

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: To Tyrannize FFWPU Japan Using Suspect Theories

Knut Holdhus
January 24, 2025



Marco Respinti delivering his speech in Nagoya, Japan December 9. 2025

Leading European campaigner for freedom of religion points out that Japan's state campaign against religious minorities is based on debunked and outdated concepts

Many scholars have abandoned the term "cult" as it lacks clear definition or boundaries: it is now primarily employed as a derogatory label to stigmatize "the other". However, this word remains in common usage in Japan.

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On 27th December 2024, [Bitter Winter](#), the prominent international online magazine focused on religious freedom and human rights, published the second in a series of four articles by its director-in-charge, Marco Respinti. These articles were inspired by a lecture series he delivered in four Japanese cities - Hiroshima, Tokyo, Nagoya, and Fukuoka - from 6th to 10th December 2024. The events were organized by the Japan Committee of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF).



Marco Respinti, here on April 6, 2023

The second of [Bitter Winter](#)'s articles was headlined "[Made in Japan: No FoRB for the Family Federation. 2. Revamping the Debunked Notion of 'Cult'](#)".

The [Unification Church](#), a new religious movement, was [founded](#) in South Korea in 1954 by Rev. [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명, 1920 - 2012). Over the years, it gained significant popularity not only in South Korea but also in Japan and other countries.

However, as Respinti points out, public perception of new religious movements in Japan has been significantly influenced by the actions of another group - a very different one - Aum Shinrikyō. Following that group's 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway and other criminal acts, many Japanese people began to view new religious movements generally, and sometimes religion as a whole, as more of a societal problem than a resource.

According to Marco Respinti, these crimes by Aum Shinrikyō fueled widespread hostility toward groups labeled - either maliciously or through ignorance - as "cults", "fanatics", or inherently linked to violence. However, in reality, most of these groups are peaceful. This hostility is particularly directed at new, lesser-known, or smaller religious organizations. Notably, the labels of "cult", "fanaticism", and "violence" are not always applied consistently. For instance, a "new religion" might be small and well-known, or large but relatively obscure, making such definitions inherently problematic.

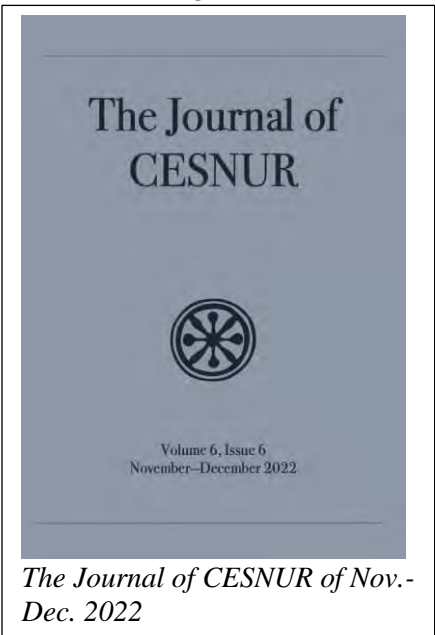


Participants listen to Marco Respinti's lecture in the afternoon of December 9, 2024, Naka Ward, Nagoya City, Japan

The [Bitter Winter](#) editor explained that the term "cult" is often used to describe new or small religious movements, yet its application is highly contentious. Activists within the so-called anti-cult movement claim their efforts are focused solely on "cults", but this is not entirely true.

Hostility toward religion often begins with a focus on "cults" but soon extends to religion in general. This occurs partly because the term "cult" is inherently ambiguous. It lacks scientific precision and is avoided by most scholars for this very reason. Instead of clarifying, the term muddies the waters. What distinguishes a "cult" from a "legitimate" religion? Who determines the dividing line, and what criteria are used? Is it appropriate for laws, secular governments, or codes to intervene in the intricate theologies, rituals, and histories of groups they scarcely comprehend?

Respinti writes that the use of the term "cult" is nearly always derogatory, serving to label individuals or groups that a person, organization, institution, or government wishes to discredit. It is a term imposed on "the other" without evidence. Ultimately, the meaning of "cult" is determined by the biases and intentions of those wielding the term.



The Journal of CESNUR of Nov.-Dec. 2022

According to Respinti, one of the most common accusations leveled at "cults" is that they engage in "brainwashing" to manipulate their members. However, this notion has been largely debunked as pseudo-scientific by the majority of Western scholars studying new religious movements, as well as by courts in the U.S. and other countries. Despite this, the rejection of "brainwashing" as a credible concept is not widely recognized in Japan.

Similarly, the scholarly pushback against the anti-cult narrative prevalent in media is also largely absent. In Japan, many scholars of religion hesitate to challenge the prevailing anti-cult rhetoric, fearing it could jeopardize their careers. This caution stems, in part, from the fallout experienced by some academics who had previously supported Aum Shinrikyō.

Respinti claims that it is worth noting that Japan's anti-cult movement did not emerge in isolation. Historical factors, which cannot be fully explored here, play a role. For example, since the French Revolution, French governments have harbored a general

suspicion of religion, particularly religious minorities deemed difficult to control. In France, governmental agencies are explicitly tasked with combating "cults" and promoting anti-cult ideology on an international scale.

"The Journal of CESNUR", since 2017 an open access periodic about new religious movements, has documented collaborations between these French agencies and Japanese lawyers opposed to "cults," which began in the late 20th century.



Marco Respinti emphasizes that investigative journalist Masumi Fukuda (福田ますみ) has provided extensive evidence on this topic, revealing that the [motivations of these lawyers](#) were not entirely altruistic. Many were driven by financial incentives, viewing lawsuits against "cults" as an opportunity for easy profit.

However, ideological factors also played a role. Most of these lawyers were socialists or communists, and their opposition was often directed at a specific religious movement: the [Family Federation](#), previously known as the [Unification Church](#). This [organization](#) was targeted for its success in Japan, particularly its anti-communist campaigns.

In summary, the term "cult" serves as a weaponized label, lacking clear definition or scholarly consensus. Its usage perpetuates prejudice and marginalization against new or minority religious groups, often obscuring their true nature as peaceful organizations. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in Japan, where historical and cultural factors have reinforced anti-cult rhetoric, leaving little room for the nuanced perspectives of religious scholars.

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FoRB: Believers Denied Most Basic Human Right

• January 23, 2025 • Knut Holdhus

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In light of gross violations in Japan: FoRB – Freedom of Religion or Belief – a most vital human right for a healthy society, spelt out to Tokyo audience

Religious liberty extends beyond the mere freedom to believe or not believe. It encompasses the right to live in accordance with one's beliefs or lack thereof. However, Japan continues to restrict religious freedom, as evidenced by the case of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

See also [Term 'Cult' Is Big Part of Anti-Religious Agenda](#)

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Bitter Winter, the leading international online magazine for religious freedom and human rights, featured on 26th December 2024 the first of four articles by Marco


Respinti, the magazine's Director-in-Charge. The articles were based on a series of lectures




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he gave in four Japanese cities – Hiroshima, Tokyo, Nagoya, and Fukuoka – from 6th to 10th December 2024, organized by the *Japan Committee of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom* (ICRF).



The first *Bitter Winter* article carried the headline “*Made in Japan: No FoRB for the Family Federation. 1. Denying the First Political Human Right*”

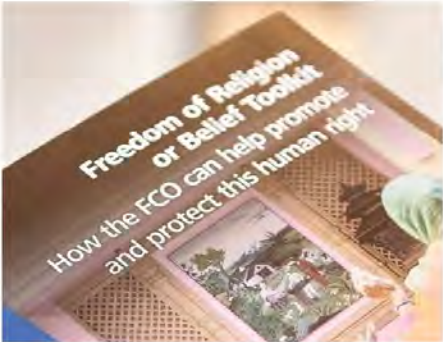
The lecture tour highlighted **a pressing issue: the ongoing challenges to religious liberty in Japan**. Respinti pointed out that he had gained valuable insights into this critical matter through discussions with esteemed colleagues, lawyers, activists, and specialists. As a foreign guest, he did not claim the authority to judge Japan, but as a global citizen, he advocated for the **universal importance of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). This right is foundational to healthy societies and genuine democracies.**

Respinti emphasized,

“A pivotal element of a healthy society and a distinctive character of a true democracy is freedom of religion, belief, or creed for everyone. International treaties call it ‘FoRB’: freedom of religion ‘or belief’. This is actually important. Practices that are not technically ‘religion’ are still manifestations of ‘belief’ and are thus protected by FoRB.”

The universality of FoRB

FoRB is recognized as a fundamental human right by international treaties. It encompasses not only traditional religious practices but also non-religious beliefs, ensuring protection for all forms of conscience. In fact, **FoRB is the first “political” human right, second only to the right to life. Without life, human rights have no bearer; without FoRB, individuals lack the freedom to explore and express their most profound convictions.**



Increased focus on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Here, the cover of a booklet produced by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in relation to a seminar in October 2016. Photo: FCO. License: [CC Attr 2.0 Gen](#). Cropped

This right involves **the freedom to engage with life's ultimate questions**, such as the existence of a higher power or cosmic principle. When people can freely address these existential queries, they achieve true liberty. Moreover, **FoRB is not confined to private belief but extends to the public sphere, influencing how individuals organize their lives and contribute to society.**

Marco Respinti emphasized that **FoRB also underpins other essential rights, such as freedom of expression, association, and education.** These freedoms derive from the ability to live authentically according to one's beliefs. Thus, FoRB is not only the cornerstone of individual dignity but also a crucial element of societal health and democratic integrity.

The far-reaching impact of FoRB

Throughout history, the presence or absence of FoRB has shaped civilizations. According to Respinti, societies rise or fall based on their ability to uphold this right. When even one individual's FoRB is restricted, the entire society suffers. This demonstrates that **religious liberty is not a niche concern but a universal imperative.**

Today, **FoRB is among the most threatened human rights worldwide.** In many countries, authoritarian regimes suppress religious freedom, destabilizing communities with hatred, ideology, and power struggles. However, even democracies are not immune to this problem. When democratic nations fail to safeguard FoRB, they become incomplete democracies in need of reform. These violations can manifest through fiscal policies, administrative actions, cultural biases, and organizational restrictions.

The case of Japan

Unfortunately, Japan is not exempt from these challenges. *Bitter Winter*, an online magazine dedicated to religious freedom, **has documented significant threats to FoRB in Japan**, particularly following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍 晋三, 1954–2022) on 8th July 2022, in Kashiwara, Nara Prefecture.



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Abe, who served as Japan's Prime Minister from 2006–2007 and 2012–2020, was tragically killed by Tetsuya Yamagami (山上 徹也), a former member of the *Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force*. This event ignited a public controversy surrounding the [Family Federation](#).

Respinti mentions how the fallout from Abe's assassination has brought increased scrutiny to the [Family Federation](#). Activists campaigning against the [religious organization](#) accuse it of financial exploitation and unethical practices, leading to government interventions that have had significant implications for FoRB in Japan. While the government's actions are ostensibly aimed at protecting citizens, the same actions raise concerns about the broader erosion of religious freedom.

A call for vigilance

Japan's vibrant democracy and remarkable cultural heritage make the current threats to FoRB particularly troubling. **A true democracy must protect the rights of all citizens, ensuring that no individual or group is denied the freedom to live according to their beliefs.** When FoRB is diminished, it jeopardizes not only individual rights but the very foundation of democratic society.

Marco Respinti emphasizes that religious liberty should concern everyone. It is not merely an abstract principle but a tangible safeguard of human dignity and societal harmony. As Japan grapples with these challenges, it is imperative for policymakers, civil society, and the international community to uphold FoRB as a universal and inviolable right.

Conclusion

FoRB is the bedrock of all human rights and the hallmark of a thriving democracy. Its **preservation requires vigilance and commitment from individuals and institutions alike.** As we reflect on the situation in Japan, let us reaffirm our dedication to ensuring that religious liberty is not just an ideal but a lived reality for all. The stakes are high, but the rewards – peace, justice, and freedom – are immeasurable.

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Featured image above: Marco Respinti speaking in Tokyo 8th December 2024. Photo: Japan Committee of ICRF

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Shinzo Abe in March 2022, few months before he was assassinated. Photo: United States Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain image](#). Cropped

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