

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan's Anti-Religious Secularism and State Persecution of Faith

Knut Holdhus
December 26, 2024



The former main entrance of the building housing the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology; the Japan Sports Agency; and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Tokyo Office) in Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo

Misunderstood separation of state and religion leads to anti-religious form of secularism and extreme persecution of religious minority the Family Federation

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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Epilogue - part 1

Misunderstandings About the Separation of Church and State, Giving Rise to Anti-Religious Secularism

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team

of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)



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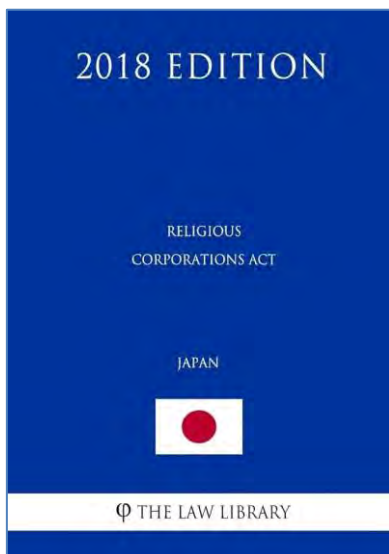
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Front page of 2018 English version of Religious Corporations Act of Japan

Why is it that violations of freedom of religion, such as the reinterpretation of the Religious Corporations Act overnight by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (as of October 2022), can occur so readily in a democratic nation like Japan? Why does the mass media turn a blind eye to the enforcement of faith-breaking - an infringement on fundamental human rights?

While freedom of religion is guaranteed under the Japanese Constitution, it is a fact that this freedom was effectively granted rather than won through struggles like the religious wars or persecutions seen in Western countries. This historical context and its limitations cannot be ignored. Additionally, in postwar Japan, the concept of separation of church and state has been misunderstood, giving rise to an extreme secularist trend.

On 15th December 1945, the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the Allied Powers issued the "Directive for the Abolition of

Government Guarantees, Support, Maintenance, Supervision, and Propagation Related to State Shinto and Shrine Shinto", commonly known as the "Shinto Directive".

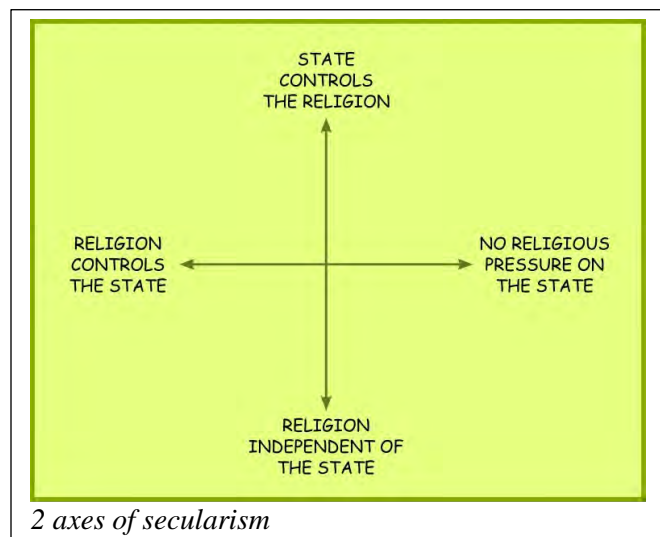


GHQ (General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers) around 1950. After World War II, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), a role held by General Douglas MacArthur from 1945 to 1951, was responsible for overseeing the occupation and reconstruction of Japan. The SCAP had broad authority and was tasked with implementing the terms of Japan's surrender and facilitating its transition into a peaceful, democratic nation. Key responsibilities included demilitarization, democratization, economic reconstruction, war crime trials, social reforms, rehabilitation and reconstruction. The occupation formally ended in 1952 with the signing of the Treaty of San Francisco, which restored Japan's sovereignty



Emperor Hirohito and General MacArthur, at their first meeting, at the U.S. Embassy, Tokyo, 27th Sept. 1945. In 1868, Shinto was reconstructed, elevating Amaterasu to the most important deity and validating the Emperor's divine right to rule. This doctrine asserted Japanese superiority and significantly increased the Emperor's power. By the mid-20th century, the Emperor's role was central to Japan's political, social, military, and religious institutions. After WWII, State Shinto was dismantled through three key documents: the Directive for the Disestablishment of State Shinto (1945), the Imperial Rescript renouncing Divinity (1946), and the post-war Constitution. These aimed to purify Shinto from political misuse and prevent its militaristic and ultra-nationalistic propaganda. Photo: Gaetano Faillace (1904-1991)

The GHQ, aiming to spiritually disarm Japan, ordered the separation of State Shinto - viewed as a pillar of Japanese militarism - from the government. Furthermore, it advocated for a complete separation of state and religion.



However, William Parsons Woodard, a staff member of the GHQ Civil Information and Education Section (CIE) who played a central role in the drafting of the Religious Corporations Act, later acknowledged flaws in the Shinto Directive. He pointed to "an overly extreme separation of religion and the state, rather than just the separation of church and state". These issues have been brought to light through the research of religious studies scholar Yasuo Ohara (大原康男).

Article 20 of the Japanese Constitution begins by stating,

"Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor exercise political authority."

It first ensures freedom of religion, followed by the so-called principle of separation of church and state.

The aim of the separation of church and state is to prevent the government from favoring a specific religion and thereby infringing on freedom of religion. This intention is evident from the historical context of the Shinto Directive and the creation of the new Constitution.

Even when examining the reality of the separation of church and state in Western nations, it is clear that this does not imply that politics must be completely disconnected from religion. The goal is to safeguard freedom and fairness.



Victim of extreme and anti-religious secularism in Japan and specifically targeted: the [Family Federation](#), here its flag waving in Japan

In 1977, the Japanese Supreme Court made a significant ruling on the separation of church and state in the Tsu Groundbreaking Ceremony Lawsuit (津地鎮祭訴訟). This lawsuit was initiated by a Communist Party city councilor, who argued that using public funds to pay for a Shinto priest's service at the groundbreaking ceremony for a gymnasium in Tsu City, Mie Prefecture, was unconstitutional. The Court held that while the principle of separation of church and state requires the government to maintain religious neutrality, it does not entirely prohibit any involvement with religion. The Court stated:

"Separation of church and state requires the state to maintain a neutral stance on religion. However, it does not mean that any interaction with religion is entirely prohibited. Acts involving religion must be judged based on their purpose and effect, and they should only

be deemed unconstitutional if they exceed reasonable limits under these conditions."

This judgment explicitly rejected the notion of "complete separation" of state and religion under the Constitution. It also clarified that the purpose of the separation of church and state is to ensure the government's religious neutrality and to protect freedom of religion.

Nevertheless, even after this Supreme Court decision, lawsuits seeking stricter enforcement of the separation principle - often driven by leftist factions - persisted. This trend fostered an atmosphere where even minimal interaction between politics or administration and religion was hastily labeled as a "violation of the separation of church and state". Consequently, an extreme and anti-religious form of secularism began to take root.

When ties between politicians and the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) became a prominent issue, a widespread view emerged that such connections were inherently wrong. This perspective was shaped by the excessive secularist trends that had taken hold.

Ironically, the misinterpretation and political exploitation of the principle of separation of church and state - originally designed to protect religious freedom - have instead threatened that very freedom. The current crisis surrounding religious freedom, highlighted by the move to dissolve the [Family Federation](#), cannot be adequately understood without recognizing the role of the GHQ's ad hoc religious policies and the leftist factions that have exploited these policies over time.

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• December 25, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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International human rights expert exposes in report to UN how Japan violates rights of 600,000 members of religious minority Family Federation

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Sign at the entrance of the headquarters of the Family Federation of Japan in Shibuya, Tokyo. Photo: FFWPU

Patricia Duval, a French international lawyer specializing in human rights issues, submitted a [report to the United Nations](#) in September, calling for reforms. She stated that the Japanese government's request for a dissolution order against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (FFWPU, formerly the [Unification Church](#))

"violates international human rights law in many respects and infringes upon treaties Japan has ratified to guarantee fundamental rights and freedoms."

At a presentation in Geneva, Switzerland, Duval highlighted that [civil lawsuits demanding the return of donations](#) from the [Family Federation](#) stem from former members who left the [church](#) after experiencing "[abduction and forcible faith-breaking](#) (deprogramming)". She emphasized that these lawsuits are being used by the Japanese government as grounds to initiate currently pending dissolution proceedings against the [church](#).

The [Human Rights Committee](#), which oversees the implementation of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), has [called on the Japanese government](#) to make amends, claiming that it has "unlawfully restricted the right to freedom of religion or belief on the basis of the 'public welfare'." In its recommendations, the committee expressed concern that the "concept of 'public welfare' is vague and open-ended" and that it "may allow for restrictions that go beyond what is permissible."



From header of the [webpage of the Human Rights Committee](#), a subpage on the site of the [UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner](#)



Front page of 2018 English version of [Religious Corporations](#)

However, according to Duval, the Japanese government has ignored these recommendations. She pointed out that Japan's [Religious Corporations Act](#), which justifies dissolution orders based on "violations of public welfare", must be repealed to align with international human rights standards.

Furthermore, following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), Patricia Duval pointed out that "a media onslaught against the former Unification Church, led by the [National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales](#) (Zenkoku)-

Act of Japan.

Lawyers against spiritual sales (Eshimon benren), began." This led to many cases of believers being discriminated against, subjected to domestic violence, and divorced have occurred.

The National Network used "spiritual sales" as a pretext to criticize the [Family Federation](#), a narrative amplified by the media to sway public opinion. This media frenzy, in turn, pressured the Japanese government to sever all ties with the [church](#), culminating in the initiation of dissolution proceedings. Duval described how this cycle extended to the judiciary, which, under pressure from the media and public opinion, has repeatedly handed down rulings unfavorable to the [church](#).

Concerning the 32 lawsuits cited as grounds for the dissolution request, Duval noted two major issues:

1. Courts relied on the discredited theory of "mental manipulation" (mind control).
2. The "social acceptability" standard used to determine the legality of donation solicitation was deemed "arbitrary and vague".

These ambiguous and discriminatory concepts, Duval argued, have been exploited to restrict the former [Unification Church's](#) right to proselytize. Furthermore, judges displayed a "presumption of guilt" against believers, often ignoring their claims.



International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

On the other hand, regarding the Japanese government's justification for restricting "freedom to manifest religion or belief", it was pointed out that *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) does not include "public welfare" or "social acceptability" as valid grounds. The Japanese government was accused of

"continuing to violate the UN covenants it has signed and ratified."

The report also criticized "anti-cult" counseling in schools, describing it as a new form of "state-led deprogramming" that doesn't involve physical abduction but still violates the rights of religious "second-generation" individuals. Such measures were condemned for infringing on parents' rights to educate their children based on their faith, as guaranteed under human rights covenants.

Considering the series of actions taken by the government, one cannot shake the impression that this is a state-led project aimed at eradicating a [specific religious organization](#). Some media outlets



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Symbol of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan.
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have reported on the

closed-door hearings at the *Tokyo District Court* regarding the *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology's* (MEXT) request for a dissolution order against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). During witness examinations involving former and current believers, current members reportedly argued that "the claims made by former members contain falsehoods."

Could MEXT be leveraging former members to support its arbitrary assertions? Continuing to violate UN covenants risks Japan being perceived by the international community as a nation that suppresses religious freedom.

Featured image above: Patricia Duval presenting her report in Geneva, Switzerland 25th September 2024. Photo: [FOREF](#)

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