

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Trump's New Religious Liberty Commission

Knut Holdhus
May 10, 2025



President Donald Trump prepares to sign an Executive Order alongside religious leaders at a National Day of Prayer event, Thursday, 1st May 2025, in the White House Rose Garden



President Donald Trump Signs Executive Order to Defend Freedom of Religion, establishing Religious Liberty Commission

Tokyo, 10th May 2025 - Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

Trump Administration Highlights Traditional Values with New Religious Liberty Commission

by Yosuke Yamazaki (山崎 洋介), reporting from Washington DC

Strategic Proposal Due by Next July



President Donald Trump delivers remarks at a National Day of Prayer event, Thursday, May 1, 2025, in the White House Rose Garden

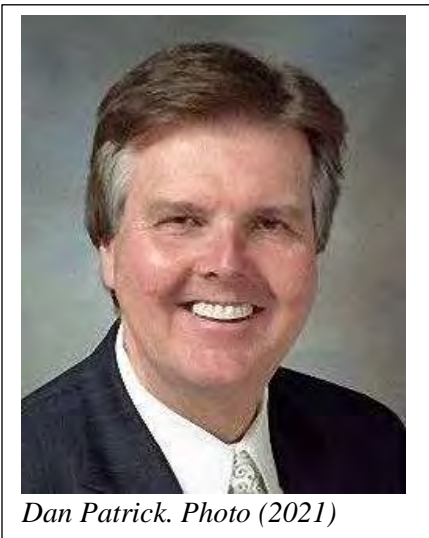
On 1st May, the U.S. National Day of Prayer, President Donald Trump announced the establishment of a new commission to defend religious freedom, a founding principle of the United States. In contrast to the Biden administration, which was criticized for downplaying religious values, the Trump administration has positioned freedom of religion as one of its top priorities.

At the podium in the White House Rose Garden, religious leaders from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, along with House Speaker Johnson - known for his devout Christian faith - offered prayers. Afterward, surrounded by representatives of various denominations, President Trump signed an executive order creating the "Religious Liberty

Commission".

In his speech, Trump emphasized that "America is one nation under [God](#)" and declared, "The radical left is trying to erase that, but we won't let them."

The commission will be chaired by Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, who is known for his strong advocacy of religious values, including promoting a bill allowing prayer and Bible readings in public schools with parental consent.



Dan Patrick. Photo (2021)

Other members include:

Dr. Ben Carson, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development during Trump's first term

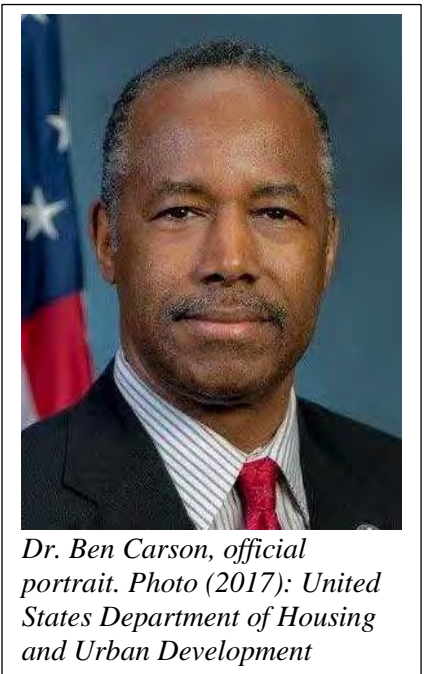
Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York

Evangelist Franklin Graham, head of the humanitarian organization Samaritan's Purse

Pastor Paula White, head of the Trump administration's newly established "Faith Office"

One of the reasons behind the commission's creation is growing dissatisfaction among conservatives and parts of the religious community over the perceived disregard for religious values under the Biden administration. A particularly symbolic incident was

President Biden's declaration of 31st March 2024 - coinciding with Easter Sunday - as "Transgender Day of Visibility", which sparked backlash.



Dr. Ben Carson, official portrait. Photo (2017): United States Department of Housing and Urban Development

Additionally, under the Biden administration, whistleblowers revealed that internal FBI documents treated certain "traditionalist Catholics" as potential domestic terrorism risks.

Meanwhile, after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion in 2022, there was a sharp rise in violent attacks against anti-abortion churches, including fire bombings and property destruction. Critics argue that the Biden administration failed to respond with sufficient legal action. According to a fact sheet released by the Trump administration, "protection of places of worship" will be a key focus area for the new commission.

Another major focus is "freedom of speech for religious organizations". This appears to target the repeal of the Johnson Amendment, which prohibits tax-exempt organizations like churches from endorsing or opposing political candidates. Conservative Christians have long criticized the amendment for restricting the free speech of religious leaders. During his first term, Trump expressed his intention to abolish it so that "faith leaders can speak freely without fear of punishment."

The fact sheet also criticizes policies that "hinder parents' rights to send their children to religious schools," claiming they infringe on the right to practice faith. This refers to rules in many states that prevent public funding or voucher programs from being used for schools with religious instruction - rules that critics say limit school choice for parents seeking faith-based education.



Rev. Paula White, here 11th June 2021 in Grapevine, Texas

The commission is tasked with submitting a strategic report to the Faith Office by 4th July 2026, outlining measures to defend and strengthen religious freedom, including legislative and administrative recommendations.

At the National Day of Prayer event, Pastor Paula White described the creation of the Faith Office as a "historic event" and reported that over 1,000 religious leaders had visited the White House in the past 100 days. She stated that the administration is working on initiatives including preventing all forms of religious discrimination - such as anti-Semitism and anti-Christian bias - and promoting foster care and adoption through collaboration with faith-based organizations. She concluded,

"Many policies are in motion, but our top priority will always be the protection of religious freedom."

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Deprogramming Abuses: Reasons For Japan's Silence

- May 9, 2025
- Knut Holdhus

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In interview Japanese expert scholar and author describes Japan's unspoken history of deprogramming abuses and why the authorities keep quiet about the worst human rights violations there since World War II

Tokyo, 12th April 2025 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. *Original article.*

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by Tsuyoshi Toyoda (豊田 剛), who conducted the interview

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Expanding deprogramming network



Toshihiro Ota (大田俊寛) – Japanese author and researcher in religious studies. Completed doctoral studies in Religious Studies and the History of Religion at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology. Holds a Doctorate in Literature. Currently a part-time lecturer at Saitama University. Photo: Sekai Nippo.

– Doesn't the Tokyo District Court's ruling to issue a dissolution order effectively legitimize violent acts by groups hostile to the Family Federation?

The district court's decision to issue a dissolution order and its concerns about the Unification Church's doctrine do not necessarily mean that the anti-Unification Church stance is justified. A major issue is the widespread use of forced de-conversion – known as "deprogramming" – through abduction, confinement, and even torture against Unification Church members.

This is thoroughly discussed in works like

- "Our Unpleasant Neighbor: The Tragedy of a Female Believer 'Rescued' from the Unification Church" by Kazuhiro Yonemoto (米本和広), and

- "Religious Persecution in Universities" and "The Dark Side of Japanese Religion – The Struggle Against Forced Renunciation of Faith" by Tadashi Muro (室生忠).

The international NGO "Human Rights Without Frontiers" also investigated this and published a report in 2012 titled "[Japan: Abductions and confinement for the purpose of religious de-conversion](#)".

In Japan, it is said that the first person to carry out deprogramming of Unification Church members was Pastor Satoshi Moriyama (森山 諭) of the United Church of Jesus Christ of Japan. Moriyama deemed the Unification Church a heresy and began vehemently refuting it.

From 1966 onward, with the help of family members of believers, he started confining believers in churches and coercing them to renounce their faith.

朝日新聞 In
The logo of Asahi Shimbun, a large left-leaning Japanese newspaper, hostile to the Family Federation.

1967, an article titled "The Principle Movement That Makes Parents Cry" appeared in the Asahi Shimbun, which increased parental anxiety and led to a rise in consultations with pastors like Moriyama. This marked the beginning of a network of Christian pastors involved in deprogramming.

In the 1970s, as conflict between the International Federation for Victory over Communism (IFVOC) and leftist groups intensified, left-leaning politicians and intellectuals joined the anti-Unification Church movement.

By the 1980s, "spiritual sales" tactics became a serious problem, leading lawyers and media figures to launch campaigns against the church. Then in the 1990s, following the Aum Shinrikyo incident, public fear of "cult brainwashing and mind control" surged. As a result, theories of mind control were



Satoshi Moriyama (森山諭 – 1908-1996), Japanese pastor, evangelist, and advisor to the United Church of Jesus Christ of Japan. He founded Ogikubo Glory Church with Ugo Nakata (中田羽後). He also served as executive committee chairman of the Tokyo Convention of the Association of Comrades Waiting for the Second Coming, financial committee member of the Japan Keswick Convention, chairman of the Japan-Korea Friendship Mission Cooperation Association, and financial chairman of the Billy Graham International Convention. Photo: 日本イエス・キリスト

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developed, and psychologists and religious scholars began “anti-cult” activities.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the anti-[Unification Church](#) movement absorbed

「[教団救産栄光キリスト教会](#) / [Wikimedia Commons](#). [Public domain image](#). [Cropped](#)



IFVOC conference in 1972. Photo: IFVOC

people from various fields while shifting its focus. Behind it all,



Professional faith-breaker and victim. Illustration: Grok xAI, 20th April 2025

repeated

[deprogrammings](#) were carried out as a kind of “secret weapon against cults”. I call this network of relationships the “[deprogramming network](#)”.

– **The district court adopted testimonies from former members who renounced their faith after being abducted and confined.**

I’ve heard that many of the written statements submitted by the *Ministry of Education* (MEXT) came from people who were forced into donation lawsuits after being [deprogrammed](#). In court cases in the UK involving the [Unification Church](#), testimonies from people who had undergone [deprogramming](#) were treated with suspicion, and the courts instead ruled that the government’s actions were breaking the law. There is a significant difference from how Japanese courts have responded, particularly in whether the issue of [deprogramming](#) is being directly addressed.

What puzzles me is why Japanese authorities – such as the police and courts – do not treat [deprogramming](#) as a crime. In the West, [deprogramming](#) movements subsided precisely because they were prosecuted as crimes. Strangely, that did not happen in Japan.

“Private transport services” operated by former police officers

– **Why didn’t deprogramming subside in Japan?**

I suspect one major reason lies in the “peculiarities of Japan’s psychiatric care system”.

Historically in Japan, there was a custom of confining mentally ill individuals in so-called *zashiki-ro* (座敷牢 – prison cell in homes) [\[See editor’s note below\]](#). After World War II, this practice faded, but instead, many psychiatric hospitals were built, and the government



An **apartment block in faith-breaker (deprogrammer) Satoshi Moriyama’s neighborhood in Ogikubo, Tokyo**. In this block, many members of the [Unification Church](#), including medical doctor [Hirohisa Koide](#), were [forcibly detained](#). Photo: Hirohisa Koide

pushed policies of institutionalization for mental illness. Japan has a system called “medical protection hospitalization”, which allows for involuntary hospitalization based on the judgment of a psychiatrist

and the patient's family – even if the person refuses. This system was often abused, leading to an enormous number of inpatients.

According to the book *"Reportage: The Archipelago of Asylums – Questioning Japanese Psychiatry"* by Naoki Kazama (風間直樹) and others, as of 2017, about 280,000 people were hospitalized in psychiatric institutions in Japan, with 340,000 psychiatric beds available – about one-fifth of the global total concentrated in a single country.

A business called "private transport services" developed to forcibly admit people to psychiatric hospitals, often operated by former police officers. Furthermore, not only psychiatric hospitals but also various mental rehabilitation centers, low-cost shelters, and retreat facilities run by so-called "extraction agents" (引き出し屋) [See editor's note below] reportedly functioned as places of confinement.

In my research into **deprogramming** of **Unification Church** members, I came to feel strongly that Japanese society has a kind of "backdoor solution" that involves solving the problem of so-called "disruptive individuals" through **abduction and confinement** – and that public authorities have supported this approach.

Going forward, we need to not only reexamine the issue of religious **deprogramming** but also look more broadly at the underlying problems in Japanese society that made it possible – and search for ways to reform them.

In a sense, the "**Unification Church** issue" is not just about a single religious organization. It could be seen as a convergence point for contradictions in postwar Japan across many sectors – politics, the judiciary, law enforcement, academia, and media. Regrettably, resolving these contradictions will likely take considerable time.

See [part 1](#), [part 2](#) of the interview



Major works by Toshihiro Ota (大田俊寛). Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

Toshihiro Ota (大田俊寛) – Born in 1974. Graduated from the Faculty of Sociology at Hitotsubashi University. Completed doctoral studies in Religious Studies and the History of Religion at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology. Holds a Doctorate in Literature. Currently a part-time lecturer at Saitama University. Specializes in religious studies. Major works include *"The Complete History of Monotheism"* (Vol. 1 & 2, Kawade Shobo Shinsha), *"The Thought of Gnosticism"* (Shunjusha), and *"The Spiritual History of Aum Shinrikyo"* (Shunjusha).

Featured image above: A **panel exhibition** 19th March 2025, Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture highlighting damage caused by **deprogramming** through **abduction and confinement**. Photo: Yasuhiro Uno (宇野泰弘)

[Editor's note 1: A **zashiki-rō** (座敷牢) is a traditional Japanese confinement room used historically for restraining individuals, typically within a private household. **Zashiki** (座敷) refers to a Japanese-style tatami-matted room. **Rō** (牢) means a jail or cell.

Historically, these rooms were used for confining family members who were mentally ill, violent, or otherwise considered disruptive or dangerous to the household or community. The practice was more common in the Edo (1603–1868) and Meiji (1868–1912) periods, before modern mental health care systems were established.



Ensuring the person could not escape. Photo: [National Association of](#)

A Zashiki-rō was typically equipped with sturdy sliding doors reinforced with bars or locks, ensuring the person inside could not escape. It was located within a family home or a secluded part of the property, ensuring privacy. The confined individual was often left alone in this small, sparse room with minimal furnishings, and their basic needs were provided through a small opening or at designated times.

The term "zashiki-rō" today is often used metaphorically to describe situations of coercive confinement or control, as it

Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Deconversion" evokes the idea of being trapped in a restrictive, oppressive environment. Such imagery is sometimes applied to cases of forcible detainment or isolation, like in the more than 4,300 instances of members of the Family Federation being abducted and confined.]

[**Editor's note 2:** 引き出し屋 (hikidashi-ya) literally means "extraction specialists"; often refers to individuals or groups that forcibly remove people (often from new religious movements, what the same "specialists" call "cults").]

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