

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: When Society Forces You to Hide Your Faith

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Druze and Christians in As-Suwayda, Syria (2021)



Living with one's faith hidden: When society drives believers underground - Japan joining ranks with North Korea, China and the Middle East

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The Anguish of Believers Forced to Hide Their Faith

by Satoshi Ogawa (小川 敏)

See also [China's New Crackdown: War on Foreign Christians](#)

See also [State Persecution in Japan, Iran, and Pakistan](#)

In Islam, the act of declaring one's faith is known as the Shahada, meaning "evidence" or "testimony". Concretely, this refers to reciting the foundational Islamic creed:

"Ashhadu an la ilaha illallah, wa ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasulullah"
("There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.")



Muslims are obligated to recite this phrase five times a day. On the other hand, when Muslims hide their faith from others due to security or religious reasons, it is known as taqiyya - literally: "hiding one's faith" or religious dissimulation [See editor's note below].

This practice has sometimes been employed by followers of minority Shia sects, such as the Alawites and Druze. (This section references information from Islamic websites such as "Kaken".)

In Christianity, "confession of faith" refers to the public declaration of belief in Jesus Christ as Savior. It is a pledge of loyalty to God and a way to affirm one's identity as a Christian - for instance, through declaring belief in Christ at baptism.

In contrast, "faith concealment" refers to the act of not disclosing or intentionally hiding one's Christian faith, out of fear of persecution or disadvantage.

A real-life example of faith concealment can be found among Christians in North Korea, where there is no freedom of religion. In September 2015, international missionary organization Open Doors held a 60th anniversary event at Vienna University of Technology. There, a North Korean defector named Ms. Kim Yong-seok gave a striking testimony.



Dangerous to possess in North Korea: A Bible. Here, Revision Korean Commons Translations Bible, Anglican Edition

Simply possessing a Bible could lead to arrest - and in worse cases, detention in a labor camp, where survival is uncertain.

When Ms. Kim was a child, she often saw her father sitting quietly with his head bowed. She thought that was just what older people did. But in reality, he was praying. In North Korea, even prayer is forbidden, and one must do it in a way that others don't notice.

Her family was sent to a camp when it was discovered they were Christians. She saw her father only once while in prison, and never again afterward.

"Confession of faith" and "faith concealment" are polar opposites. In the latter case, believers may find themselves unable to declare their faith due to concerns for their own or their family's safety - leading to inner turmoil. While confession of faith is an active expression of loyalty to [God](#), faith concealment is often a painful, protective response to harsh circumstances.

Although many countries today guarantee freedom of religion, minority denominations can still be oppressed under the influence of dominant religious traditions.

In fact, persecution of Christians from minority denominations continues in some Islamic countries. Many have been killed simply for confessing their faith.

I chose to write about confession and concealment of faith in this column after hearing that Druze believers in Syria have at times practiced faith concealment to avoid persecution from Sunni Muslims. In southern Syria's As-Suwayda Governorate, since 13th July, clashes have erupted between the minority Druze and Bedouin Sunnis, resulting in over 300 casualties so far.



Shusaku Endo. photographed on October 211, 1966 at his home in Tamagawa Gakuen, Machida City, Japan

Religious persecution is not unfamiliar to Japan's own history. The novel Silence by Shūsaku Endō (遠藤周作) portrays the agony of Christians caught between confessing and concealing their faith under intense persecution.

In recent times, we're witnessing something similar: amid the intense scrutiny and so-called "witch hunt" following the government's [dissolution order](#) against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), some believers are advocating for freedom of religion, while others may be forced into faith concealment.

In any case, the left-leaning media outlets and certain politicians who have relentlessly pursued the eradication of the former [Unification Church](#) will someday have to atone for the anguish they have inflicted on believers forced into hiding their faith. History teaches us that much.

See also: [China's New Crackdown: War on Foreign Christians](#)

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[Editor's note: Taqiyya is an Islamic principle that allows a person to conceal their faith or beliefs when under threat, persecution, or compulsion, particularly when facing danger to life or severe harm. The concept is rooted in the Qur'an (e.g., Qur'an 16:106), which permits believers to protect themselves when forced to deny their faith, as long as their hearts remain firm in belief.

It has been especially emphasized in Shia Islam, where minority Shia communities have historically faced

persecution and used taqiyya for self-preservation.

Taqiyya is not a license to lie for personal gain. It is a form of self-protection in extreme circumstances, not a routine practice.

In essence, taqiyya allows for the concealment of faith to avoid harm, while inwardly maintaining one's beliefs.]

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The “Hokkaido Citizens’ Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom”, a group of volunteers affiliated with the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), recently held the 3rd Interfaith and Scholars Forum in Sapporo. Around 200 people participated.

At the forum, Pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa (中川晴久) of the Christian Church of the Lord’s Sheep (主の羊クリスチャン教会) delivered the keynote address. He criticized the request from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to the Tokyo District Court for the dissolution of the [Family Federation](#). Nakagawa criticized the process for being heavily biased in one direction. He stated that the root of the issue lies in the fact that some Christian pastors have targeted [Family Federation](#) believers and subjected them to forcible faith-breaking (de-conversion, renunciation of faith) [\[See editor’s note below\]](#) involving [abduction and confinement](#). He emphasized,

“The number of pastors involved in abductions, based on what I personally know, easily exceeds 200 and is close to 300.”

He appealed that,

“The government’s acceptance of only the opposition’s perspective amounts to an abuse of state power.”



Location of Sapporo on the northern island of Hokkaido. Illustration: Maximilian Dörrbecker (Chumhwa) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 3.0 Unp](#)

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Protesting against the evil of deprogramming (faith-breaking) in Shinjuku, Tokyo 8th December 2024. Here, Toru Goto (後藤 徹), representing the [National Association of Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Religious De-Conversion](#) (center), delivering a speech. The posters behind him carry pictures of Toru Goto hardly able to walk after more than 12 years of forcible confinement. Photo: Reiwa Kato (加藤 玲和)

In the second part of the forum, a panel discussion was held featuring Reverend Kōshin Enomoto (榎本興信), a monk from the Jodo Shinshu Takada sect, and Imam Mohammad Ismael of the Hokkaido Islamic Society. Reverend Enomoto firmly stated that “forcible faith-breaking [\[See editor’s note below\]](#), even when committed by one’s own family members, through violence to change someone’s faith must never be tolerated.” He added,

“If Jesus Christ, the Buddha, and Muhammad were here, they would shake hands with one another and say, ‘Don’t go to war!’”

Enomoto called for interfaith harmony as the path to peace.

Featured image above: Pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa (中川晴久) discussing issues with the dissolution order request issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) – 12th July 2025, Sapporo City. Photo: Yuasa Hajime (湯朝筆)

[Editor’s note: Coercive faith-breaking (“deprogramming”, forced renunciation of faith) in Japan refers to the practice of coercively attempting to separate individuals from their religious affiliations or beliefs, typically through intervention by family members, professional faith-breakers (deprogrammers) or organizations hostile to new religious movements (NRMs). This phenomenon often targets members of such movements, or a relatively large faiths like the

members of such movements, e.g. relatively large faiths like the [Family Federation](#) or Jehovah's Witnesses, but also smaller groups like Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku) and other newer religious movements.



Also subject to faith-breaking attempts: *Members of [Soka Gakkai](#). Here, students belonging to the faith in 2001. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 3.0 Unp](#). Cropped*

However, also Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based lay organization with more than 8 million Japanese members, and affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, has occasionally been subject to faith-breaking attempts.

The practice gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents or concerned family members often hired faith-breakers who taught them how to abduct and forcibly detain believers. Almost all such cases involved confining the individual believer and cutting him or her off from the religious community. During the confinement, the believer was subjected to intense questioning or indoctrination designed to break his or her faith. The aim was to "rescue" the person from what the family often had been tricked by faith-breakers or lawyers to regard as harmful influence from the religious organization.

Critics of forced de-conversion argue that it violates fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, religion, and association. Reports of psychological trauma and accusations of unlawful detention have sparked debates over its ethical and legal implications. In response, some religious groups, particularly NRMs, have lobbied for greater protections against such practices.

Japanese courts have been inconsistent in addressing cases of coercive faith-breaking. While some verdicts have condemned the practice as illegal detention, others have been more lenient, citing family concerns about "mental health" or alleged "exploitation" as mitigating factors.]

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