [insider trading and corruption scandal] and the Moritomo Gakuen [Japanese private school operator] issue, when time passed, and the public forgot, the only thing that remained was the media frenzy when the lid was finally lifted.

However, this time, it is not permitted. In terms of the gravity of the matter, this should be completely different from the past matters where the government was involved and influenced by the sensation caused by media. The level of significance is distinct between the government initiating the dissolution of a religious corporation, and a private organization requesting a dissolution. This is the first religious persecution in the post-war history, and it could also severely undermine the system under the constitution.

Continued in a [part 2](#) and [part 3](#).

Featured image above: Haruhisa Nakagawa, Tokyo Christian Theological Institute Executive Secretary, President of Japan Christian Theological Institute. Photo: Haruhisa Nakagawa. Published with permission.

"Deliberate Lies Caused Abe Assassination" – text: Haruhisa Nakagawa

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