

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan's excluding religion from politics isn't religious freedom

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Separation of church and state

Misunderstanding the separation of church and state in Japan: Protecting religious freedom vs. excluding religion from politics

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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 7: Religion in Japan in a Global Context

The True Meaning of "Separation of Church and State" is to Protect Freedom

Jefferson's Letters

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



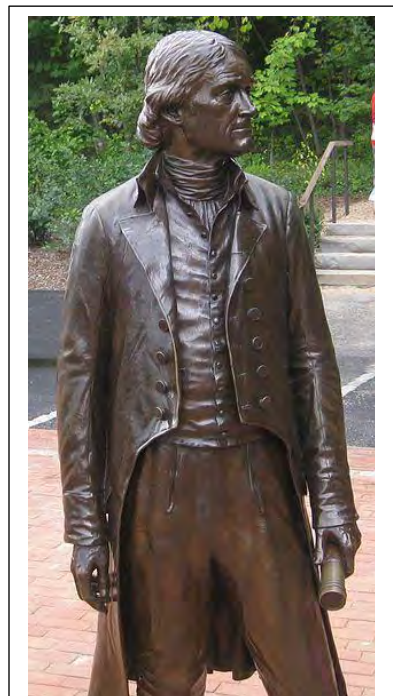
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Statue of Thomas Jefferson in Monticello, Virginia, USA

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Driving a little over two hours southwest from Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States, takes you to Charlottesville, a lush university town in central Virginia. Located on the outskirts of this city is Monticello, the home of the third U.S. President, Thomas Jefferson. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Monticello attracts numerous visitors from both within the United States and abroad.

The estate boasts beautiful gardens, and within one section lies Jefferson's grave. Despite leaving an unparalleled legacy as one of the most prominent "Founding Fathers", only three of Jefferson's accomplishments - those he was most proud of - are inscribed on his tombstone.

The first is drafting the Declaration of Independence, the second is drafting the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and the third is founding the University of Virginia. Interestingly, Jefferson took

greater pride in contributing to the establishment of laws protecting religious freedom than in having served as President of the United States.

For many years in the United States, a "culture war" has been ongoing between conservative groups seeking to preserve Christian traditions and values, and liberal groups attempting to replace these with leftist ideologies. Liberals have sought to remove Christian elements from society through court battles and other means, citing the principle of "separation of church and state".



Thomas Jefferson's tombstone in the Jefferson Graveyard at Monticello, Virginia on an autumn evening Nov. 2011

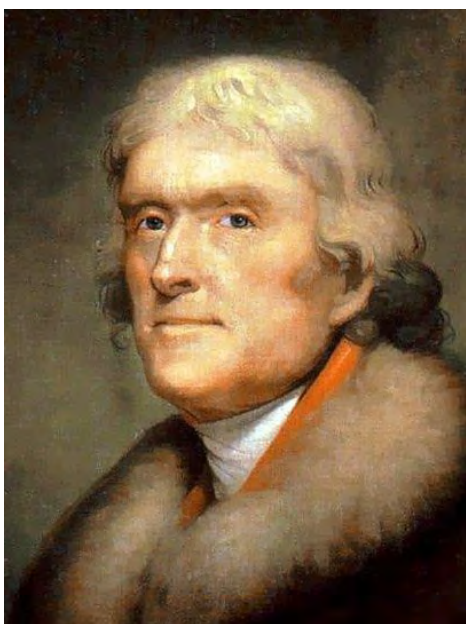
A central piece of evidence in the debate over the separation of church and state is a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1802 to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut. In it, Jefferson mentioned having built "a wall of separation between church and state". This phrase has led to the modern perception of Jefferson as a strict advocate of the separation of church and state.

Interestingly, Jefferson used the phrase "wall of separation" only once, in this private letter. Despite this, it has been treated almost as if it were law, frequently cited in court decisions as a foundational principle of church-state separation.

However, a closer reading of the letter reveals that Jefferson did not intend for the "wall of separation" to mean the exclusion of religion from public life. The Baptists to whom he wrote were a religious minority facing persecution in states like Virginia, where the Anglican Church dominated. Jefferson's use of the phrase was meant to fully support their religious freedom. In other words, the true purpose of the "wall of separation" was to protect religious minorities from state interference.

Unlike George Washington, the devoutly Christian first president, Jefferson is often considered the most secular among the Founding Fathers. A deist, he believed in a [God](#) who created natural laws but was not a personal being. Jefferson dismissed the virgin birth, miracles, and resurrection of Jesus as fabrications, yet he admired Jesus' teachings, not as the work of a savior but as a model of moral conduct.

During his eight-year presidency beginning in 1801, Thomas Jefferson was a dedicated attendee of Sunday worship services held in the U.S. House of Representatives, a public institution. Remarkably, his first attendance at such a service occurred just two days after he penned the "wall of separation" letter. Jefferson is also reported to have said,



Portrait of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), painting from 1805 by Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860)

"No nation has ever existed or been governed without religion, nor can it be governed without it. As the president of this country, I must set an example and demonstrate my support."

The history of the United States' founding reveals that the principle of the separation of church and state was established to protect religious freedom from government interference. However, in Japan, the debate surrounding the principle of separation often focuses on the notion that religion should not be involved in politics.

This misinterpretation of the principle of separation of church and state likely underpins much of the criticism directed at attempts by organizations affiliated with the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) to influence politics. It is clear that such criticism often stems from a misunderstanding of the concept.

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• December 18, 2024 • Knut Holdhus



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

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The



Jimmy Lai with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence in the White House, 8th July 2019. A third person, presumably an interpreter, is sitting in the foreground with the back of his head to the camera. Photo from Tweet by Pence on 10th August 2020. Photo: Office of U.S. Vice President / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain image](#)

founder of Hong Kong's daily newspaper *Apple Daily*, Jimmy Lai (76), is at the center of an issue that could ignite U.S.-China tensions. The upcoming Trump administration is expected to adopt a hardline stance on China, focusing not only on trade and security but also on human rights.

Jimmy Lai, a prominent pro-democracy figure in Hong Kong, continuously criticized the *Chinese Communist Party* through his newspaper's reporting. In 2020, he was arrested on charges of violating the *Hong Kong National Security Law* (NSL) and has been detained for over four years. In his ongoing trial, he now faces the possibility of a life sentence.

In October, during an interview on a conservative U.S. podcast, incoming U.S. President Trump was asked whether he could secure Lai's release if elected. Trump firmly responded, "100% yes. It's very simple." In response, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, John Lee Ka-chiu, warned, "Mutual respect is important. Local internal affairs should not be interfered with." This issue is already emerging as a point of contention between the U.S. and China.

The U.S. conservative camp strongly advocates for Lai's release because they see his imprisonment as a symbol of oppression against the pro-democracy movement. However, there's another dimension: Lai is also a devout Catholic, and many interpret his arrest as "religious persecution".

Lai, who holds British citizenship, could have fled overseas before his arrest. However, he was encouraged by his wife – also a Catholic – who told him, "You must carry your own cross." Therefore, Lai chose to remain and face imprisonment.

Reports of Jimmy Lai's faith, his deep bond with his wife, and even his efforts to draw images of Christ using the small amounts of paper and pencils available to him in prison have resonated deeply with the U.S. public. For the incoming Trump administration, abandoning a Christian who endures China's oppression through his faith is not an option.

For the United States, defending human rights is a universal theme of its diplomacy, but the values reflected in such efforts differ depending on the administration. The Democratic administrations of Obama and Biden prioritized the expansion of LGBT rights, whereas the upcoming Trump administration is expected to place the defense of religious freedom at the core of its human rights diplomacy.

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U.S. Vice President Mike Pence addresses delegates at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom at the U.S. Department of State in Washington D.C. on July 18, 2019. Photo: Ralph Alswang from US State Department / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

One major reason for this is the strong demand from Trump's key support base, the evangelical Christians. During his first administration, Trump held the *Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom* conference twice, bringing together individuals from around the world who face religious persecution.

It remains highly doubtful whether the Japanese government can align itself with the Trump administration's human rights diplomacy, which prioritizes religious freedom. Criticism of the Japanese government has already

surfaced from influential figures close to Trump, particularly in light of Japan's request to dissolve the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the *Unification Church*).

On 8th December, Paula White, Trump's "spiritual advisor", sent a [video message](#) to a rally in Tokyo organized by the *Japanese Committee of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom* (ICRF). In her message, she noted that concerns have been expressed by the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, and UN-affiliated NGOs, stating, "We urge our great ally in Japan to uphold religious freedom for all."



Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Sam Brownback delivers opening remarks at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom held at the U.S. Department of State in Washington D.C. on July 16-18, 2019. Photo: U.S. Department of State / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

Additionally, Sam Brownback, who served as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom under Trump's first administration, commented in a February interview with [this newspaper](#):

"The [Unification Church](#) has fought against communism for decades. China opposes anti-communist groups like the [Unification Church](#). If the Trump administration returns to power, it will actively address this issue."

Brownback projected that the next U.S. administration would view Japan's request to dissolve the [church](#) as "a major concern".

The issue of religious freedom is thus poised to become not only a flashpoint in U.S.-China relations but also a growing thorn in Japan-U.S. relations.

Featured image above: Senator Ted Cruz (Rep) meeting Jimmy Lai (left) and another pro-democracy dissident in Hong Kong 12th Oct. 2019. Cruz writes, "While I was in Hong Kong, I met Jimmy Lai and other pro-democracy dissidents. Reports of his arrest are deeply troubling. Instead of focusing on the #coronavirus, the HK government and Communist Chinese Party are exploiting this crisis to attack political opponents." Photo: Office of Senator Ted Cruz / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

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