

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: In Japan Settlements Unlawfully Used as Evidence of Wrongdoing

Knut Holdhus
May 27, 2026



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, an Italian scholar specializing in the sociology of religion. He founded and serves as managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions, an international network of academics focused on the study of new religious movements. He has authored around 70 books and over 100 scholarly articles in this field. Here, speaking in Geneva, Switzerland June 16, 2025



Bitter Winter, the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights

When settlements become evidence: A troubling legal shift in Japan and dangerous precedent for any religious community

Published in Bitter Winter on 28th March 2026, an [article](#) by sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne examines the legal reasoning behind the [Tokyo High Court's endorsement](#) of the dissolution of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). The [article](#) pays particular attention to accusations surrounding "spiritual sales" and substantial donations, exploring the courts' contention that such practices reflected psychological manipulation of believers.

See [part 1](#) of the opinion piece: [Civil Lawsuits as Weapons Against Religion](#)

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Reverend Shindō Mizuta, chief priest of Kongo-ji Temple since 2014 (2025)

The [article](#) criticizes both the Supreme Court and the High Court for failing to explain convincingly why decades of established legal interpretation had suddenly been abandoned. Dr. Introvigne suggests that the reinterpretation of Japan's Religious Corporation Act appears specifically designed to target the [Family Federation](#). He further warns that such a precedent could affect many other religious communities in Japan, including organizations never accused of criminal activity but potentially vulnerable to civil lawsuits.

Reverend Shindō Mizuta (水田真道), chief priest of Kongo-ji Temple, a Buddhist leader reportedly warned that the new interpretation threatens all religions and temples. The concern is that if civil claims become sufficient for dissolution, any unpopular religious movement might eventually face similar legal risks.

Another important issue discussed in the [article](#) concerns the High Court's treatment of settlements. Alongside civil judgments,

the court relied heavily on cases resolved through negotiated agreements. Dr. Introvigne argues that this approach is fundamentally flawed because settlements are not admissions of guilt. In legal practice, parties frequently settle disputes simply to avoid lengthy, expensive, or unpredictable litigation.

The [article](#) stresses that equating settlements with proof of wrongdoing undermines basic legal principles. It may also discourage religious organizations and other institutions from settling disputes in the future, since any compromise could later be interpreted as evidence of guilt in separate proceedings.



Dr. Hirohisa Koide, victim of kidnapping, forced detention, and attempted faith-breaking. Was pressured to sue the [Unification Church](#) after his coercive faith-breaking ordeal

The High Court also addressed the [Family Federation](#)'s argument that many plaintiffs in these cases were former members who had undergone deprogramming. The [religious organization](#) maintained that "anti-cult" lawyers and hostile Christian activists had encouraged parents to abduct and confine believers in attempts to force them to renounce their faith. According to the [Family Federation](#), some of these former members later became plaintiffs in lawsuits and settlements after developing deep hostility toward the [organization](#).

Dr. Introvigne notes that there are documented cases in which former believers allegedly faced pressure to sue the [faith organization](#) after coercive faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below] experiences. Entire books and studies, he explains, have examined the relationship between faith-breaking (deprogramming), apostates [See editor's note 2 below], and "anti-cult" litigation.

The High Court rejected the [Family Federation](#)'s objections, arguing that if the plaintiffs' claims truly lacked credibility, the [religious organization](#) would not have agreed to settlements. For the court, the very existence of settlements suggested that some wrongdoing must have occurred.

The [article](#) sharply criticizes this reasoning. Dr. Introvigne contends that settlements cannot reasonably be interpreted as confessions of guilt, especially in an environment where the [Federation](#) believed it faced widespread public hostility and judicial prejudice. In such circumstances, he argues, the [organization](#) may have considered settlement the only practical option regardless of whether allegations were accurate.

Ultimately, the [article](#) presents the High Court decision as evidence of a troubling shift in Japanese legal standards concerning religion. The [Family Federation](#) was dissolved despite the absence of criminal convictions against the [religious corporation](#) itself. Longstanding interpretations of the law were set aside, and civil judgments together with settlements were treated as sufficient proof of misconduct.

For Dr. Introvigne, this development raises broader questions extending far beyond one persecuted [religious movement](#). The case touches on the limits of state power, the protection of minority religions, and the danger that unpopular faiths may become vulnerable to political pressure and shifting public opinion. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the [Family Federation](#)'s theology or past practices, the [article](#) argues that the precedent established by the Tokyo High Court deserves careful scrutiny from anyone concerned with religious liberty and due process.

The debate therefore is not simply about donations or "spiritual sales" - a term coined by hostile activist lawyers. It concerns the standards by which democratic societies determine when a religious organization has crossed the line from protected religious activity into legally punishable misconduct. In the view presented by Dr. Introvigne, the [Tokyo High Court's decision](#) risks lowering that threshold in ways that may eventually affect many religious communities beyond the [Family Federation](#) itself.

See [part 1](#) of the opinion piece: [Civil Lawsuits as Weapons Against Religion](#)

See also [Flawed Reasoning of a Politician Backing Torts](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note 1: Coercive faith-breaking ("deprogramming") in Japan refers to the practice of coercively attempting to separate individuals from their religious affiliations or beliefs, typically through intervention by family members, professional faith-breakers (deprogrammers) or organizations hostile to

new religious movements (NRMs). This phenomenon often targets members of such movements, e.g. relatively large faiths like the [Family Federation](#) or Jehovah's Witnesses, but also smaller groups like Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku) and other newer religious movements.



Also subject to faith-breaking attempts: Members of Soka Gakkai. Here students belonging to the faith in 2001

However, also Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based lay organization with more than 8 million Japanese members, and affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, has occasionally been subject to faith-breaking attempts.

The practice gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents or concerned family members often hired faith-breakers who taught them how to abduct and forcibly detain believers. Almost all such cases involved confining the individual believer and cutting him or her off from the religious community. During the confinement, the believer was subjected to intense questioning or indoctrination designed to break his or her faith. The aim was to "rescue" the person from what the family often had been tricked by faith-breakers or lawyers to regard as harmful influence from the religious organization.

Critics of forced de-conversion argue that it violates fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, religion, and association. Reports of psychological trauma and accusations of unlawful detention have sparked debates over its ethical and legal implications. In response, some religious groups, particularly NRMs, have lobbied for greater protections against such practices.

Japanese courts have been inconsistent in addressing cases of coercive faith-breaking. While some verdicts have condemned the practice as illegal detention, others have been more lenient, citing family concerns about "mental health" or alleged "exploitation" as mitigating factors.]

[Editor's note 2: Apostates here refer not just to someone who have left the religion, but who are now being used to undermine the group. Apostates in Japan are often being used by hostile and cynical lawyers for malicious reasons to cause harm to the faith they were forced out of, when they had their faith broken coercively by so-called faith-breakers (deprogrammers), working in league with activist lawyers.]

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Seong-su (정성수).
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In a report published on 29th May 2026 in the South Korean daily Segye Ilbo, religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) covers the funeral rites held for Park Gyu-nam (박규남), the longtime president of the Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma (성남일화 천마) professional football club and a senior member of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. The article presents Park not only as a successful sports administrator but also as a religious leader whose career reflected the movement's broader vision of promoting social harmony and international peace through public engagement, particularly in the realm of sport.

The report centers on the Seonghwa ceremony (성화식 – 聖和式) held on 28th May at Seoul Asan Medical Center following Park's death on 25th May at the age of 89. Within the theological framework of the Family Federation, a Seonghwa ceremony is understood not merely as a funeral but as a sacred transition from earthly life to spiritual life. The movement regards death as a return to God's embrace and the beginning of a new existence in the spiritual world. Consequently, the ceremony combined mourning with expressions of gratitude, remembrance, and hope.



Park Gyu-nam. Photo: Segye Ilbo

Family members, leaders of the religious organization, colleagues from the football community, and other guests gathered to pay tribute to a man whose life spanned decades of religious service and sports management. According to the report, participants reflected on Park's contributions both to Korean professional football and to the religious community in which he had long played a prominent role.



Song Yong-cheon, President of the Family Federation in South Korea, delivers the Seonghwa address 28th May 2026 in Seoul. Photo: FFWPU

A central feature of the ceremony was the memorial address delivered by Song Yong-cheon (송용천), president of the Family Federation in Korea. Song portrayed Park's life as one marked by sustained dedication to public service and faith. He recalled that Park first served as an evangelist and pastor during the early years of the movement before later assuming responsibility for the management of Seongnam Ilhwa. In Song's account, Park's twenty-five years with the football club represented an important chapter in what the movement describes as "sports ministry" – the use of

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athletic activities as a means of fostering positive values and contributing to society.

Song also highlighted Park's later years of religious devotion, including extensive participation in prayer vigils and spiritual disciplines. He presented the gathering not merely as a farewell but as an opportunity for attendees to renew their own commitment to faith and to continue the work that Park had devoted his life to advancing.

Religious affairs correspondent Jeong's [report](#) reviews Park's role in Korean football, emphasizing the difficulties he faced as well as the achievements he helped make possible. During his tenure, Seongnam Ilhwa experienced several relocations, playing their home matches in Seoul 1992-1995, then in Cheonan 1996-1999, and lastly in Seongnam from 2000. The club operated under circumstances that were not always favorable. Despite these challenges, Park remained closely involved in the club's daily affairs, overseeing operations and maintaining a visible presence around the team.



Seongnam Ilhwa Cheonma celebrating the victory in the Asian Champions League 13th November 2010 after defeating the Iranian team Zob Ahan 3-1 in the final in Tokyo, Japan. Photo: Masashi Hara Hara / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 2.0 Gen](#).

Under his leadership, Seongnam Ilhwa became one of the most successful clubs in Korean football history, winning seven domestic championships – in 1993, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2006 – and establishing a reputation as one of Asia's leading football organizations. The club won five international titles: 1995 Asian Club Championship, 1996 Asian Super Cup, 1996 Afro-Asian Club Championship, 2004 A3 Champions Cup, and 2010 AFC Champions League.

Beyond club management, Park also played a role in shaping the institutional development of professional football in South Korea. As a vice president of the *Korea Professional Football League*, he participated in efforts to strengthen and stabilize the country's professional football system during a period of growth and increasing international recognition.

[Jeong's report](#) places particular emphasis on the connection between Park's football career and the vision of the [Family Federation's](#) founders, [Sun Myung Moon](#) and [Hak Ja Han](#). According to the [article](#), Park's involvement in football began because he was encouraged and entrusted by the founders to take on responsibility for the club. Within the [movement's](#) interpretation of his life, his achievements in sport were therefore not viewed as separate from his religious calling but as an extension of it.

The [article](#) further explains the theological and philosophical ideas that motivated the [movement's](#) investment in football and international sporting events. The [Family Federation](#) has long promoted the view that sport can serve as a means of building friendship, overcoming barriers between peoples, and encouraging peaceful coexistence. The [report](#) notes that this philosophy inspired the creation of the Peace Cup, an international football tournament that brought together prominent clubs

from Europe and elsewhere. Teams such as Real Madrid, Juventus, PSV Eindhoven, Tottenham Hotspur, and Olympique Lyonnais participated in the competition, while Seongnam Ilhwa represented South Korea on the international stage.



Seongnam Stadium 8th November 2009, when it was the venue for the Korea FA Cup Final. Photo: 주전자/ Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 3.0 Unp](#).

By highlighting these events, the [report](#) portrays football as more than a competitive activity. Instead, it is presented as a vehicle for cultural exchange and a practical expression of ideals concerning peace and human unity. Within this framework, Park is depicted as someone who worked to transform those ideals into tangible projects and institutions.

In November 2013, the club was sold to the city of Seongnam, then with current South Korean president Lee Jae-myung (이재명) as mayor. The name was changed to Seongnam Football Club (Seongnam FC). Since 2022, it plays in K league 2, the second-highest level in the country. Seongnam has about one million inhabitants and is the country's 10th largest city. It is located fairly close to Seoul and is part of the Seoul metropolitan subway system.

The [article](#) concludes with remarks from a [Family Federation](#) representative who described Park as a figure committed to promoting reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula and peace throughout the world through sport. The representative expressed confidence that the values Park championed would continue to influence future generations.

Overall, [Jeong Seong-su's report](#) presents Park Gyu-nam as a multifaceted figure whose life linked religion, public service, and professional football. While acknowledging his achievements as a football executive, the [article](#) places equal emphasis on his identity as a man of faith and on the broader vision that guided his work. In doing so, it portrays his death not only as the passing of a respected sports manager but also as the conclusion of a life dedicated to advancing a particular understanding of service, community, and peace through athletic endeavor.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: From the commemorative display at the Seonghwa ceremony for Park Gyu-nam in Seoul 28th May 2026. Calligraphic inscriptions received from Rev. [Sun Myung Moon](#) and Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#) are displayed before an image of the deceased. Photo: FFWPU

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

by Massimo Introvigne | Mar 28, 2026 | [Op-eds Global](#)

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

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 3 of 6. Read [article 1](#) and [article 2](#).



“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 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

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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.

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.



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

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.

Japan, Religious Liberty, Unification Church



Massimo Introvigne

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. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the [Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia](#) (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion](#) and of the executive board of University of California Press’ [Nova Religio](#). From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the “Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions” of the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

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