

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Term *Cult* Is Big Part of Anti-Religious Agenda

Knut Holdhus
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Marco Respinti speaking at a conference in Japan in December 2024



Leading human rights expert: Anti-cult rhetoric conceals an underlying anti-religious agenda, with the political goal of creating an anti-religious society

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

"The term 'cult' is anti-religious."

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

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Marco Respinti, Director of the Italian online religious freedom magazine [Bitter Winter](#), was invited by the Japan Committee of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF), chaired by Professor Emeritus Shoichi Ito (伊東正一) of Kyushu University, to deliver a series of lectures in four Japanese cities, including Tokyo, from 6th to 10th December 2024.

In his lectures, which focused on the themes of freedom of religion and human rights, Respinti stated that the term "cult", often used with a pejorative connotation, is applied to groups or individuals disliked or viewed as adversaries by individuals, organizations, institutions, or governments. He remarked:

"Cults are accused of using "brainwashing" to control their victims, but this concept has been dismissed as pseudoscience by the majority of scholars studying new religious movements in the West and by courts in countries like the United States. Moreover, the 'anti-cult' discourse propagated in the media is opposed by most scholarly organizations. This fact seems to be relatively unknown in Japan."



Professor Emeritus Susumu Shimazono (1948-), leading Japanese scholar in the field of the sociology of religion



John Gordon Melton (1942-), American religious scholar who was the founding director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion

In 1995, a group of sociologists of religion established the "Japan Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery" - headed by Executive Director Kimiaki Nishida (西田公昭) - which has continued its activities to this day. The organization, which uses the term "cult" in its name, describes on its website that "cults are organizations that violate human rights" and "often use mind control to conceal the true nature of their human rights violations."

In the autumn of 2022, following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), NHK Educational TV's religious program Kokoro no Jidai (The Era of the Heart) aired a discussion among religious scholars on the theme of "Religion and 'Cults' Under Scrutiny". Participants included Kenji Kawashima (川島堅二), a professor at Tohoku Gakuin University and an advisor to the Japan Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery, and Yoshihide Sakurai (櫻井義秀), a professor at Hokkaido University Graduate School.

Susumu Shimazono (島藺進), Professor Emeritus at the University of Tokyo, who also participated in the discussion, stated, "(the term 'cult') is somewhat unsuitable as an academic term."

However, the discussion proceeded on the premise that the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly known as the [Unification Church](#)) was a "cult". Scholars present also used the term "mind control", which is often associated with "cult" in public discourse.

Lawyers involved in activities against the [Family Federation](#) frequently use the term "mind control" as well. However, J. Gordon Melton, a prominent researcher of new religious movements in the United States, stated in an interview with [Sekai Nippo](#) about 30 years ago,

"Scholars who claim that new religious movements brainwash their followers are using the media to spread the terms 'brainwashing' and 'mind control', but this is merely a political argument designed to attack new religious movements."

In the United States, an organization called the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) operated under the premise that followers of new religious movements were victims of brainwashing or mind control, abducting young people and forcibly deprogramming them. However, the organization lost a lawsuit, was ordered to pay massive damages, and went bankrupt and dissolved in the late 1990s.

In Western countries, terms such as "cult" and "mind control" have long been abandoned due to their role in stigmatizing religious groups and their followers, and in some cases leading to severe human rights violations such as forced deprogramming. However, these terms are still widely used in Japan - not only by the media but also by prominent scholars of religion. Respinti highlighted this distinct aspect of Japan.

He also noted that "anti-cult" activists claim they are not opposing freedom of religion but are merely

against "cults". However, he cautioned, "This quickly becomes generalized." This is because the concept of "cult" is vague, raising the question of who determines the line between a "legitimate religion" and a "cult". Inevitably, the target of the term becomes arbitrarily decided by those using it.

Respinti stated,

"The majority of these lawyers (engaged in anti-cult activities) are socialists or communists. Their real target was a specific new religious movement in Japan that had been successful in anti-communist activities, namely the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#))."

If these individuals are materialists, it suggests that anti-cult rhetoric conceals an underlying anti-religious agenda, with the political goal of creating an anti-religious society.

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Japanese Government Rejects UN Investigation

• December 20, 2024 • Knut Holdhus



Japanese government continues to prevent an official visit as it doesn't respond to request for UN investigation into the country's treatment of religious minorities

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

Japanese Government Rejects UN Investigation


Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion



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The Japanese government has refused the request for a visit from Nazila Ghanea, the *UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief*, to investigate potential violations of religious freedom affecting minority religions such as the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the Unification Church) and Jehovah's Witnesses.

This article republishes a paper by Italian sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne addressing the issue.

by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist and scholar of religion

Something very strange is happening with Japan. After United Nations criticism of its attitude towards the Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities, it seems that the Japanese government is trying to prevent an official visit to the country by the *UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, Nazila Ghanea.



UN Special Rapporteur: Nazila Ghanea. Photo (2023): FOREF

On March 28, 2024, the Special Rapporteur officially requested to conduct a country visit to Japan. Her request is officially posted on the United Nations' website.

Yet, the visit has not been scheduled, which means that Japan did not agree to it. Japan is a democratic country and one that extended a standing invitation to Special Rapporteurs in 2011, yet in practice each visit should be confirmed to actually happen. This has not been the case for the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief's March 2024 request.

If I may, I would add that I am familiar with the procedure as I was in 2011 the Representative of the *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions. OSCE Representatives' system of country visits was patterned after the one used by the *UN Special Rapporteurs*. I expressed my intention to visit certain countries (including, for the first time in OSCE history, the Vatican, which accepted) but needed their ad hoc invitation to actually go there.

Both OSCE and UN Representatives and Rapporteurs normally are unable to visit totalitarian and non-democratic countries. Almost nobody refuses the visits explicitly. The strategy used by those who have something to hide is what is called in diplomatic language "fin de non recevoir". They simply delay the answer indefinitely.



Sometimes, however, even totalitarian states understand that they should allow such visits to save face. "Bitter Winter" covered the saga of the cat and mouse game between China and then *UN High Commissioner for Human Rights* Michelle Bachelet about a visit to Xinjiang, which she requested in June

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Michelle Bachelet and Xi Jinping shaking hands 11th Nov. 2014. She then was President of Chile. She served as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2018-2022. Photo: Government of Chile / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 2.0 Gen](#). Cropped

2018. After considerable international pressure, the visit happened in 2022. China used COVID as an excuse in 2020 and 2021, but there was no COVID lockdown in 2018 and 2019.

After the visits, Rapporteurs normally publish reports. After Bachelet's visit to Xinjiang, China started lobbying against the publication of her report. She only released it on August 31, 2022, on the eve of the end of her term as High Commissioner. China managed to avoid the use of the word "genocide", but was still unhappy that the report mentioned its "crimes against humanity."

This recent precedent is very important. It shows that even China, while continuing to play its usual games, in the end realized that not allowing a high UN Human rights representative to visit the country was worse in terms of international reputation than having to confront a negative report.



UN Special Rapporteur: Farida Shaheed. Photo (2016): [Wotancito / Wikimedia Commons](#). License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#). Cropped



UN Special Rapporteur: Irene Khan. Photo (2024): [Juan Carlo Ruff for the Philippine Information Agency / Wikimedia Commons](#). [Public domain image](#). Cropped



UN Special Rapporteur: Clément Nyaletsossi Voule. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

Why is Japan putting itself

in an even worse international position than China? The reason of course is that Ghana co-signed on April 30, 2024, with *Special Rapporteur on the right to education* Farida Shaheed, *Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression* Irene Khan, and *Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association* Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, a [letter to Japan](#) that mightily disturbed the local government. The Japanese government did submit a very weak response to the statement only on June 27.

The Rapporteurs' letter clearly denounced that after the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by a man who claimed he wanted to punish him for his cooperation with the [Unification Church](#), which the assassin hated, the Japanese government adopted a series of measures targeting both the [Unification Church](#) and the Jehovah's Witnesses (and potentially other religious groups). The Rapporteurs found that some measures "may constitute a violation of the principles of neutrality and non-discrimination, as well as potentially contributing to further stigmatization and suspicion of religious or belief minorities." They also noted with concern that anti-cultists well-known for their vitriolic criticism of the targeted groups had cooperated with the government in drafting regulations.

In the meantime, the Japanese government is pursuing at the *District Court of Tokyo* a legal action seeking the dissolution of the [Unification Church](#), now called [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). In Japan, a legal dissolution is a death sentence as it deprives the dissolved religious corporation of its assets and makes the continuation of its regular activities impossible in practice.



International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

specialized French attorney Patricia Duval has demonstrated that the action [violates the international commitments of Japan](#) under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. Meanwhile, discrimination and even physical violence has continued against the Jehovah's Witnesses as well as against devotees of the [Unification Church](#).

Well-known



Patricia Duval, French attorney and expert on international human rights law. She has defended the rights of minorities of religion in domestic and international fora, and before

This is, as they say, hidden in plain sight in Japan. A visit by the [UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief](#) would underline that what is happening is not acceptable and add emphasis to a blame already expressed by many NGOs and international scholars.

During the visit, it may also come out that Japanese authorities only interviewed disgruntled second-generation ex-members of the [Unification Church](#) while ignoring the thousands that reported positive experiences in the religious organization. They also ignored the positive social contributions of the reportedly "anti-social" church and its allied organizations, including through disaster relief after earthquakes and tsunamis. The visit may even examine the arbitrary actions of the Japanese authorities abroad, including [against a school in Senegal](#) funded by an organization connected with the [Unification Church](#).

institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the European Union, and the United Nations. She has also published numerous scholarly articles on freedom of religion or belief. Photo: [FOREF](#)

Japan can, of course, continue to refuse the visit. As somebody who admires so many features of Japan's culture and rich religious heritage, I would, however, respectfully suggest to the Japanese authorities that continuing to prevent the visit from happening is worse for Japan's reputation than anything Ghana could say while visiting the country or in her report. It puts [Japan dangerously close to egregious violators](#) of human rights and freedom of religion or belief – which can run but cannot hide.

See [original article](#) as published by [Bitter Winter](#)

Featured image above: Dr. Massimo Introvigne, 6th April 2023. Photo: [FOREF](#)

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