

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Scholar on Image, Idealism, Donations, Mistrust

Knut Holdhus
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Japanese man looking questioning. Illustration



[Sekai Nippo](#)

In interview Japanese scholar and author comments on the public image of the Family Federation, large donations, and building the Kingdom of Heaven

Tokyo, 11th April 2025 - Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

A Reconsideration and Explanation of the "Heaven on Earth" Concept

Interview with Religious Scholar Toshihiro Ota (Part 2)

by Tsuyoshi Toyoda (豊田 剛)

See [part 1](#) of the interview

Negative image influencing the courts



Toshihiro Ota - Japanese author and researcher in religious studies. Completed doctoral studies in Religious Studies and the History of Religion at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology. Holds a Doctorate in Literature. Currently a part-time lecturer at Saitama University

- You've studied Aum Shinrikyo. From a religious studies perspective, what is the fundamental difference between Aum and the [Family Federation](#) (formerly [Unification Church](#))?

Aum Shinrikyo and the [Family Federation](#) are fundamentally different religions, so it's not easy to compare them directly. Aum was an exceptionally aggressive religion, to the point where it's difficult to

find comparable examples. Its founder harbored a destructive impulse and worshiped "Shiva", the god of destruction. They preached a doctrine called "Vajrayana", which interpreted murder as salvation. A select murder squad was formed within the group, and they killed not only external enemies but even fellow believers without hesitation.

I myself have not conducted detailed research on the [Unification Church](#), so I can't say much definitively. However, it doesn't appear that [Sun Myung Moon](#), its founder, had the same destructive tendencies as Asahara (Aum's founder). If anything, [Moon](#) was a "dove-like" figure who aimed to transform the world into a utopia through peaceful means. There is a simplistic tendency to equate Aum and the [Unification Church](#), but I cannot agree with that view.



From a Victory over Communism (IFVOC) campaign in Japan in 1969

There have been rumors that the International Federation for Victory Over Communism (IFVOC), one of the organizations affiliated with the [Family Federation](#), operated a gun shop and may have had an armed group equipped with shotguns. I can't verify these claims either. But at the time, the radical violence of far-left groups was more conspicuous, and perhaps the IFVOC felt compelled to defend itself in some way. These issues need accurate explanations from those directly involved; otherwise, they risk becoming hotbeds for conspiracy theories and excessive fear.

- What are the problems within the [religious organization](#), and what needs to be improved?



Happy families, key to establishing the [Kingdom of Heaven](#) on earth. Illustration

As far as I understand, the main goal of the [Unification Church](#) is the "establishment of a [Kingdom of Heaven](#) on earth based on the [Unification Principles](#)". From the 1960s to the 1990s, when [Moon](#) was actively preaching, there was a strong sense of urgency to realize this goal while the Lord of the Second Advent was still alive. Many followers pursued this mission with little regard for opposition from their families or society.

However, that zeal also led to problems, such as making excessive donations beyond their means, using "spiritual sales" tactics, solicitation under false identities, neglect of child-rearing, among others.

In recent years, the [Family Federation](#) has made PR efforts to improve its image. Yet I find it concerning that their core principle of building a "[Kingdom of Heaven](#) on Earth" is

rarely discussed. Without explaining this theme thoroughly and engaging in frank discussions with the broader society, public understanding of the [religious organization](#) will remain shallow, and its overall image won't change.

- The compliance declaration [See editor's note below] issued by the [Family Federation](#) in 2009 is said to have curbed excessive donations and "spiritual sales", and lawsuits noticeably decreased. Yet the court's impressions didn't change.

The reforms of the [religious organization](#) had some effect, but they didn't go far enough to fundamentally change the general image of the [Family Federation](#).

One key reason is that reforms based on the compliance declaration [See editor's note below] focused only on surface-level activities. There was no clear explanation of how core doctrines like "building the [Kingdom of Heaven](#) on earth", "[restoration](#) of all things (all creation)", or "conditions for [indemnity](#) (蕩減 - reparation, atonement, amends)" were reexamined or changed.

As a result, many Japanese continued to see the [Family Federation](#) as a group that tries to extract wealth from Japan (plunder Japan's assets) to build a strange utopia centered on South Korea.



Even in the recent [district court ruling](#), there were concerns that excessive donations might still be continuing post-compliance declaration [See editor's note below].

While the religious organization has objected, pointing out that no concrete figures were shown for donation damages, I can understand the court's concern.

The underlying tendency of the [religious organization](#) to raise funds for goals like the salvation of humanity and building a [Kingdom of Heaven](#) on earth may be temporarily suppressed but has not fundamentally changed. This leaves believers continually exposed to potential donation pressure - a point that worries the general public.

Concerns of repeating past religious mistakes

- Large donations often accompany religious groups. From a religious studies point of view, what's the issue here?



Selling indulgences. "A Question to a Mintmaker", circa 1530, woodcut by Jörg (Jeorg/Jan) Breu the Elder

The relationship between religion and money is delicate and historically fraught. A classic example is the "indulgence" controversy in late medieval Christianity.

The Catholic Church, then extremely powerful, sold indulgences with claims that they could absolve sins or save ancestors from purgatory.

This led to criticisms over whether salvation could be bought, sparking the Protestant Reformation and even religious wars.

While not directly equivalent, the [Unification Church](#)'s emphasis on human and financial power seems to echo some of these historical missteps. If a religion claims it will build a [Kingdom of Heaven](#) on earth using money, then naturally, people will expect concrete, visible results - and when these don't materialize, believers will likely feel dissatisfaction.

Now that founder [Sun Myung Moon](#) has passed away (in 2012), and the early devout members are aging, it's time to calmly reassess: was a [Kingdom of Heaven](#) on earth really built? Did this ideal ever have the power to truly improve reality?

The [Unification Church](#) has also tried to realize its ideals through ventures beyond religion - into politics, arts, academia, journalism, and business. It has established numerous affiliated organizations. Yet there is a serious lack of explanation about the nature, history, and relationship of these groups with the [religious organization](#) itself. I believe this is a factor that arouses suspicion and anxiety in the general public.

See [part 1](#) of the interview



Major works by Toshihiro Ota

Toshihiro Ota (大田俊寛) - Born in 1974. Graduated from the Faculty of Sociology at Hitotsubashi University. Completed doctoral studies in Religious Studies and the History of Religion at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology. Holds a Doctorate in Literature. Currently a part-time lecturer at Saitama University. Specializes in religious studies. Major works include "The Complete History of Monotheism" (Vol. 1 and 2, Kawade Shobo Shinsha), "The Thought of Gnosticism" (Shunjusha), and "The Spiritual History of Aum Shinrikyo" (Shunjusha).

[Editor's note: The 2009 compliance declaration of the [Unification Church](#) of Japan (now the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)) was a formal commitment by the [organization](#) to reform its practices in response to longstanding public criticism and legal challenges.

The [Unification Church](#) in Japan had faced numerous allegations related to recruitment tactics and donation solicitation, termed "spiritual sales" (霊感商法) by a hostile network of activist lawyers who had declared the [religious organization](#) an enemy. These issues led to multiple lawsuits orchestrated by the activist lawyers and significant media backlash. This prompted the [organization](#) to take measures to restore its reputation and demonstrate compliance with legal and ethical standards.

The [religious organization](#) pledged to stop possibly unethical donation practices, including what the hostile network of lawyers claimed amounted to "pressuring members into making large financial contributions under spiritual pretexts."

This was in response to accusations from the same activist lawyers that followers "were being manipulated into giving away substantial amounts of money or property."

The [Unification Church](#) stated it would enhance internal oversight to ensure compliance with ethical and legal standards. Measures included better training for leaders and stricter guidelines for evangelization

and solicitation of donations.

After this compliance declaration, there was a significant decrease in the number of lawsuits against the [Unification Church](#) - since 2015 called the [Family Federation](#). The [religious organization](#) has used this as evidence that it has improved its practices and should not be subject to [dissolution](#).]

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Scholar: Government Mishandling Dissolution Case

• April 29, 2025

• Knut Holdhus

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Rushed justice behind closed doors: Japanese scholar raises alarms on due process and religious rights as freedom of religion is undermined

Tokyo, 10th April 2025 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. *Original article.*

State Intervention as “Interference with Freedom of Religion”


Interview with Religious Scholar Toshihiro Ota (Part 1)

by Tsuyoshi Toyoda (豊田 剛)




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Toshihiro Ota (大田俊寛) – Japanese author and researcher in religious studies. Completed doctoral studies in Religious Studies and the History of Religion at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology. Holds a Doctorate in Literature. Currently a part-time lecturer at Saitama University. Photo: Sekai Nippo.

The Tokyo District Court recently issued a [dissolution order](#) for the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (FFWPU, formerly the [Unification Church](#)). We spoke with religious scholar Toshihiro Ota (大田俊寛), who has studied the history of Western religious thought and “cult issues” like *Aum Shinrikyo*, about the legitimacy of this dissolution, the meaning of freedom of religion, and the issues with the [Family Federation](#).

Interviewer: Tsuyoshi Toyoda (豊田 剛)

Questioning the process of resolving religious issues

– What are your thoughts on the Tokyo District Court's decision to order the dissolution of the [Family Federation](#)?

Overall, my impression is: *Why was there such a rush to complete the process?* Freedom of religion is so vital that it's often referred to as the

“human right of human rights” and is deeply tied to the very purpose of the modern state.

I believe that a decision should have been made only after thoroughly examining the situation with as much transparency as possible and through repeated discussion and careful deliberation. If the decision is not convincing to many people – including [Family Federation](#) believers – it won't lead to a true resolution of the issue and may leave future concerns unresolved. This decision might, in fact, backfire and lead to a broader and more complicated problem down the line.

– The court rendered its judgment behind closed doors and essentially assumed guilt. Was the process flawed?

Not just the trial – but also Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's (岸田文雄) [sudden reinterpretation of the law](#), the Agency for Cultural Affairs' internal [Religious Corporation Council deliberations](#), and the repeated use of the “[right to question](#)” – all of these steps were carried out in secrecy. I was honestly astonished by how little information was disclosed. As things stand, we're not even in a position to verify whether the government's actions were valid or rational.



Head of government mishandling?
He certainly changed the law overnight: Former Prime Minister **Fumio Kishida**. Here, at press conference 14th August 2024. Photo: 首相官邸 (PMO) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

The issues surrounding the [Unification Church](#) are extremely complex (multifaceted), but the government moved straight to a conclusion without thoroughly considering all aspects. That is deeply concerning.

Ideally, when dealing with religious issues, the state should first listen carefully to both victims and the religious group, issue appropriate recommendations for improvement, and if there's no change, apply some form of monitoring or oversight. Only when the problems persist should a dissolution order be considered – with care and flexibility. Sadly, the Japanese government's response this time seems to deviate significantly from that ideal.

– The court decision claims it does not prohibit or restrict freedom of religion. What's your view on that?



As I mentioned in my book *The Complete History of Monotheism*, the modern concept of freedom of religion was first clearly defined by the 17th-century British philosopher John Locke in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. In it, Locke argues that under normal

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John Locke (1632-1704), English philosopher and physician. Early empiricist and influential

Enlightenment thinker. His writings on fundamental rights and freedoms under the rule of law continue to have large influence even today. Photo: Portrait by Kate Jones / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

conditions, the separation of church and state must be maintained, and the state should not intervene in religious matters. However, he also states that if public order is fundamentally threatened or citizens' lives and property are at risk, the state must intervene in religious issues.

Naturally, when such intervention happens, some infringement on religious freedom is inevitable. Therefore, the state must be fully aware and prepared for this and ensure its intervention is both reasonable and minimal.

In the case of the [Family Federation](#), interference with religious freedom had already occurred at the point the government began intervening. Despite

that, the [court's verdict](#) document states at its conclusion that the [dissolution order](#) was "not intended to infringe upon the spiritual or religious aspects of the [religious corporation](#) or its believers."

From the perspective of someone who has studied the history of religious thought, this statement is difficult to accept. It feels like a surgeon saying, "I performed major surgery with a scalpel, but I didn't harm the body or cause any pain." It just doesn't make sense.

Lowering the bar for dissolution of religious corporations

– Do you think this court decision could affect other religious organizations?

According to modern state principles, targeting a specific religious group alone is unacceptable. The standards applied to the [Family Federation](#) must be equally applied to all religious organizations. That said, this particular [dissolution order](#) was clearly influenced by public outcry following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三). So it's unlikely that other religious groups will be immediately affected.

However, it's undeniable that the government's actions have significantly lowered the threshold for dissolving religious corporations, and the criteria for doing so have become less clear. It will be necessary to eventually disclose all the currently undisclosed procedural details and seriously reconsider whether the steps taken were truly appropriate and what approach should be followed in the future.

See [part 2 of interview](#)

Toshihiro Ota (大田俊寛) – Born in 1974. Graduated from the Faculty of Sociology at Hitotsubashi University. Completed doctoral studies in Religious Studies and the History of Religion at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology. Holds a Doctorate in Literature. Currently a part-time lecturer at Saitama University. Specializes in religious studies. Major works include "The Complete History of Monotheism" (Vol. 1 & 2, Kawade Shobo Shinsha), "The Thought of Gnosticism" (Shunjusha), and "The Spiritual History of Aum Shinrikyo" (Shunjusha).

Featured image above: A handful from the Kishida administration meeting behind closed doors. Illustration: Grok xAI, 2025.

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