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Anti-cult journalist Eight Suzuki sued for false statements

Both the Universal Peace Federation and deprogramming victim Toru Goto seek damages from a reporter famous for his anti-Unification-Church campaigns.

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (17.10.2023) - Two lawsuits filed this month in Japan will test both the independence of Japanese courts and whether unpopular groups can be accused of almost anything with impunity. Democratic countries protect freedom of speech, which certainly includes criticizing groups one does not like. There is, however, a clear line separating harsh criticism from outright lies.

Many (including the undersigned) may have, for example, a very negative opinion of QAnon and expose it for its dangerous conspiracy theories. However, even QAnon ringleaders are protected against the same kind of false accusations they propagate against others. If I would write that certain QAnon activists have been paid millions of dollars by the Russian Embassy for their pro-Putin posts, or have a criminal record for child abuse, and can supply no evidence for these accusations, I will probably be sued and will have to pay damages—and rightly so.

The argument that QAnon plays a negative social role may be used to justify vitriolic criticism, but would not excuse statements about its leaders that are demonstrably false. This is how democracy works. Only in totalitarian regimes such as Russia and China opponents or groups labeled as “undesirable,” including some minority religions, can be accused of everything and have no way of protecting themselves.

Eight Suzuki is a Japanese journalist that converted attacking the Unification Church (now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) and other “cults” into a cottage industry and a lucrative business. This is, in my personal view, immoral, but is not illegal. Since prejudice against minority religions stigmatized as “cults” is widespread in Japanese society and media (and has extended to foreign reporters based in Japan), Suzuki has even won awards.

The question, however, is whether in a democratic country somebody like Suzuki should be allowed to publish false statements against the Unification Church, its members, and organizations related to it and get away with his lies by shielding himself under the argument that the church is an allegedly “anti-social” organization that the Japanese

government is seeking to dissolve. Japanese courts of law should now answer this question in two separate lawsuits.

The first has been filed by the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), an NGO with general consultative status at the United Nations that has been founded by the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who also founded the Unification Church, and his wife Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon. As documented in [a White Paper published by "Bitter Winter,"](#) while not hiding in any way its connection with the Unification Church, the UPF does not proselytize on its behalf and the vast majority of those who participate in its events and are active as "ambassadors for peace" are not members of the Family Federation.

The assassinated Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, participated via video in one UPF event held in South Korea in September 2021. Eight Suzuki repeatedly stated that Abe was paid fifty million yen (\$334,000) for this video message. UPF maintains that Abe received no compensation at all. Suzuki's allegations also slander the memory of Abe, who would have violated the Political Funds Control Act and evaded taxes. While Suzuki is trying to create a smokescreen claiming he is persecuted by UPF for his criticism of its connections with the Unification Church, the issue is much simpler. Either the UPF paid fifty million yen to Abe for its video message, or it didn't. If Suzuki has no evidence that the sum was paid, he propagated a lie damaging the plaintiff UPF and should pay damages for it. Whether UPF is a good or bad organization and what exactly are its connections with the Unification Church is not the subject matter of the lawsuit. The only question the court should examine is whether Suzuki has any evidence that UPF paid fifty million yen to Abe. If this evidence does not exist, the court should declare Suzuki a liar and a slanderer and make him pay for it.

The second lawsuit is by Toru Goto, the most famous victim of the obnoxious crime of deprogramming, the practice born in the U.S. and later exported to Japan of kidnapping adult members of groups stigmatized as "cults," keeping them imprisoned, and bombarding them with negative information about their religious movement and other forms of physical and mental violence until they would give up their faith. Western democratic countries outlawed deprogramming in the past century, but it survived in Japan—until the Toru Goto case. He was kidnapped, kept in seclusion, malnourished, and abused for the incredible time period of twelve years and five months. When his calvary finally ended, he looked like a survivor from a Nazi concentration camp.

12 NGOs denounce the dissolution of the Unification Church

The request for dissolution of the Unification Church in Japan: A tragic violation of freedom of religion or belief

by [Bitter Winter](#) (14.10.2023)

We represent religious and secular organizations that share a commitment and an interest in freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), which scholars have identified as the most threatened human right in the world today. We also share a sympathy and admiration for Japan, its culture, and its vibrant democracy in a part of the world plagued by bloody non-democratic regimes.

We have followed with great concern the developments in Japan after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, including the attempt to make the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (formerly known as the Unification Church) somewhat responsible for it and to request its dissolution as a religious organization.

We understand that the assassin has offered as motivation for his heinous crime that he intended to punish Abe for his collaboration with the Family Federation, a religious organization he hated, he claimed, because his mother went bankrupt in 2002 after her excessive donations to the group. Not all is clear in the crime, including why the assassin waited for 20 years after his mother's bankruptcy to kill Abe. The fact that members of the Family Federation partially reimbursed the donations after relatives of the criminal's mother complained is rarely mentioned in the media. Nor is the fact that the assassin himself was never a member of the Unification Church emphasized, as it should be.

Following the crime, an old campaign was revamped by lawyers and others hostile to the Family Federation mostly for political reasons, as they resented for decades its successful sponsorship of anti-Communist initiatives. It was claimed—through a mixture of truths referring to events that occurred decades ago, half-truths, and outright lies—that the Family Federation was an anti-social organization financing itself by soliciting extravagant donations and through “spiritual sales” of objects sold to devotees for sums greatly exceeding their value, and that second-generation members suffered because of their strict education. Press conferences and an unprecedented media campaign of slander followed.

We acknowledge that excessive pressure on devotees to donate and a strict education not all second-generation members agree with are problems that exist in many religious organizations. We note, however, that with respect to the Family Federation, they have been reported unfairly and one-sidedly, listening only to the militant lawyers and to “apostate” ex-members whose stories in some cases have been exposed as false by independent journalists.

“Spiritual sales” is a label created by opponents to designate activities carried out by believers of the Family Federation that have long since ceased. The Family Federation counseled its over-enthusiastic members to cease these sales activities and issued a public declaration condemning them in 2009. Before the assassination of Shinzo Abe, the number of lawsuits against “spiritual sales” by Family Federation members that occurred after 2009 had decreased to only a handful. Many of the cases advertised in the media refer to incidents said to have happened more than 15 years ago. Hostile lawyers claim otherwise, but facts do not agree with their statements, and they sometimes maliciously confuse the dates when the so-called “spiritual sales” occurred with the dates of the lawsuits started years thereafter.

As for soliciting donations and educating their children in a strict conservative way, there is no evidence that the Family Federation acts in a way that is significantly different from how dozens of other religious organizations behave.

It seems that the dissolution of the Family Federation, a measure reminiscent of practices current in China and Russia rather than in democratic countries, is out of proportion with the charges raised against it and not consistent with the Federation's law-abiding behavior. It will also open the way to similar action against other religious minorities unpopular with certain lawyers or political groups and the media.

We urge Japanese authorities and courts not to proceed with a measure that would forever taint the image of Japan as a country committed to democratic principles, including FoRB. Pressing for dissolution will align Japan with totalitarian regimes “where unpopular religious minorities are ‘liquidated’ after the ground has been prepared by slanderous media campaigns,” as Amb. Suzan Johnson Cook, former Ambassador-at-Large for the Office of International Religious Freedom at the U.S. State Department, and Dr. Katrina Lantos-Swett, co-chair of the International Religious Freedom Summit, wrote in [a September op-ed on Real Clear Politics](#).

This is not the Japan we have learned to respect and love.

October 14, 2023

Signatories

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Why the Unification Church should not be dissolved. 4. The witch hunt should be stopped

There are no legal reasons to dissolve the Family Federation. The campaign against it follows decades of bigotry and discrimination.

Article 4 of 4. Read [article 1](#), [article 2](#), and [article 3](#).

by Tatsuki Nakayama

Abduction and confinement of Family Federation believers

There is a reason why there are fewer trials against the Family Federation. For nearly 30 years, anti-family coalition forces have asked people known in English as “deprogrammers” to kidnap and imprison believers, force them to leave, and persuade them to sue the Family Federation as a defendant if they leave.

This is called the “defection business” and it seems that the number of abduction and confinement victims exceeds 4,300. The composition of the “Abduction and Confinement → Trial” is shown in the graph above.

For example, Toru Goto, a believer, was imprisoned for 12 and a half years, and in 2015 he won a lawsuit at the Supreme Court and won compensation of 22 million yen. In this way, since the Family Federation won the case against the abductors and the abduction and confinement were eliminated, there was no longer a “stepping stone” to bring lawsuits against the Family Federation.

The relationship between this abduction and confinement and the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, which is said to have been involved in it, is described in detail in “Our Unpleasant Neighbors” (Information Center Press) written by journalist Kazuhiro Yonemoto, to whom Tetsuya Yamagami sent a letter the day before the murder of former Prime Minister Abe.

In the media, the narrative—or “Composition A”—that is reported is only that “the Family Federation is the perpetrator and is causing the damage of large donations.”

However, behind the scenes, there is also a “Composition B” narrative that says, “The Family Federation has suffered from the abduction and confinement involving the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales.” I would like Prime Minister Kishida and the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to look at both these compositions with an open mind.

No maliciousness

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) says that the Family Federation is “malicious” because it lost a total of 1.4 billion yen in 22 civil court cases in which the Family Federation lost on the grounds of employer liability.

However, according to my analysis, the Family Federation won about half of the cases, 48% and won about 1.1 billion yen. For half of the donation, the court did not recognize the Family Federation's tort liability (employer's liability). In this way, it is not fair to take only the Family Federation's lost cases as a way to claim that it is malicious.

It has also been criticized that the doctrine and solicitation of the Family Federation is "mind control" or "brainwashing." However, the definition of mind control is vague to begin with and overseas research has [persuasively shown](#) that it does not have the effect of changing humans. In Japan trials, which have been contested for more than 20 years, there has never been a single case in which responsibility for mind control has been found head-on.

Comparison of maliciousness with other religions

Compared to other religions, I don't think the Family Federation is "malicious" enough to order its dissolution.

In the cases of Aum Shinrikyo and Myokakuji Temple, where dissolution orders were issued, leaders were sentenced for murder and fraud. These cases cannot be compared to the Family Federation, where no executives have been taken to court or convicted of criminal or fraudulent acts.

In addition, there are six religious corporations, whose believers and former believers have committed group assaults and murders, that have not been disbanded and are still in existence today. These are Nenpō Shinkyō, World Salvation Buddhism,

Hōyū-no-kai, Kigenkai, Kukai Esoteric Buddhism Daikinryūin, and Shinji Shumeikai.

In particular, the first three religious corporations, such as Nenpo Shinkyo, were brought to court with dissolution orders on the grounds of mass lynching and murder, but the court ultimately refused to approve their dissolution. I don't believe the Family Federation should be dissolved given that other religious groups that killed their followers are not dissolved.

In addition, the government has not exercised its right to question or requested a dissolution order against Hōnohana Sampogyo, in which the leader and others were subjected to organized fraud civil cases, and the Kenshokai, which has caused 12 criminal cases since 1999 and its district director was sentenced to 15 years in prison for murder in 2003.

Compared to these religious groups, you can see that there is little chance that the Family Federation will be dissolved. Once the trial for the dissolution order begins, it will be clear that the government will eventually lose. If the Kishida administration were to start a trial for dissolution order, I think it would leave a stain on the nation's history as a government that "lost in a case where it is destined to lose, started a trial for religious persecution and wasted tax money."

Past failure to file a dissolution order request

In fact, for about thirty years, the government has repeatedly received requests from the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales to investigate and dissolve the Family Federation, but it has not exercised its right to question and has not requested a dissolution order.

Specifically, then-Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama in 1994 and the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 1998 clearly determined that it was not possible to request a dissolution order of the Family Federation after analyzing court precedents.

In 2012, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales filed a lawsuit claiming national compensation from the Family Federation. The lawyers argued that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) had failed to exercise its legal rights to question the Family Federation and request a dissolution order.

However, the Tokyo District Court rejected the request of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales in February 2017, stating that it was within the discretion of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to not ask questions or request a dissolution order.

Six and a half years have passed since then, and no court case has been filed against the Family Federation regarding donations. In other words, you can understand that there is no way that the Family Federation, which has improved its organization after the 2009 Declaration of Compliance, can now be ordered to dissolve.

Dissolution order does not help alleged victims

The Tokyo District Court's February 2017 ruling stated that "relief" for "individual stakeholders" was not the purpose of a dissolution order, but that "relief for damages is entrusted to the general tort code, etc."

As such, in the first place, the dissolution order is not intended to help individual victims. In other words, the court held that the relief of individuals, such as the Yamagami family and [Sayuri Ogawa](#) (pseudonym), should be discussed in tort and should be considered separately from the question of whether or not to lose the legal personality of a religious corporation.

In addition, when a corporation is dissolved, it becomes difficult to compensate for damages, so in order to save the victims, it is better to continue the corporation rather than dissolve it. The Diet passed the Act on Prevention of Unfair Donations in December last year. However, to request a dissolution order while enacting a new law looks like an act of shooting oneself in the foot.

In fact, Masaki Kito of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales once stated that it was better not to dissolve Aum Shinrikyo. Why should Aum Shinrikyo not be dissolved, but the Family Federation should be dissolved?

According to data from the Consumer Affairs Agency in 2021, only 1.9% of the damage consultations it invited for "spiritual sales" problems were related to the Family Federation. The remaining 98.1% involved "spiritual sales" for other organizations.

However, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales does not pay attention to the 98% of organizations on its website; it only attacks the Family Federation. I feel that the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales—despite its name—only works for the Anti-Family Federation cause with a partisan character and political purpose.

Name change to Family Federation

The change of name from the Unification Church to the Family Federation in 2015 has been criticized as a ploy to influence politicians by using a new name. This case does not deserve criticism from a legal point of view. Deciding the name of a religious corporation is part of religious freedom and can essentially be changed immediately by notification to competent authorities.

This is evident from international comparisons. In 1997, then-President of the Family Federation, which emphasizes the family, Reverend Sun Myung Moon instructed the entire world membership to change its name to the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. As a result, the name change to Family Federation was completed in 97 countries around the world a few years later.

However, in Japan, the notification to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) was not accepted; it was finally changed after 12 years of delay, compared with other countries. Internationally, only the Family Federation in Japan was subjected to discriminatory measures.

Prime Minister Kishida's dangerous interpretation of the law

Prime Minister Kishida stated in the Diet in November 2022 that the Family Federation's effort to create a memorandum (agreement) stating that believers would not file a claim for damages against the Family Federation or that the creation of a videotape of these scenes itself is enough to prove the illegality of Family Federation's solicitation and recruitment methods. Moreover, this view was followed by the Consumer Affairs Agency in its explanation of the Unfair Donation Solicitation Prevention Act.

However, as a lawyer, I can say that it is a matter of course and a daily occurrence to prepare agreements, make recordings, and videos in order to confirm the intentions of the parties and prevent future disputes. If taking a video is presumed to be illegal, the visualization of criminal investigation interrogation will also be close to illegality.

The memorandum that Prime Minister Kishida claimed to be the grounds to prove Family Federation's illegality was held to be legally valid in civil trials last year and the year before. Since Prime Minister Kishida has made these statements that ignore these precedents, I believe that there are no people around him who calmly analyze judicial precedents and give him proper advice.

As a Japanese citizen

In this way, I feel a bit embarrassed, not only as a lawyer but also as a Japanese citizen, because Prime Minister Kishida has changed the interpretation of laws and regulations overnight and made statements that ignore judicial precedents.

As I have mentioned so far, it is clear from the comparison with past cases that it is not possible to order the dissolution of the Family Federation. Nevertheless, the current situation—in which the right of questioning is exercised seven times to “torture the members of the Family Federation without killing them,” so to speak—is a major religious persecution that violates the freedom of religion under the Constitution. In fact, it has drawn strong international criticism from American and European religious liberty watchdogs and human rights activists.

Japan, as a world-class democracy, must be a nation that values freedom of religion. I would like Prime Minister Kishida not to listen only to the arguments of one party, but to make a calm and rational judgment based on judicial precedents and the matters pointed out in this document.

Japan’s threat to international religious freedom

By Aaron Rhodes

[The Messenger Opinion](#) (15.07.2023) - Japan has a well-earned reputation as a defender of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, known and admired for its lively, open politics and tolerance for dissent. But if the current government goes through with its threat to [dissolve](#) a minority religious group, it will not only deny religious freedom at home but show that liberal democracies may not be serious about defending principles they promote.

The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, better known as the Unification Church, has been [under scrutiny](#) by Japanese media, political parties and government bodies since Japan’s former prime minister, Shinzo Abe, was assassinated a year ago, on July 8, 2022. Tetsuya Yamagami, the man accused of shooting Abe with a homemade gun, reportedly held him [responsible](#) for the fact that Yamagami’s mother had given a substantial amount of money to the Unification Church.

Abe was not a member of the church but had taken part by video in a meeting organized by an international NGO, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), founded by church leaders. Over the years, hundreds of others, including many national and international figures, have done the same thing.

The facts surrounding this tragedy have been [documented](#) by sociologist Dr. Massimo Introvigne, an expert on new religious movements. [Prejudice](#) against “cults” may have played a role. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, opponents of the church began a campaign in the media and on the internet, and some church members reportedly received [death threats](#).

Leading this campaign was Japan’s Communist Party, exploiting the fact that several other members of Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) also had had contacts with the UPF. The Unification Church, founded by the late Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who was jailed and tortured by the North Korean communist regime, has been fiercely anti-communist and socially conservative.

Other leading figures in the campaign against the church include lawyers who have denounced its fundraising practices and “de-programmers” who have earned money by persuading Unification Church followers to abandon the church. The “scandal” of political figures having had even tenuous connections with the church, and the danger of “cults”

to Japanese society — including, to some, the [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) — has been the main interest of mainstream Japanese media following Abe's death. Some in the media and in the political class have laid blame on the church for his assassination.

Commentary from outside Japan has not been helpful. As Introvigne [found](#), the U.S. government's report on international religious freedom "gives equal coverage to the typical anti-cult position that the attack against the [Unification Church] and the Jehovah's Witnesses 'was not about religious freedom' but about 'harm' caused to members and society." The report, he concluded, showed the U.S. being "soft" on an ally.

Japan just earned a score of 96/100 for its respect for political rights and civil liberties from Freedom House, but that independent body [sidestepped](#) the government's threat to religious freedom in its report.

This suggests that should the Japanese government act on the proposal to dissolve the church, reaction by the United States — Japan's strongest ally and the champion of religious freedom around the world — and by the human rights community may be tepid. That would present a problem for religious minorities in Japan and potentially for others around the world.

Religious freedom is threatened by aggressive secularism in the developed Western world, but more acutely by rising authoritarianism and totalitarianism in China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and elsewhere.

If Japan, a supporter of the United Nations and international norms, dissolves a legally constituted religious group, undeterred by international human rights institutions and liberal democracies, authoritarian states may see a green light for further assaults on Christians, Muslims, minorities such as the Ahmadi Muslims, Jews, the Baha'i and others. And if any Western state raises alarm about such abuses, the abusers could point to Japan's overlooked violations and call them hypocritical.

With so much at stake, human rights monitors and friends of Japan should help ensure that the principle of religious freedom is not corroded.

Aaron Rhodes is senior fellow in the Common Sense Society, whose council of trustees is chaired by Thomas Peterffy, an investor in *The Messenger*. Rhodes is also president of the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe and was executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights from 1993-2007. He is the author of "The Debasement of Human Rights."

Photo: Mourners hold a candlelight vigil to pay tribute to Japan's late former prime minister, Shinzo Abe, who was fatally shot during a campaign speech on July 8, 2022. Sam Panthaky/AFP via Getty Images

The Department of State and the drama of religious liberty in Japan

The U.S. Department of State is not an NGO

By Massimo Introvigne

[Washington Times \(24.05.2023\)](#) - The U.S. Department of State's yearly report on religious liberty is eagerly awaited every year by scholars and activists who specialize in freedom of religion. It is the most comprehensive document of this kind published internationally. Some sections, including those on [China](#) and [Russia](#), are usually outstanding, and this is also true for the 2023 report, covering developments in the year 2022.

I noticed, however, that the 2023 document is unusually "soft" on some countries where there have been serious issues of religious liberty. One such case is in [Japan](#). In 2022, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated by a man who stated he wanted to punish him for his friendly attitude to the Unification Church, now called Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

The assassin claimed that in 2002 his mother, who is still a member of the Family Federation, went bankrupt from excessive donations to the religious movement. An unprecedented slander campaign against the Family Federation followed, which extended to other groups stigmatized in [Japan](#), including the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Regulations were passed limiting religious movements' freedom to collect donations and socialize the children of their members into their religions. Administrative proceedings were started that may lead the government to seek the de-registration of the Family Federation as a religious organization. Similar proceedings are threatened against the Jehovah's Witnesses. It would be no exaggeration to say that what is happening in [Japan](#) is now the most dramatic religious liberty crisis in a democratic country.

The report by the Department of State mentions that "Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, (CAP-Freedom of Conscience), a Paris-based NGO, submitted a series of statements to the UN Human Rights Committee that said that the Unification Church had become a victim of 'a campaign of intolerance, discrimination, and persecution' in [Japan](#) since Abe's assassination. The church stated its members suffered attacks, assaults, and death threats as a result of negative media attention." The report also mentions concerns about the new regulations.

However, it gives equal coverage to the false anti-religious position that the attack against the Family Federation and the Jehovah's Witnesses "was not about religious freedom" but about an alleged "harm" caused to members and society. It also says the public testimonies of certain disgruntled ex-members of the stigmatized groups, ignoring that the story of the most visible of them, ex-Family-Federation devotee Sayuri Ogawa (a pseudonym), has been debunked as largely false by an independent and award-winning Japanese journalist, Masumi Fukuda. [The Unification Church's affiliated commercial empire comprises hundreds of ventures in more than a half-dozen countries, including hospitals, universities and newspapers, including The Washington Times.]

I do not believe that positions favorable and hostile to religious liberty should be given "equal coverage" in a report about freedom of religion. I would have preferred a coverage of the Japanese situation confirming the traditional American position that regards stigmatization of certain groups as "cults" as bigotry, a position reiterated on the sections on [Russia](#) and [China](#) of the same 2023 report. And I know for a fact that American ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, Rashad Hussain, had been fully briefed about what is happening in [Japan](#).

I realize that the world has changed, and the name of this change is the war in Ukraine. The U.S. Department of State is not an NGO. It is about politics. It is understandable that, even when it comes to religious liberty, the distinction between countries perceived as enemies or competitors, such as [Russia](#) and [China](#), and those that are allies of the United States and support Ukraine has been taken into account, with an effort not to

irritate governments regarded as valuable partners, including [Japan](#). Yet, the situation in [Japan](#) is so dramatic that a more thorough criticism would have been more consistent with the traditional American uncompromising stand for religious liberty.

Massimo Introvigne, an Italian sociologist, is the former Representative of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Christians and members of other religions, and the editor-in-chief of the daily magazine on religious liberty "Bitter Winter."
