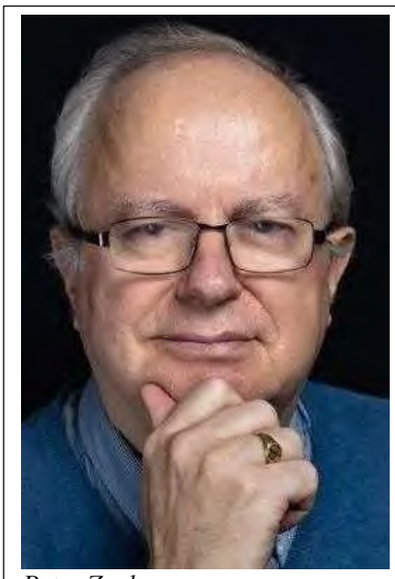
FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Peter Zoehrer - Voltaire's Warning to Japan and S Korea

Knut Holdhus
October 5, 2026

Portrait of Voltaire (1694-1778) in 1718 by Nicolas de Largillière (1656-1746)



Peter Zoehrer

What Voltaire's defense of persecuted minorities 250 years ago can teach about religious freedom today

Peter Zoehrer's 1st October 2026 Substack essay, "The Pen Against the Infamy: Voltaire's Fight Against Fanaticism, Persecution and the Abuse of Power", is ostensibly a reflection on the eighteenth-century French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778). Yet its central argument has direct relevance to the treatment of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in Japan and South Korea. Zoehrer, Austrian journalist and campaigner for human rights, asks what happens when a persecuted religious community becomes the object of intense public suspicion, political pressure and judicial action - and what role writers, journalists and human-rights advocates can play in ensuring that accusations do not become substitutes for evidence.

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Zoehrer begins with Voltaire's campaign against religious persecution and judicial injustice, particularly the case of Jean Calas, a Protestant merchant executed in Toulouse in 1762 after being accused of murdering his son to prevent his conversion to Catholicism. Importantly, Voltaire did not initially assume Calas was innocent. He investigated the case, examined its inconsistencies and only then became convinced that a grave miscarriage of justice had occurred. He subsequently gathered evidence, mobilized contacts, published his Treatise on Tolerance and continued campaigning until the judgment was overturned and Calas's reputation restored.

For contemporary debates over the Family Federation, this method is particularly significant. In his Substack article, Peter Zoehrer emphasizes that investigation must precede indignation. Human-rights advocacy is weakened when allegations, rumors or politically convenient narratives are repeated without scrutiny. A documented case, he argues, is ultimately more persuasive than an angry slogan, while credibility accumulated over years can be destroyed by a single claim that cannot withstand examination. This principle is especially pertinent where the Family Federation has faced extensive allegations concerning fundraising, political relationships and its institutional activities. The appropriate question is not whether the religious organization is popular or unpopular, but whether particular allegations against

particular individuals or entities can be established through evidence and due process.

The arrest of Calas - The ground floor of Maison Calas, rue de Fillatiers in Toulouse. The evening of the discovery of the body of Marc-Antoine Calas. Capitoul David de Baudrigue (tricorn) publicly accuses Jean Calas of the disguised murder of his own son. Painting by Casimir Destrem in 1879

The article's most explicit contemporary reference is Japan. Zoehrer notes that Japan's Supreme Court finalized the dissolution of the Family Federation's religious corporation in June 2026 following years of political and media scrutiny after the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. He acknowledges that allegations concerning fundraising practices should be carefully examined, but identifies the broader question raised by the case: how should a democracy distinguish between sanctioning proven misconduct and imposing consequences upon an entire religious institution and its community? That question has implications beyond the Japanese case itself, particularly because dissolution affects an entire religious organization rather than simply punishing individuals found responsible for specific wrongdoing.

Zoehrer then articulates a distinction highly relevant to both Japan and South Korea: the difference between conduct and identity. Labels such as "cult", "sect", "extremist" or "dangerous religion" can, he warns, become substitutes for proving individual wrongdoing. The danger arises when suspicion of particular conduct becomes suspicion of belonging itself - when membership in a persecuted religious community begins to function as evidence of wrongdoing.

Hounded and persecuted like a criminal by weaponizing criminal law against her? here, Hak Ja Han (83), Holy Mother Han, in Gapyeong, South Korea July 20, 2025

His formulation is particularly relevant to the South Korean situation surrounding Hak Ja Han and the Family Federation, where criminal allegations concerning particular transactions and political relationships have unfolded against a much wider backdrop of persecution of the religious organization.

This also explains why Zoehrer insists that religious liberty must be tested precisely where the religion is persecuted. One does not need to accept the theology of the Family Federation - or of any controversial minority religion - to insist that allegations against its members be assessed through individualized evidence and due process rather than collective suspicion. This principle provides a useful framework for considering both Japan's institutional dissolution proceedings and South Korea's criminal and political investigations without requiring an endorsement of the Family Federation's beliefs or of every claim made in its defense.

Another important theme is the relationship between media coverage and state action. Zoehrer argues that journalism has a responsibility to investigate misconduct while avoiding collective condemnation of believers. Crimes have perpetrators; allegations require evidence; guilt should attach to those who committed wrongful acts rather than automatically to thousands of people who share a religion or worldview. In controversies involving the Family Federation, where highly charged media narratives can influence public attitudes and the political environment in which government and judicial decisions are made, this distinction becomes particularly consequential.

Ultimately, Zoehrer returns to the power of the written word. Voltaire had neither modern human-rights organizations nor international conventions nor social media; he had investigation, correspondence, publishing networks and a pen. His method was to identify an individual injustice, establish the facts, give the victim a name, bring the story before a wider public and continue writing. For those documenting the experiences of Family Federation members in Japan and South Korea, Zoehrer's argument therefore offers a broader lesson: the defense of religious freedom does not require defending every action of a religious organization. It requires insisting that persecuted believers remain entitled to evidence-based scrutiny, individualized responsibility and the same protections of law and conscience afforded to everyone else.

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The Grueling, Lonely 10-Km Walk To Freedom

October 4, 2026 • The News Desk

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An answered prayer on the sidewalk: The miraculous end to Toru Goto's 12-year confinement

***Part 7** of "**My Experience of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Deconversion**", a testimony on 19th September 2026 by Toru Goto (後藤徹), a*

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For 12 Years They Took My Freedom, Not My Faith

September 28, 2026

Japanese member of the Family Federation and victim of attempted coercive faith-breaking – locked up for over 12 years in apartment turned prison. This first-hand witness account – of high relevance for the current dissolution case against the Family Federation in Japan – was delivered at a Zoom conference organized by Peace and Reconciliation Together (PnR-T), a Dutch-registered foundation focused on reconciliation, peacebuilding, dialogue, and healing historical conflicts.

Toru Goto speaking during the online conference on 19th September 2026. Screenshot

Continued from part 1: Apartment Turned Prison: 12 Years to Break Faith

Continued from part 2: Escaped from 1st Confinement, But Abducted Again

Continued from part 3: Inside the Room Where They Tried to Break Faith

Continued from part 4: Trapped: 13 Breaking Faith of 1 in Locked Room

Continued from part 5: For 12 Years They Took My Freedom, Not My Faith

Continued from part 6: Thrown Out After Being Locked Up for 12 Years

I sat there in shock on the cold floor. It was only then that I realized I had finally been released.

The location of the 8th floor apartment in Ogikubo, Tokyo where Toru Goto was held captive and treated in a dehumanizing way for 10 years out of a total of 12 years and 5 months. Photo: National Association of Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Deconversion,

I went downstairs and stepped outside. In the evening light, people and cars were passing by, their lights shining.

I took a deep breath. I was free.

When I looked back at the entrance, I saw the name of the apartment complex: Flower Mansion. I had been unable to step outside for ten years, and that was the first time I learned the name of the building in which I had been confined.

"I did it! I'm free!"

I was free for the first time in 12 years and five months.

But my joy was short-lived. I was severely weakened, had no money, nowhere to go, and was desperately hungry.

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Supporters walk the route toward Shibuya's Shoto, ***retracing 17 years later the past journey of Toru Goto*** *– 10th February 2025, Ogikubo, Suginami Ward, Tokyo. Photo: Yasuhiro Uno (宇野泰弘)*

I thought that somehow things would work out if I could get to the Unification Church headquarters, so I began walking the approximately ten-kilometer journey.

After walking about five kilometers, however, I began experiencing severe pain in both knees. Eventually, I could no longer put any strength into my knees.

I found a wooden stick at a construction site and used it as a walking stick.

Night fell, and there were very few people on the main streets.

I had been thrown out with nothing but the clothes I was wearing: a torn sweater and sweatpants. My hair was roughly cut because I had been cutting it myself, and I was walking hunched over, supporting myself with my hands.

To people passing by, I may have looked like a homeless man.

When I was just over a kilometer from the headquarters, I finally could not take another step. I sat down at the edge of the sidewalk.

The cold winter air penetrated my clothes and reached my skin. I thought,

> "If I stay here, I will collapse and die."

I hugged my knees and prayed:

> "Heavenly Father, thank You for protecting and guiding me all the way to this point. I cannot move another step. If it is Your will for me to end my journey here, please let Your will be done."

At that moment, a voice – not an audible voice, but something that resonated within my heart – said:

> "Don't give up."

I raised my head and thought,

> "I'll go as far as I can."

Gripping my makeshift walking stick and gritting my teeth, I stood up.

Then a young woman came walking toward me. I thought that if I spoke to her looking like this, she might become frightened and run

away.

Artistic illustration of God-sent young woman helping Toru Goto on 10th February 2008. Illustration: ChatGPT, October 2026.

Nevertheless, I called out to her. She was startled and asked,

> "What's happened to you?"

I explained my situation. Then she took a thin book with a black cover out of her bag.

It was, amazingly, a hymnbook of the Unification Church. Then she said,

> "I'm a member."

She was the first Unification Church member I had encountered in 12 years and five months.

I was convinced that God had arranged for me to meet her. I asked her:

> "Is True Father well?"

She answered with a radiant smile,

> "Yes, he's well."

I thanked God from the bottom of my heart.

The woman hailed a taxi, paid the driver, and sent me to the Church headquarters. By the time I arrived at the headquarters, I could barely walk on my own.

To be continued. Part 8 coming soon.

Continued from part 1: Apartment Turned Prison: 12 Years to Break Faith

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Continued from part 6: Thrown Out After Being Locked Up for 12 Years

***Featured image** above: Artistic illustration of **Toru Goto** being supported by a young woman and a makeshift walking stick on in Shibuya, Tokyo on10th February 2008. Illustration: ChatGPT, 1st October 2026.*

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