

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Religious Freedom Head Sounds Alarm about Japan

Knut Holdhus
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Marco Respinti speaking in Tokyo 22nd July 2024. Respinti was born in Milan in 1964. He is a journalist, author and translator. He is a member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), a Senior fellow at the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, a founding member and advisory board member of the Center for European Renewal (CER), and Editor-in-Chief of International Family News (2018-2022). He is also Director-in-Charge of the academic publication *The Journal of CESNUR* (Center for the Study of New Religions) and the online religious freedom and human rights magazine *Bitter Winter*



Prominent religious freedom leader Marco Respinti sounds the alarm about Japan at international conference in Tokyo

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Marco Respinti, director of the religious freedom magazine *Bitter Winter*, calls the government's request to dissolve the Family Federation "abuse of power".

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

The state cannot suppress religious freedom

Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the government has requested the Tokyo District Court to issue a dissolution order against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). Believers are on the brink of losing essential church facilities and clergy necessary for worship and other religious activities.

On 22nd July 2024, the general meeting of the Japanese Committee for the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF) was held, chaired by Professor Emeritus Shoichi Ito, Kyushu University). The coalition defends freedom of religion and democracy. There, Marco Respinti, director of the Italian online religious freedom magazine [Bitter Winter](#), which has primarily monitored religious persecution in China, gave a lecture and sounded the alarm about the situation in Japan. He said,



["Bitter Winter](#), the magazine dedicated to religious freedom and human rights, is a successful original enterprise that combines media people, activists, and scholars who are deeply committed to defend freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for everyone, everywhere, always, and to denounce the persecution of believers.

Religious persecution or intolerance threatens believers all over the world, taking different shapes but always aiming at the same goal of curtailing or even denying religious liberty.

But religious liberty is not an accident that human beings and societies can do without. It is the pillar of any viable commonwealth, founds true democracy, and helps securing all different rights and protections to citizens.

Religious liberty is in fact the first political human right. It is the right to believe or not to believe in [God](#), the Supreme Being, or any supernatural, overarching, and all-encompassing cosmic entity or force that rules the universe, and to live consequently. It is not sufficient to leave human beings alone to believe in the privacy of their houses. Believers should have the liberty to worship publicly and organize their personal and communal lives accordingly.



Marco Respinti speaking in Tokyo 22nd July 2024

No power, state, church, organization can curtail or deny that right.

Also, religious liberty is not relativism or pick-and-choose. It is the fundamental right of every human being to believe that an ultimate truth exists and to live by it.

Let us consider the case of Japan, where we are now. I come from Europe as an admirer of its lively culture and vibrant democracy. Tokyo, its capital city, is a marvelous blending of ancient and modern, home to millions of law-abiding citizens, and one of the most industrious centers of the world.

Yet, Japan it is also the place where a great abuse is being committed. I am referring to the case of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)) and the order of its dissolution that the Japanese government is seeking before the Tokyo District Court.

[Bitter Winter](#) has followed the case closely and has been quite assertive in denouncing it as an absurd.

All began with the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954-2022), on 8th July 2022.

The [Family Federation](#) was in fact made somewhat responsible for it to the point of requesting its dissolution as a religious organization.



Tetsuya Yamagami, the man who killed Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan

The assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, said he was motivated by his intention to punish Abe for his collaboration with the [Family Federation](#) out of the hatred he felt for it when his mother went bankrupt in 2002, allegedly after her excessive donations to the group.

Many shadows remain on the case, including why the assassin waited for twenty years after his mother's bankruptcy to kill Abe.

But here we have an organization that is at the end of the day punished for a crime it never committed.

Abe paid a high price, the [Family Federation](#) is paying a high price, but the villain was solely the assassin. No one else but him should be made accountable for that heinous crime.

Instead, 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. Other groups that had even less to do with the Abe

assassination such as the Jehovah's Witnesses are now also targeted.

All decent and democratic people should be worried of measures that are reminiscent of practices current in the People's Republic of China and in the Russian Federation. Of course, Japanese authorities do not want to be associated with such rogue states. For this reason, they should redress their wrongdoings against the [Family Federation](#) and other religious minorities. This great country does not deserve this injustice.

No authority, state, church, or organization can suppress or deny freedom of religion. Japan should rectify this immediately."

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States Sponsoring Fear-Mongering Faith-Breakers

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Investigative journalist points out how politicians and media willingly embrace fear-mongering faith-breakers

by Knut Holdhus

Barbara Grabner, Austrian author and journalist, was in June 2024 interviewed by Allatra TV, a TV channel run by the Allatra spiritual movement, founded in 2011 by Igor Mikhailovich Danilov, a Ukrainian.



Barbara Grabner in TV studio 18th June 2024. Photo: Allatra TV.

Grabner has written on topics related to religious freedom. One of her notable works is *"Das Märtyrertum der Zeugen Jehovas in der Slowakei 1939–1945"* (The Martyrdom of Jehovah's Witnesses in Slovakia 1939-1945), which explores the persecution and experiences of *Jehovah's Witnesses* during the Slovak State period. This book delves into issues of religious freedom, highlighting the struggles and resilience of a religious minority under a repressive regime.

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She is also known for her investigative journalism on so-called faith-breaking. This was the focus of **"Faith-Breaking Is Big Business"**, the program Allatra TV released on 9th July featuring the interview with Grabner.

Grabner, a member of the [Family Federation](#), was asked about her experience with faith-breaking organizations and their practices. She replied,

"In September 1976, during my stay in Washington DC, I had my first encounter with faith-breaking groups. [...] At that time the faith-breakers – so-called deprogrammers – were supported by the public (politicians, churches, parents, media). **Deprogramming became a big business!** They kidnapped members from various groups in large numbers."

Barbara Grabner explained that parents of members of the [Unification Church](#) paid thousands of dollars to have their son or daughter "freed from danger". According to the Austrian journalist,

"Some members who escaped were kidnapped several times. This business combined lies and terror and spread soon to Europe. Many friends became afraid to visit their relatives. My parents were worried, but my mother said that she does not approve of force. Thus, I felt to be safe."

Grabner claims that the **media spread terrible stories and gave voice only to opponents and faith-breakers**. Most of the time **they used former members who had left the religious organization as witness, but neither the media nor the faith-breakers mentioned that those "witnesses" had been forcibly de-converted by faith-breakers earlier.**

Basically, this came to an end in the USA when **some**



Did constant fear-mongering from faith-breakers cause terror attack against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Hamburg? Here, the Kingdom Hall in Hamburg-Alsterdorf, ten days after the killing spree on 9th March 2023: damaged door, flowers and candles. Photo: NordNordWest / Wikimedia Commons. Licence: CC ASA 3.0 Germany

deprogrammers were sentenced to jail or huge fines. In the late 1980s, the wave of kidnappings and forcible faith-breaking also **stopped in Europe, but not in Japan**.

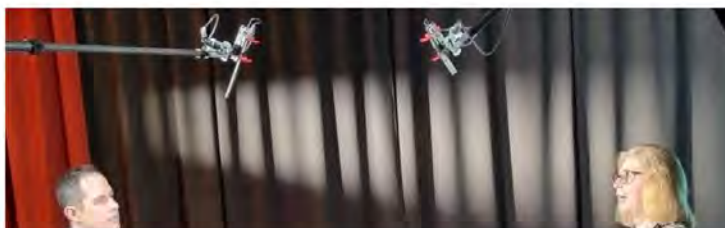
Asked about the **tactics of the faith-breakers and the harm they cause to individuals and society**, Grabner replied,

"Their method is to spread fear everywhere and terrify relatives – they call for government action."

She points out that the goal of faith-breakers is to have states drastically curb the freedom of religion for certain minority faiths. The media has to a large extent aided the faith-breakers and "hindered or stopped the growth of new religions. [...] At the same time the **media became hostile also to bigger or established religions**. Also, the Catholic church is now persecuted by the media."

Grabner continues,

"Organizations like FECRIS (since 1994) and RACIRS (since 1993) have faced condemnation by courts in various countries for criminal and civil violations. Why can they continue? Because of **media support**. **Journalists search for bad news, scandals**. In 2019, a former member of the [Unification Church](#) caused a scandal – though he had left the church 35 years earlier [...]. There were headlines that a 'Moonie' had hidden his children in a cellar, etc."



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Robert Mikita of Allatra TV interviewing Barbara Grabner on 18th June 2024. Photo: Allatra TV.

The Austrian journalist explains that the **faith-breakers work to damage the reputation of a faith for a very long time. As a result of media publishing such allegations, members of minority faiths easily become social outcasts** and socially isolated in their village or at their workplace until their everyday life proves that the faith-breakers lie. But the **restoration of a damaged reputation needs many years, and especially children suffer** from it.

Grabner also emphasizes that **faith-breakers say that the leaders of new religious movements are manipulators, but in reality, it is the faith-breakers who do the manipulation,**

"They select and spread information with a huge bias."

In the interview Barbara Grabner gave details about the **extensive cooperation since the 1990s between faith-breaking organizations in European countries and Russia.** She claims that the activities of the French faith-breaking organization FECRIS – *European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects* have combined forces with the **pro-Putin Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects.** Not long ago FECRIS expanded activities to Japan and China.

Grabner points out,

"FECRIS lost a court case against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Hamburg in 2020, where it was **found guilty of 18 false allegations.** In March 2021 FECRIS claimed that there was no persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, calling such reports as 'primitive propaganda'.

Alexander Dvorkin [\[Editor's note: High-ranking Russian faith-breaking activist and academic\]](#) remained a FECRIS Board of Directors member until March 2023. Dvorkin introduced the term 'totalitarian sect', which FECRIS later adopted. In 2009, Dvorkin became vice-president of FECRIS. The organization was granted 'ECOSOC Special Consultative Status' by the UN! The labelling of religions as 'cults' intensified afterwards."



Alexander Dvorkin in 2006. Photo: Евгений Мухоморов / Wikimedia Commons. License: Public domain image.

Barbara Grabner also adds that a big problem is that **FECRIS and similar faith-breaking organizations receive a lot of money from national governments.** Faith groups, however, have no sponsors and often lack personnel as well.

Text: Knut Holdhus

Featured image above: Robert Mikita of Allatra TV interviewing Barbara Grabner on 18th June 2024. Photo: Allatra TV.

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