

Forced Conversions of Unificationists in Japan: A Continuing Human Rights Violation

Dan Fefferman

Journal of Unification Studies Vol. 13, 2012 - Pages 21-32

The issue of forced conversion (“deprogramming”) in Japan was last addressed in the Journal of Unification Studies Vol. 5, 2003 by Chris Antal. Since that time, several developments have given reason for increased optimism. Although court cases have not always favored the cause of religious freedom for Unificationists in Japan, deprogrammers are increasingly on the defensive. Also, public relations efforts have resulted in faith-breakers losing face in the Christian community, with the result that relatively few of them are still active. The number of incidents has thus continued to diminish. Already down from a high of more than 300 abductions in the late 1990s to less than 100 per year in the early 2000s, the number of cases was down to less than ten in the 12 months preceding the current paper.[1] Exposure of the facts to the international human rights community has also caused Japanese authorities some discomfort. The bad news is that the abductions continue with virtual impunity, and Japanese authorities persist in seeing the issue a “family matter” in which they will not intervene.

Background

The Unification Church of Japan estimates that more than 4,000 of its members have undergone abduction and forced confinement to break their faith over the past four decades. Less than one third of these returned to the church.[2] That kidnapping and forced conversion constitute a fundamental human rights violation is obvious.[3] Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes it clear that “Everyone has the right... to change his religion or belief.” Similar language was adopted by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which includes “freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of [one’s] choice” and “no one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.” Japan is a member of both the UN and the ICCPR, and its own constitution also has guarantees of freedom of religion and protection against kidnapping and false imprisonment.[4]

In Europe and North America, religious kidnapping and faith-breaking were made famous by Ted Patrick, who coined the term “deprogramming” and admitted to holding scores of adults against their will in order to make them leave their religious communities. Many NRM’s were targeted, and a cottage industry of faith-breaking capitalized on the fears of worried parents. Numerous law cases resulted and important academic debates ensued, especially over the question of whether deprogramming could be justified on the grounds that NRM members had been brainwashed or otherwise influenced to the point that they were no longer able to exercise their free will.[5] Patrick and several other deprogrammers eventually found themselves in jail on felony charges, civil courts established that new religions were a protected minority group whose civil rights must be upheld, and the brainwashing argument was dismissed as lacking scientific validity. Finally, the organization known as the Cult Awareness Network was held liable of conspiracy to violate a certain believer’s civil rights and forced out of business. Deprogramming was thus essentially defeated in the West by the mid-late 1980s, although sporadic cases continue to be reported.[6]

The forced de-conversion of NRM members began in Japan around the same time or even before Ted Patrick began his notorious activities in the U.S.[7] Although the Japanese Unification Church admits that its record keeping on this matter has been inconsistent, it estimates that around 4,300 of its members have been victimized by this practice. Those who managed to return to the church usually did so either by escaping their captors or, more usually, faking their apostasy. More than 100 members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses were also victimized, mostly in the 1990s.

The deprogramming movement in Japan appears to be both better organized and more sophisticated than it was in the US. Based on field interviews with dozens of victims as well as reports from Unification Church sources, lengths of confinement are often longer than they were in the West.[8] Specially constructed confinement places have been established, sometimes (though not currently) with the knowledge of local police. Escapes are consequently more difficult, and police only rarely side with the victims. Deprogrammers often require victims to provide the names of fellow UC members before reducing security precautions. The families of these current members are then approached by the faith-breakers. Normally, the deprogrammers themselves do not directly abduct or confine the victim, but advise the families to do this and then act as “exit counselors” during the confinement. Extreme tactics have also been reported, including sleep deprivation, psychological abuse, sexual harassment, starvation, and rape.

One major difference between the Japanese experience of faith-breaking and its Western counterpart is the role of the Christian churches. In the West only a few pastors were involved in deprogramming, and no mainstream denomination supported it. In Japan the majority of deprogrammers are Christian

ministers. For more than two decades, the largest Japanese Christian denomination, the umbrella organization called the United Christian Churches of Japan (UCCJ), not only actively opposed the Unification Church but actually encouraged parents to consult with deprogrammers. Both UCCJ ministers and dozens of other Christian pastors acted as faith-breakers. Some of them created “rehabilitation” centers in their churches for UC members who had gone through the initial stages of deprogramming. A book written by former American deprogrammer Steve Hassan was translated into Japanese and became required reading for those undergoing such “rehabilitation.” Hundreds of UC members converted to the brand of Christianity espoused by their “exit counselors” while under psychological duress and secret confinement. It is for this reason that the term “forced conversion” to describe this process is no exaggeration.[9]

Sample Cases

Here are several notable examples. All except the Fujita case (in which the victim committed suicide) involve individuals who returned to the UC.

- “Keiko Itokawa” (not her real name) was kidnapped and confined for a month in a faith-breaking center and was then taken to her deprogrammer’s apartment for “rehabilitation.” She related that he raped her more than 30 times over the next two months. She was eventually able to return to the church, and when her father learned (years later) what his agent had done, he committed suicide.
- Hiroko Tomizawa was violently abducted from a church building in Tottori by a gang who broke into the premises and attacked her pastor, using a stun gun and chains. After 15 months, she escaped her captors. She was successful in proving her case in civil court. However, penalties were light, and prosecutors refused to indict the perpetrators on criminal charges.
- Soichiro Kobayashi was abducted twice, in 1992 and 1997. On the first occasion police came to his confinement place when he broke a window and called for help, but when police arrived on the scene they sided with his parents and refused to liberate him. On the second occasion police actually forced him to return to captivity after he escaped.
- Dr. Hirohisa Koide was practicing medicine in a Tokyo hospital when he was abducted. During his two-year confinement, an anti-UC lawyer named Hiroshi Hirata visited the confinement place and went so far to advise him that it was “not illegal” for his family to hold him against his will. Dr. Koide was required to make public statements against the UC in order to reduce security precautions. After his escape, he wrote a book detailing his experience to correct the record, but it was ignored by the same media that publicized his earlier charges against the UC.
- The most tragic case is that of Takako Fujita. Recently married to a Korean husband, she returned home for a family reunion. When her husband came to join her a few days later, the family had disappeared. She had been taken to Kyoto, where she endured four months of confinement and finally committed suicide. Her husband was barred from the funeral, and police refused to investigate the circumstances of her death.
- Toru Goto was held for a record length of time, 12 years and 4 months. During virtually all of this time he was not allowed out of the confinement place for fresh air and exercise. More than six feet tall, he weighed less than 100 pounds when he finally escaped in 2008 at the age of 44. In December 2009, Tokyo prosecutors declined to indict those who imprisoned him. A commission of inquiry upheld the prosecutors’ decision. Mr. Goto is currently suing his captors and faith-breakers in civil court.

These are just a few of scores of documented cases of escapees who returned to the UC and were willing to let their names be used publicly.[10] There are also hundreds more who wish to keep their names private. At least two thousand more gave up their faith, at least to the extent that they are no longer active UC members. Among the latter are several categories: a) those who turned against the church and actively cooperate with the faith-breakers; some also engage in lawsuits against the UC and persuade donors or fundraising clients to demand their money back, b) those who play no active role against the UC (the largest group) and c) those who remain non-members but actively oppose deprogramming.[11] There is also one case of a man who received serious brain damage attempting to escape from a third-story window, suffering such severe amnesia that he did not remember ever being a UC member.

Why It Persists

Why has the practice of kidnapping, secret confinement and forced conversion been allowed to continue so long in Japan, while it has been eradicated in the West? I suggest several possible reasons:

a. Fewer groups are targeted.

The vast majority of cases in Japan involve the Unification Church. Although more than 100 cases involving Jehovah's Witnesses during the 1990s were also reported, and also a smattering of smaller groups, under these circumstances NRMs have not formed an effective coalition.

b. The UC remains extremely marginalized in Japan's society.

The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper, but include such factors as:

- its founder being a Korean
- the UC's practice of arranged marriage, often involving international and interracial matches
- fears that UC members will marry a foreigner and move away from Japan
- that many UC members remain involved in fundraising activities
- allegations that members are involved in criminal financial schemes known as "spiritual sales"
- fear of "cults" in the wake of the Aum Shinrikyo subway gassing affair
- strong opposition from Japan's left-wing political groups
- several high-profile "deprogramming" cases involving nationally known athletes or movie stars who had joined the UC but then turned against it.

c. The mainline churches play a much different role.

In the US, mainline Christian leaders were outspoken in opposition to deprogramming and often joined in court actions to defend the rights of NRM members.[12] In Japan, most of the deprogrammers themselves are Christian ministers,[13] and the mainline churches have not actively opposed the practice - at times they have even supported it.

d. Academics remain on the sideline.

Scholars and journalists in Japan have reported that their professional reputations and even their jobs may be at risk if they speak out in support of the rights of Unificationists.

e. Japanese human rights groups are not involved.

Similarly, human rights groups are reticent to become involved, and those who oppose the Unification Church on political grounds seem unwilling to stand up for the rights of its members even on civil libertarian grounds.[14]

f. Religious affiliation is considered a "family matter."

Japanese society generally considers that children should continue to obey parents in matters of religion even after the children become adults. Thus, even though the international law documents are clear on the issue and Japanese law guarantees religious freedom and forbids false imprisonment, public opinion remains unconcerned about the rights of young adults who convert to an unpopular religion.

g. Police in Japan turn a blind eye to reports made by people who are not family members.

Due to the cultural difference stated previously, the police refuse to investigate reports by the church that a member has gone missing, and accept only the word of parents that there is no confinement, just a "family discussion" (family disagreement).

h. Prosecutors do not indict those responsible.

In cases where UC members have returned to the church and filed criminal charges, prosecutors do not indict the perpetrators. Not one such criminal case has been brought.[15]

i. Civil courts fail to punish responsible parties.

A small number of civil cases resulted in perpetrators being judged as having acted outside the law. However, few penalties have been imposed, and the Japanese Supreme Court even refused to enjoin the perpetrators from repeating their crime.[16]

Several UC members are currently missing. One was reported abducted just a week before this writing. Police are normally contacted by the victims' fiancée, pastor or local church friends. However, the current victim is not yet engaged to be married. Moreover, police routinely refuse to receive missing persons' reports from non-relatives, even fiancées, despite the fact that the suspected perpetrators of the abduction are the victims' family members. Thus, even though the numbers are down significantly from their highs, the situation remains urgent.

Reasons for Hope

Because of the lack of response of the Japanese government, the International Coalition for Religious Freedom and other UC-related groups have been striving to bring this matter to the attention to the international community. The US State Department has been responsive to our appeals and has included the issue of deprogramming in Japan in its International Religious Freedom Report virtually every year for the last ten years.[17] A sampling of reports from recent years shows both a decline in numbers of cases and the continued failure of the Japanese police and courts to protect the religious freedom rights of UC members:

Members of the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses continued to allege that police do not act in response to allegations of forced deprogramming of church members. They claim that police do not enforce the laws against kidnapping when the victim is held by family members and that Unification Church members are subjected to prolonged detention by family members and deprogrammers, whom the police do not charge. By its own calculation, the Unification Church claims that kidnapping and deprogramming has declined significantly in recent years. It remains concerned, however, by the tendency of officials to judge kidnapping and deprogramming by victim's family members and deprogrammers as a family matter.

In August 2002, the courts declared "deprogramming" illegal in a case involving members of Jehovah's Witnesses. However, in 2003 the Supreme Court rejected the Unification Church's appeal in a case involving charges against the victim's family and the kidnappers for kidnapping and "deprogramming." In the Unification Church's case, the court determined that the causes of the appeal were not matters involving a violation of the Constitution. In January, the Yokohama district court ruled in favor of the defendant in a 1997 case in which two victims allege they were kidnapped and held in several apartments for nearly 5 months. The court cited a lack of evidence and peaceful conditions in captivity as reasons for the judgment. (2004)

[Unification] Church leaders continued to express concern over the government's unwillingness to prosecute abductors. According to church officials, police often refused to intercede because abductions often involved family members abducting other family members. According to a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, members were free to practice their religion without restriction. [Among JW's] There was only one alleged forced confinement in January 2005, which was reported to the police. (2006)

According to representatives from the Unification Church, a member of their congregation was abducted by his family and held in captivity for more than 12 years in an attempt to "deprogram" him. Four months after his escape, police had not opened an investigation into the case. (2008)

Recently, several US Congressmen have expressed their concern, and we expect a number of them to travel to Japan soon both for direct fact finding and to urge Japanese authorities to act.[18]

Recently an independent report on the issue was conducted by the Brussels based NGO Human Rights without Frontiers. This represents the first in depth study of the issue by a non-UC organization. It confirms "the long-standing and persistent, though declining, existence of the kidnappings for the purpose of forced conversion" in Japan. It concludes,

The abduction, the confinement or deprivation of freedom of movement, the so-called 'family discussions' or 'protective custody' imposed on adults, and unsolicited or forceful exit counseling of converts to new or other religious movements for the purpose of religious de-conversion in Japan must be unambiguously condemned as incompatible with human rights principles and eradicated; freedom of thought and of conscience, freedom of religion or belief and freedom of movement are grossly violated by non-state actors with the passive complicity of the police and in total impunity... Japan's government should thus make more efforts to integrate the international human rights culture and law in society and legal institutions, and revise practices of its law enforcement forces and its judiciary that are inconsistent with Japan's international legal human rights obligations.[19]

HRWF also filed a formal complaint with the United Nations Human Rights Council with regard to the upcoming Universal Periodic Review for Japan, which will take place later this year. This will force Japan to respond officially to these charges. Also filing complaints were the Universal Peace Federation USA[20] and the Women's Federation for World Peace USA.

While deprogrammers thus still act with impunity, there is thus good reason for optimism. Numbers of cases are down. Only a few deprogrammers are still active. The UC of Japan is working proactively to protect its members from abduction. Significantly, the issue is coming to the attention of the international community, which is beginning to cause Japanese officials discomfort. For example, several US congressmen and senators have expressed concern to the Japanese ambassador in Washington DC. Japanese consulates in ten cities throughout America received visits last year from delegations of Japanese victims and US clergymen expressing their outrage that faith-breaking still goes unpunished in Japan. In Korea, Japanese women married to Korean husband demonstrated outside the Japanese embassy, and the Seoul Broadcasting System aired a serious documentary portraying the plight of Japanese women in Korea who have been persecuted by their own families for joining the UC and marrying Korean men. At the UN Headquarters in Geneva, Japanese diplomats were visibly discomforted when they attended a meeting at the UN Human Rights Council and heard the testimony of three Japanese victims: Toru Goto, Hiroko Tomizawa, and Kozue Terada. Justice Ministers and national police officials have been confronted by Diet members who called the officials to account for the lack of police action against kidnapers of UC members. Congressional delegations from the US have begun to meet with Justice Ministry officials and other high ranking members of the Japanese government in Tokyo. Finally, as mentioned, the Japanese government will need to give an official response to allegations that it has failed in its human rights obligations, when it faces its Universal Periodic Review at the Human Rights Council later this year.

If this pressure continues, it should be only a matter of time before Japanese police agencies begin to enforce the laws against abduction and false imprisonment. In the meantime, a victory in the Goto case, now before a civil court, would send a powerful message to the remaining hard core deprogrammers that their activities are unacceptable. Although the Japanese UC still has an uphill battle to secure full human rights protection for its members, there is thus good reason to hope that within a few years, "deprogramming" in Japan will face the same fate that it did in the West.

Notes

[1] Since 2010 the numbers have continued to diminish, but only slightly. See chart at www.religiousfreedom.com/PDF/Japan/Goto/6.%20History%20of%20Religious%20Kidnapping.pdf.

[2] In recent years, the number of victims returning to the church has increased somewhat.

[3] I use the term "forced conversion" rather than "forced de-conversion" here because in most cases, Japanese deprogrammers are Christian ministers who often attempt to convert their victims to their brand of Christianity.

[4] Article 11 of the Japanese Constitution states: "The people shall not be prevented from enjoying any of the fundamental human rights." Article 20 states: "Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all." Article 220 of the Japanese Penal Code provides that "Anyone who would arrest or confine other individuals unlawfully shall be subject to imprisonment for the period of more than three months and not exceeding seven years." Article 223 states: "A person who, by intimidating another through a threat to another's life, body, freedom, reputation or property or by use of assault, causes the other to perform an act which the other person has no obligation to perform, or hinders the other from exercising his or her rights, shall be punished by imprisonment with work for not more than 3 years."

[5] See J. Gordon Melton, "Brainwashing and the Cults: The Rise and Fall of a Theory," CESNUR, www.cesnur.org/testi/melton.htm

[6] Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, "Cult Awareness Network," www.religioustolerance.org/acm2.htm

[7] The practice evolved in Japan parallel to the practice in the US, rather than being derived from it, as once thought by many in the West. The first documented case seems to be that of Hatsuko Honma, the daughter of a Japan Communist Party activist, in April, 1971, the same year that Patrick began his activities in the US. However, Ms. Honma was not actually the first such case. Imprisoned in a mental hospital, she "found a tiny piece of paper, rolled up, which had an inscription written on it by her cousin, a UC member and former hospital inmate." See Andrew C. Davies, "The Kidnap Ministry," a divinity thesis written for the Unification Theological Seminary. www.

religiousfreedom.com/documents/Japan/The%20Kidnap%20Ministry%20by%20Andrew%20Colin%20Davies.htm#_ftnref16

[8] In Japan, confinements of several months are almost commonplace. Confinements of 1-2 years have been documented in a number of cases. The Goto case involved a man who had been held for more than 12 years.

[9] The UCCJ still opposes the UC, but it no longer directly encourages deprogramming. Steven Hassan, meanwhile, wrote an open letter to the UCCJ clarifying that he did not intend his book to be used to justify forced confinement of UC members. www.religiousfreedom.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=437&Itemid=30

[10] Since most cases result in the victims leaving the church, the majority of the cases remain undocumented except to the extent that the apparent victim went missing under suspicious circumstances and often later resigned officially from the church. For testimonies see www.religiousfreedom.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=68%3Aforced-de-conversion-victim-statements&Itemid=30

[11] One example is Asako (last name withheld), who suffered from serious post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of her more than four-month confinement and later spoke out in sympathy with UC members who are victims of this practice, even though she herself renounced the UC. Her story is detailed in a book by independent journalist Kazuhiro Yonemoto, a UC critic who likewise opposes confinement and faith-breaking, in his book “Our Unpleasant Neighbors.” [Joho Center Publishing, in Japanese]. Relevant excerpts in English here: kidnapping.jp/torn-e.html. “Though I recognize problems of the Unification Church,” Asako stated, “I also sympathize with the very agony and pains experienced by the plaintiff (victim Rie Imari) during her confinement, the very reason for which she filed the case. I had a similar, horrible experience under detention.”

[12] See for example the statement of the National Council of Churches, USA at www.religiousfreedom.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=477%3Ancc&catid=47%3Adeprogramming-issues&Itemid=30. The NCC was also involved in several high-profile court cases against “deprogramming.”

[13] See “Activists involved in Religious Kidnapping and Forced Conversion in Japan,” www.religiousfreedom.com/PDF/Japan/Goto/7.%20Activists%27%20List.pdf

[14] This was not the case in the US, where liberal groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union opposed deprogramming. See “Kidnapping People from Religious Groups,” adopted by the ACLU National Board, March 5, 1977. www.religiousfreedom.com/documents/Japan/aclu.htm

[15] See “Deprogramming Cases Dismissed in Japan” at www.religiousfreedom.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=478%3Adismissed&catid=47%3Adeprogramming-issues&Itemid=30

[16] In the case of Mitsuko Ishikawa Antal, the Japanese Supreme Court upheld a lower court’s decision not to enjoin Mitsuko’s parents or her faith-breaker (Rev. Yoshio Shimizu) from repeating their offense, even though it admitted she had been confined against her will on two previous occasions. In a pretrial interview in 1996, Shimizu testified that he had attempted persuade more than 50 UC members to leave the church, and admitted that in at least some of these cases, they were confined. www.religiousfreedom.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=56&Itemid=30

[17] www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168357.htm

[18] The first of these was U.S. Congressman Danny Davis (D-IL), who travelled to Japan for this purpose in early April 2012.

[19] hrwf.org/images/reports/2012/1231%20report%20final%20eng.pdf

[20] Included in the WFWP complaint was a letter from Luke Higuchi, president of the US victims’ association Survivors against Forced Exit (SAFE).

Mr. Fefferman currently serves as the president of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (www.religiousfreedom.com), which advocates for religious freedom and human rights. Previously he was secretary-general of the Freedom Leadership Foundation, served as national president of the Collegiate Association for Research of Principles (CARP) and executive editor of its publication World Student Times, publications director for the American Freedom Coalition, and publisher of Currents, an independent journal of Unificationist Thought. A graduate of the UTS divinity class of 1986, he is also the author of several popular Unificationist songs.