

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: The Unification Church, Personal Salvation and Contributions to Society

Knut Holdhus
December 28, 2024



Sign at the main entrance of the Japanese headquarters of the [Family Federation](#) in Shibuya, Tokyo

Conflict between the secular and the sacred amidst fierce persecution brings up the question of the relationship between personal salvation and contributions to society

Tokyo, 26th December 2024 - Published as the 58th article (final) in a series in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#)

Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Epilogue - part 3



[Sekai Nippo](#)

Challenge of the Family Federation - Striking a Balance Between "Salvation" and Social Contribution

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

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Old men at a café. Illustration

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On a Sunday morning, a little over two months after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (8th July 2022), a loud voice was heard from a group of six elderly people at a café in Funabashi City, Chiba Prefecture,

"Members of the [Unification Church](#) are all good people. The current TV reports are strange."

At the time, television programs, especially infotainment shows, were heavily critical of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). The speaker was a man in

his seventies, seemingly the leader of the group, who appeared to have significant personal interaction with members of the [church](#).

The other five individuals in the group merely listened. There was a noticeable gap between the man's perspective and the narrative presented by the media, creating a sense of dissonance. However, since their knowledge of the [Family Federation](#) was limited to media reports, the others did not say anything. Judging from their demeanor, I guess that is what was going through the minds of the five



Approximately one month later, the Mainichi Shimbun published the results of a public opinion poll. It revealed that 82% of respondents believed a dissolution order against the [Family Federation](#) should be issued, compared to only 9% who thought it unnecessary. Seeing this data

brought to mind the man's voice from the café.

If more people had had direct experience interacting with members of the faith, the results of the opinion poll would probably have been quite different. As we continued to cover the [Family Federation](#), we realized that the issue facing the [religious organization](#) was how to bridge the gap with society.

An infographic titled 'LEFT-LEANING MEDIA OUTLETS IN JAPAN' listing several media outlets with their descriptions. The outlets listed are: Shimbun Akahata (daily organ of the Japanese Communist Party), Asahi Shimbun (intellectual flagship of Japan's political left), Mainichi Shimbun (liberal-left leading national daily), Chunichi Shimbun (regional paper from Nagoya, center-left to leftwing), Tokyo Shimbun (regional paper from Tokyo, center-left to leftwing views), and NHK World-Japan (international service of national broadcaster, left-center). The source is cited as 'Media Bias/Fact Check'.

Outlet	Description
しんぶん 赤旗 (Shimbun Akahata)	▶ The daily organ of the Japanese Communist Party
朝日新聞 (Asahi Shimbun)	▶ "Intellectual flagship of Japan's political left"
毎日新聞 (Mainichi Shimbun)	▶ Liberal-left leading national daily
中日新聞 (Chunichi Shimbun)	▶ Regional paper (Nagoya), center-left to leftwing
東京新聞 (Tokyo Shimbun)	▶ Regional paper (Tokyo), center-left to leftwing views
NHK WORLD-JAPAN	▶ International service of national broadcaster, left-center

Source: Media Bias/Fact Check

Some of the main left-leaning media outlets in Japan

On the other hand, the poll figures highlighted the strong influence of the media. This year, newspapers and television, often derided as "old media", have been criticized for their biased tendencies, which stray far from impartial reporting. Particularly, left-leaning media outlets, opposing the [religious organization](#) known for its strong anti-communist stance, appear to have played a significant role in shaping public opinion equating the [organization](#) with "anti-social elements". The [church](#), for its part,

seems to have been caught off guard, failing to effectively communicate its true identity.

Among the religions that deal with human salvation, new religions tend to be more inward-looking. The shallow understanding of "religious freedom" in the mass media, which is based on "secular" values, has led to devout believers becoming more inward-looking, widening the gap between them and society. This is a manifestation of the classic conflict between the "sacred" and the "profane".



Given the relentless media coverage - arguably amounting to "bashing" - it is unsurprising that believers feel increasingly victimized. However, when considering the passing on of their faith to second and third generations, it is an unavoidable task for them to earn the trust of society through their own efforts.

According to Tomihiro Tanaka (田中富広), the president of the [Family Federation](#), the [church](#)'s vision consists of three pillars:

Building happy families that live for the sake of others.

Churches that coexist with their local communities.

Contributions to the nation and the world.

These visions underscore that the [Family Federation](#) is inherently a religious organization that does not confine itself to a sacred space, but instead places importance on relationships with the community, the nation, and the world. This is evident from the [church](#)'s involvement with political and volunteer organizations as affiliated groups.

However, one might question whether the followers truly shared and practiced this vision. If they had, voices like the one heard in the café at the beginning of the article might have been more widespread. The figure of 80% in favor of the request for the dissolution order not only indicates a shallow understanding of religious freedom among the media and the general public, but also the believers' excessive focus on personal salvation while their vision is not being shared sufficiently. This is likely one point the [religious organization](#) needs to reflect on.

How to connect the salvation of individual believers with the vision that the religious organization aims for

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the [organization](#)'s recognition as a religious corporation, and we are in the midst of a generational change. Therefore, we would like to point out that it is a major challenge for the [Family Federation](#) to link the salvation of individual believers with the broader vision the [religious organization](#) aims to achieve.



Another factor contributing to the widening gap with Japanese society may stem from the fact that the [religious organization](#) originated in South Korea. This is also where the stigma of being an "anti-Japanese cult" came from.

The founder of the [religion](#), Reverend [Sun Myung Moon](#), was Korean, and his wife, [Hak Ja Han](#), who is still alive and resides in South Korea, currently leads the [organization](#). To her followers globally she emphasizes the importance of loving one's own country. On the other hand, it is only natural that for both the individual members and the [organization](#) itself, the focus on the "sacred" would lead to a strengthening of ties with South Korea.

However, as a legally recognized entity in Japan, the [Family Federation](#) bears the obligation to comply with the law. In addition, the [organization](#) has secular responsibilities such as contributing to the development of society. It is incumbent upon leaders, including President Tomihiro Tanaka, to guide members in [balancing these responsibilities](#) while pursuing the [organization](#)'s vision. That said, it is undeniable that, in the past, an excessive focus on devout faith may have led to a neglect of the latter responsibility.

Apart from the heinous crimes committed by Aum Shinrikyo (オウム真理教), topics related to freedom of religion - a cornerstone of democracy - rarely surfaced in postwar Japanese society. In this context, the issue of the dissolution order against the [Family Federation](#) has inadvertently demonstrated the limited understanding of religious freedom among politicians, the media, the general public, and even the judiciary.

At the same time, the conflict between the secular and the sacred brought to light by this issue seem to be prompting the [religious organization](#) to change and become more open to society. Likewise, its followers now appear to be encouraged to deepen and universalize their faith in a direction that links personal salvation to contributions to society.

(End of the series)

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Supreme Court Ruling Called Politically Swayed

• December 27, 2024 • Knut Holdhus



Expert on freedom of religion and constitutional law calls verdict against Family Federation politically swayed, "deceptive and amateurish"

Tokyo, 25th December 2024 – Published as the **57th article** in a series in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#)

Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat – Epilogue – part 2

The Supreme Court Denies the Value of Religion

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of *Sekai Nippo*

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In an interview with this newspaper, published 3rd December 2024, Tomihiro Tanaka (田中富広), President of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (FFWPU, formerly the [Unification Church](#)) in Japan, emphasized,

"In 2009, we issued a compliance declaration. We have repeatedly provided guidance that it is unacceptable to solicit donations by inciting anxiety over ancestral curses or to demand large donations that exceed individuals' financial capacity."



Tomihiro Tanaka during an interview 15th Nov. 2024. Photo: Kato Reiwa (加藤 玲和)

He also noted that as a result, lawsuits over donations have significantly decreased, and since the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), the [organization](#) has implemented stricter verification processes for donations.

In this context, a landmark [Supreme Court ruling](#) was issued in July of this year, declaring invalid a "pledge" signed by a female member of the [Family Federation](#) in which she agreed not to seek refunds for donations made to the [organization](#). This ruling overturned the [Family Federation's](#) victories in both the lower and appellate courts, and the case was remanded to the [Tokyo High Court](#) for further review.



Professor emeritus Seishiro Sugihara. Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

At a [rally in Nagoya](#) on 9th December, focusing on the theme of religious freedom, Seishiro Sugihara (杉原誠四郎), President of the [International Historical Debate Institute](#) and an expert on issues of freedom of religion and constitutional law, criticized the Supreme Court's ruling, calling it *"deceptive, amateurish, and politically motivated"*.

The contested pledge was written in 2015 by a female member of the [Family Federation](#), confirming that she would not seek refunds or compensation for her donations. This woman passed away three

years ago.

The Supreme Court ruling stated that she was under the "psychological influence of the [Family Federation](#)" and was "in a state where it was difficult to make a calm judgment." Seishiro Sugihara criticized this as reflecting a *"very crude and shallow view of religion"*, noting that anyone practicing a specific religion is at least somewhat under the psychological



Five judges of the Japanese Supreme Court issuing a verdict that is being called *"deceptive, amateurish, and politically motivated"*.

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influence of their religious organization.

*Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator
14th July 2024.*

The ruling referenced the "Act on the Prevention of Unjust Solicitation of Donations by Corporations and Other Entities" (*Unjust Donation Solicitation Prevention Act*), enacted in December 2022. This law was cited as a basis for questioning the validity of the pledge. However, both the donations and the writing of the pledge occurred before the law was enacted. Sugihara argued that citing the law in this Supreme Court decision violated "*the fundamental legal principle of non-retroactivity*".

By effectively declaring that donations made based on religious faith could be invalidated and reclaimed retroactively, the judiciary has seemingly given implicit approval for such actions. Sugihara expressed concern that both the law – enacted with an intent to target the **Family Federation** – and the Supreme Court ruling amounted to saying that "*religion and faith have no value*." He argued that it would be unjust for the religious world to remain silent and urged the submission of critical opinions to the United Nations.



From a **Family Federation** demonstration in Japan 8th Dec. 2024.
Photo: **FFWPU**

Amid increasing threats to the **Family Federation's** freedom of religion, its members organize rallies across Japan to advocate for this fundamental right and invite participation from various religious groups. These gatherings aim not only to denounce the perceived injustice of the dissolution order sought against the **Family Federation**, but also to strengthen solidarity among religious denominations in defense of freedom of religion.

While many religious figures are present at these events, few take the stage to speak out. A representative of a new religious movement attending a meeting in Osaka expressed opposition to the dissolution order and affirmed solidarity with the **Family Federation**.

However, he admitted refraining from public advocacy due to fear of being labeled as a supporter of the **Family Federation** in the eyes of public opinion. He explained that voicing support could lead to accusations of being "cut from the same cloth", which deters open action. This cautious approach reflects the stance of the majority within Japan's religious community, where concern for religious freedom exists alongside a deliberate distancing from the **Family Federation**.

Regarding the **Family Federation's** appeals for religious freedom, its president, Tomihiro Tanaka, commented in this series [[Editor's note: See overview of the series below](#)]:

*"Human rights activists worldwide are mobilizing for issues like Tibet and Xinjiang, yet if **our organization** only advocates for its own rights, it will fall on deaf ears. We must be genuinely committed to the freedom of religion for other faiths as well. The expectation is for **our organization** to engage sincerely with such broader themes."* (2nd December 2024)

Raising voices for religious freedom on behalf of Japan as a whole is seen as a crucial step toward restoring trust in the **organization**.

Featured image above: Seishiro Sugihara (杉原誠四郎) speaks at the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF) Nagoya Conference, 9th December 2024, in Nagoya. Photo: Tsuyoshi Toyoda (豊田剛).

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