

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Julian Gray on Sociologist Debunks Cult Stereotypes in Court

Knut Holdhus
June 8, 2025



Pope Pius VI (1719-1789) being arrested by the French in 1798 during the French Revolutionary Wars after Napoleon's troops had captured Rome and the Papal States. The pope was taken as prisoner to France, where he died the following year, 81 years old. Pius VI had condemned the French revolution and its persecution of the Catholic Church. Illustration from 1888 by Ellen Gould Harmon White (1827-1915)



Julian Gray

Case against religious minority was dropped by the authorities in London after sociologist of religion showed their arguments were based on historically recycled pejorative stereotypes, not empirical evidence

Part 3 of a series written based on a report by Julian Gray, former editor of the [FFWPU](#) publication Today's World, currently translator for the [Family Federation](#)'s new international administrative HQ, known as Cheon Mu Won, located in Gapyeong, South Korea.

See part 1: [England Dropped Its Case in 1988; Why Isn't Japan?](#)

See part 2: [Scholar Warns Against Revival of Stereotypes](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus

The affidavit by Professor Bryan Wilson in the [Attorney-General's case](#) to revoke the [Unification Church](#)'s charitable status (1984 - 1988) was of significant scholarly and legal weight. Its inclusion marked a key intervention by a leading academic expert in the sociology of religion who sought to contextualize the criticisms directed at the [Unification Church](#) within a broader historical and sociological framework. Here's how its significance can be understood:

Academic legitimization and historical contextualization

Wilson's affidavit challenged the premise that the [Unification Church](#) was uniquely harmful or fraudulent. By showing that accusations such as wealth accumulation, irrationality, brainwashing, and family breakdown had historically been leveled - often unfairly - against mainstream and now-respected religious groups (e.g., Catholicism, Methodism, the Salvation Army), Wilson provided a comparative

sociological perspective that questioned the objectivity and validity of the claims against the [Unification Church](#).



The Methodist church was once persecuted fiercely. here, its founder John Wesley (1703-1791) preaching in the fields. To begin with its followers were contemptuously called Methodists. Now it is an honorable name. Illustration from 1888 by Ellen Gould Harmon White (1827-1915)

This reframed the [Unification Church](#) not as an outlier, but as part of a recurring pattern in the treatment of unpopular or minority religions. Such framing undercut the narrative that the [Unification Church's](#) practices were automatically grounds for losing charitable status.

To illustrate Wilson's reasoning, here is what he wrote in his affidavit on alleged wealth accumulation,

"The amassing of wealth has been another perennial accusation: the Catholic Church has been alleged to exploit the poor in order to support wealthy bishops...; the Salvation Army was subject in the 19th century to similar abuse, particularly in the press in Switzerland, where the movement was stereotyped as 'exploitative of minds and purses'; today, leaders of the NRMs [New Religious Movements] are frequently alleged to be exploiting their followers while amassing a fortune. Irrationality has long been a pejorative stereotype of religion:

Catholicism allegedly inculcated superstition into the young; Methodists in the 18th century were regarded as bewitching their followers; today members of NRMs are said to be 'brainwashed'. Unpopular religions have often been depicted as agencies for the kidnap and mistreatment of children: in the Middle Ages Jews were thought to kidnap Christian infants for vile Passover rites; the Protestant press in America and Britain depicted Catholic children

being enticed, before the age of majority, to become nuns and priests; today the stereotype of the NRM is that it sets itself out to kidnap young people and break up families. [...]

What is remarkable about these stereotypes is that they have been recurrent in recent history and have been widely applied to quite diverse religious movements at various times."

Deconstruction of stereotypes and media influence

Wilson emphasized that media and public discourse had historically recycled the same pejorative stereotypes against religious minorities. He cited "brainwashing", "kidnapping", and "deception" as examples of rhetorical devices used to demonize new religious movements (NRMs). This positioned public hysteria as a cultural phenomenon, not necessarily reflective of legal or moral wrongdoing.

This helped undermine the prosecution's case if it relied heavily on public fear or negative publicity rather than empirical evidence of harm or fraud. Wilson's affidavit implicitly argued that perception is not proof.

Apostate testimony: bias and reliability

Perhaps the most potent element was Wilson's discussion of apostate testimony - the emotionally charged accounts of former members, often central to anti-cult narratives.

Citing other scholars like Anson D. Shupe (1948-2015), David G. Bromley, Donna L. Oliver, Wilson pointed out that such testimony, though rhetorically powerful, is methodologically suspect due to its tendency to be sensationalized, motivated by grievance, or shaped by anti-cult movements.

This directly challenged the credibility of key witnesses for the [Attorney-General's case](#), whose narratives may have been pivotal. Wilson's affidavit thus cast doubt on the evidentiary value of such testimonies, urging courts to distinguish between subjective accounts and systematic analysis.



David G. Bromley (1941-), Professor of Sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, and University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, specialized in sociology of religion and academic studies of new religious movements. Has written much about so-called cults, new religious movements, apostasy and the anti-cult movement

Bryan Wilson wrote in his affidavit,

"4.10 The medium which has proven itself most effective in propagating religious stereotypes is the apostate testimony: the first-hand evidence about a new or unpopular religion which such testimonies purport to contain makes their claims hard to refute.

The phenomenon of apostate testimony has been documented by Shupe, Bromley and Oliver (The Anti-Cult Movement in America, 1984, pp. 39-43). They note that:

'The accounts of the experience of apostates from the new religious movements of the 1970's made dramatic reading. As a result, toward the end of the decade a number of 'exposes' of these various groups, written by or about ex-members in the tradition of righteously indignant apostasy appeared for public consumption.' (pp. 39-40)."

In section 4.11 of the affidavit, he provided examples of apostate testimonies in various religions including the Catholic Church.

Implication for religious freedom and charity law

By placing the [Unification Church](#)'s situation within a broader sociological and historical continuum, Wilson raised deeper constitutional and human rights questions - namely, how the law treats minority religions and to what extent subjective cultural fears should influence legal definitions of public benefit under charity law.

His testimony implied that stripping charitable status based on such contested stereotypes could set a dangerous precedent - where ideological or cultural disapproval masquerades as legal reasoning.



The execution of William Tyndale (1494-1536) near Brussels in 1536. He was a priest who translated the Bible to English. Was tried and condemned as a heretic. As he was known as a distinguished scholar, he was given the courtesy of being strangled before he was burnt at the stake. Illustration: Internet Archive Book Images

Conclusion

Wilson's affidavit was a scholarly counterbalance to emotionally and ideologically charged narratives. It highlighted the recurrence of moral panics, propagation of stereotypes, and historical biases that accompany the emergence of new religions. Its significance lies in challenging the legitimacy of the case against the [Unification Church](#), not by defending every practice of the [movement](#) per se, but by urging the legal system to apply rigorous, evidence-based standards and to be aware of its susceptibility to prejudice.

In sum, Wilson offered not just expert testimony but a meta-commentary on how societies - and courts - understand and regulate religion.

To be continued. Part 4 coming soon.

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Scholar Warns Against Revival Of Stereotypes

- June 6, 2025
- Knut Holdhus

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Stereotyping Catholics as trying to take over the world. Here, the 'Whore of Babylon' by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) in the September 1522 publication of Luther's translation of the New Testament. The 'Whore of Babylon' mentioned in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament is here depicted wearing the papal tiara. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

Revival of religious stereotypes as Japanese authorities base their oppression of large religious minority on historic prejudices used in witch hunts since medieval times

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Julian Gray. Photo: Private

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Academic Scrutiny and Witness Credibility

One contributing factor to the British government's retreat was the mounting criticism of its witnesses and methodology. Scholarly observers raised significant doubts about the reliability of the evidence submitted by former members and anti-Unification Church activists.

Sociologists and religious studies scholars who had observed the Church firsthand testified that the government's characterization of the Unification Church was often exaggerated or distorted. They noted that the portrayal of the Church as inherently deceptive, coercive, or immoral did not align with their empirical observations or broader religious studies frameworks.

Moreover, they pointed out that former members – while often sincere in their criticism – were not necessarily objective or disinterested parties. Some had left the Church in highly emotional or contested circumstances and might not be credible witnesses in a court of law.

This skepticism regarding witness reliability undermined the government's case in the UK and could do the same in Japan, where much of the action is based on similar types of testimony.

Several notable scholars took time to write lengthy affidavits. They addressed specific points of the government's complaint against the Unification Church based on their vast experience with new religious movements (NRMs).

These are the objective voices of people who study new religions (and older ones), and who also monitor and analyze the public response to these faiths and their adherents. They did not gain any personal benefit through signing an affidavit but wished to support the cause of religious freedom.

One of the scholars who submitted affidavits was **Bryan Ronald Wilson** (1926-2004), Reader Emeritus of Sociology of the University of Oxford. He served as President of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (SISR), 1971-1975.

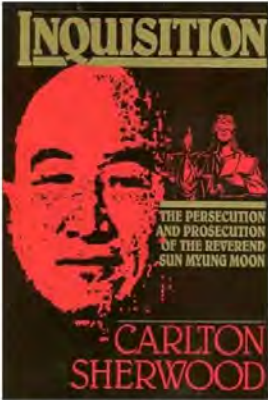
In his first affidavit, he writes on the **history of stereotyping**,

"4.0 Religion is a frequent subject of stereotyping throughout the world. A stereotype is a constructed model or image of a social group or class (or of some other phenomenon) to which the stereotype uncritically ascribes certain stock descriptions which are one-sided, exaggerated, or biased.

The ascribed attributes may or may not be empirically validated, but even where they exist in fact the stereotype presents them in an exaggerated and/or distorted form to which fixity is also ascribed. The stereotype conforms to prevailing prejudices, reflecting and reinforcing them. For this reason it is resistant to change, even in the face of disconfirming factual evidence.

Stereotypes are most frequently used with respect to social groups or movements groups or movements about which there is widespread ignorance, and which differ from conventional assumptions. Typically, the stereotype presents a simple but biased image of a complex phenomenon.

Stereotypes of unfamiliar or new religions have almost always been negative. Religious bodies which today have acquired respectability in the public eye were regularly presented as alien, harmful, deceitful or evil in the early days of their development. It sometimes took many decades or even centuries before negative stereotypes were abandoned.



Investigative journalism on persecution of Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church: "Inquisition" by Carlton Sherwood, published 1991 by Regnery Publishing, 705 pages.

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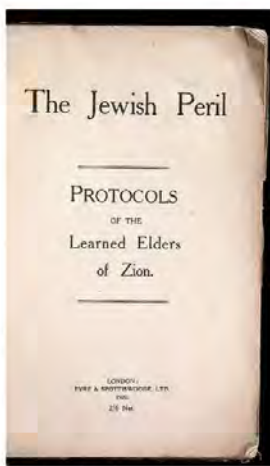
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Colored version of the "Whore of Babylon" illustration from Martin Luther's 1534 translation of the Bible. The term refers to both a symbolic female figure and a place of evil as mentioned in the Book of Revelation of the New Testament. She is described more fully in Revelation 17:5 as "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth". Leading reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox taught that the figure represented the Catholic Church. Author: From the workshop of Lucas Cranach. [Public domain](#) image.

4.1 Thus, the movements which are stereotyped change over time, although the stereotype itself may not. For example, in the 19th century, **Scottish and American Presbyterians sought to prove that the papacy ('the whore of Babylon') was seeking to take over the world.**



Stereotyping Jews as trying to take over the world: Here the title page of the 1920 British publication of the anonymous edition of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an antisemitic fraudulent publication describing an alleged Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. Photo: Eyre & Spottiswoode / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image

After the First World War, a new candidate for this 'conspiracy' stereotype was Jewry. **Jews were accused of seeking a stranglehold on the world.** The fraudulent *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were produced by anti-Semites as evidence of such a conspiracy. **Today, various new religious movements including the Unification Church, are subject to stereotyping.** 4.2 New Religious Movements (NRMs) are those which have newly emerged as separate organizations, outside the mainline churches, or as new styles in devotional practice within those churches (of this latter type, Charismatic Renewal in many churches, Catholic and Protestant, and Opus Dei, in the Roman Church, would be examples).

NRMs today are numerous and highly diverse in form, belief, organization, ritual, and provenance. None the less,

such is the ignorance involved in stereotyping that all NRMs are frequently lumped together and labeled as 'cults'. Even when NRMs are differentiated, however, ignorance about individual movements is still fully evident in the stereotypes that are projected.

4.3 Prejudicial stereotypes used historically to characterize new or unpopular religions, include the accusations of loyalty to a foreign power; the amassing of wealth; irregularity; deception; enticing or kidnapping children; and sexual irregularities. Catholics were long accused of being disloyal, their true alliance being to the Pope."

Continued in [part 3](#).

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