

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan Dissolves Church - Church Remains

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Understanding the Japanese dissolution decision: The Supreme Court's recognition of the continued existence of the religious organization even though it lost its corporation status

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[Opinion]

Dissolution Order and the Supreme Court's Decision Confirm the Continued Existence of the Family Federation as a Religious Organization

by Rev. Hiroshi Kurose 黒瀬博, Tokyo West Baptist Church

Part 1

Worship Facilities Should Be Returned Immediately



On 22nd June, the [Supreme Court of Japan](#) [dismissed](#) the [special appeal](#) filed by the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). As a result, the [dissolution order](#) has become final.

Without addressing the constitutional issues involved, the Supreme Court fully affirmed the decisions of the Tokyo District Court and the [Tokyo High Court](#). Naturally, this outcome is deeply disappointing for members of the [Family Federation](#). However, now that the decision is final, there is little point in continuing to debate its contents.

Court decisions are like an umpire's call in baseball. Even if a ruling is mistaken, time moves forward on the basis of that decision. The reasoning behind this decision is flawed, but just as an erroneous call in baseball cannot be reversed after the game proceeds, neither can this result. Going forward, the focus should shift toward preserving a record of the decision's injustice.

Distinguishing the Religious Corporation from the Religious Organization

One point made clear by the [Supreme Court's decision](#) is that the dissolution order applies to the religious corporation (宗教法人 - shūkyō hōjin), while the religious organization (宗教団体 - shūkyō dantai) itself is permitted to continue to exist.

This distinction had already been hinted at by the district and high courts, but the Supreme Court's explicit recognition of it is noteworthy. At the same time, there remains considerable room for interpretation regarding what this continued existence (存続) actually entails. Likewise, opinions differ over what the dissolution order itself legally means. It is therefore still worthwhile to examine these questions carefully.

The distinction between a religious corporation and a religious organization may seem obvious in common understanding, but legally it is much less clear.

For foundations, there are general incorporated foundations and public-interest foundations, both of which possess legal personality. Religious organizations, however, do not possess legal personality. Consequently, they not only lose tax-exempt privileges but also face numerous practical disadvantages, such as being unable to maintain bank accounts.



Nevertheless, Articles 1 and 2 of the Religious Corporations Act describe the conditions under which a religious organization qualifies to become a religious corporation - for example, engaging in religious activities and possessing places of worship. The language used even suggests that a religious organization could be the holder of legal rights such as ownership.

In practice, however, religious organizations cannot be registered as legal entities, making it unlikely that they can actually serve as holders of legal rights. The theoretical question then arises: do religious organizations have any right to own property?

This resembles questions such as whether a parent-teacher association or a school reunion association can own property. While they may exercise de facto control over property, they generally do not hold legal title. By the same reasoning, a religious organization is not a legal entity but merely a private association.

Today in Japan, obtaining legal status as a religious corporation has become extremely difficult. As a result, religious leaders seeking to conduct religious activities may instead establish incorporated associations or foundations and carry out their religious work within those legal frameworks. I have in fact heard of such cases.



From now on, not only will obtaining religious corporate status be difficult, but the recent dissolution order has made clear that even after obtaining such status, there is a risk that the organization's [assets may be seized](#) if it is dissolved. Consequently, more religious groups are likely to choose not to incorporate at all. Even organizations that already possess legal personality may voluntarily dissolve their religious corporation and instead reorganize as foundations.

No one can predict the future with certainty, but this dissolution order will almost certainly prompt new developments within Japan's religious community.

The Supreme Court has clearly distinguished between religious corporations and religious organizations, stating that only the corporation - not the organization - is dissolved.

Nevertheless, there are also explanations suggesting that the religious organization itself should effectively disappear. For example, [seizing places of worship](#) used by the religious corporation prevents the religious organization from carrying out its activities. Some have even argued that the organization should change its name. More generally, many people have come to believe that the court's decision dissolved the religious organization itself.

The decision states that "because the religious organization continues to exist, there is no violation of religious freedom." Yet in practice, does the decision not aim at dissolving the religious organization as well? Such ambiguity is problematic.

To be continued. Part 2 coming soon

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Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): [Segye Ilbo](#)

On 8th July 2026, Jeong Seong-su (정성수), the religion correspondent for the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#), published an [opinion column](#) examining the implications of South Korea's newly enacted “False and Manipulated Information Eradication Act”. Although the legislation has attracted widespread attention for its potential impact on political speech and the

media, Jeong argues that one of its most significant – but less discussed – areas of influence may be the reporting of religious organizations.

His [article](#) is not primarily about the legal details of the new law. Rather, it is a reflection on the relationship between journalism, public opinion, and religious freedom in South Korea. Using the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* – in Korea known as [Unificationism](#) (통일교) – as an example, Jeong contends that religious groups have often found themselves judged in the court of public opinion before allegations against them have been fully verified. While acknowledging that religious organizations should be subject to legitimate public scrutiny and investigative reporting, he argues that journalism has an equally important responsibility to distinguish clearly between established facts and unverified suspicions.

Determining what is false / manipulated information



Under the new South Korean law, **judicial courts** ultimately determine falsity and award punitive damages. The **Korea Media and Communications Commission (KMCC)** enforces administrative fines and oversees platform compliance. However, day-to-day evaluation falls on **private tech platforms**, which must independently process user reports and moderate content using self-governance frameworks. Illustration: ChatGPT, 9th July 2026, edited.

The new legislation, which came into force on 7th July 2026, strengthens legal accountability for the dissemination of false or manipulated information. Since its passage, it has generated considerable debate within South Korea. Supporters view it as an important tool for combating fake news and protecting individuals and organizations from reputational harm. Critics, however, worry that it could have a chilling effect on freedom of expression or make journalists reluctant to pursue legitimate investigative reporting. Jeong recognizes this broader controversy but focuses his discussion on what the law may mean for religious communities.

According to the columnist, religion occupies a particularly vulnerable position within South Korean public discourse. Unlike political parties or commercial enterprises, religious

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organizations are often viewed through the lens of deeply rooted social stereotypes. Labels such as “cult”, “corrupt organization”, or “secretive religious group”, he writes, can spread rapidly through media coverage and public discussion regardless of whether they are ultimately substantiated. Once such an image becomes established, it can be extremely difficult to reverse, even if subsequent investigations or court proceedings fail to confirm the original allegations.

Jeong argues that this reflects a broader structural problem in contemporary journalism. Modern news organizations operate under intense pressure to publish stories quickly, especially in the digital era. As a result, preliminary allegations made during criminal investigations or other official inquiries are sometimes reported in a manner that gives readers the impression they have already been proven true. If prosecutors later decline to bring charges or courts eventually reach a different conclusion, those developments rarely receive the same level of media attention as the initial accusations. Although corrections or follow-up reports may eventually appear, the first impression created in the public mind often persists.

The columnist emphasizes that this imbalance can impose lasting harm on individuals and organizations alike. Even when legal proceedings ultimately vindicate those who were accused, the reputational damage may already be irreversible. He therefore views the new law as encouraging greater journalistic diligence by reinforcing the importance of careful fact-checking before publication.



Will the new South Korean law make it easier for religious organizations to guard their public image and avoid being judged in the court of public opinion? Members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification wonder. Here its logo.

As an illustration of these concerns, Jeong refers to the extensive media attention surrounding the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* during recent years. Following political and social controversies involving the *religious organization*, numerous news reports examined its alleged relationships with political figures, financial matters, and various criminal investigations. These reports generated widespread public attention and contributed significantly to public perceptions of the *movement*.

Jeong notes in his *article* that the *Family Federation* has consistently disputed many of these reports, maintaining that substantial portions were inaccurate or misleading. Regardless of whether particular allegations ultimately prove to be true or false, he argues that the *religious community* and its members have already borne the consequences of the negative public image created by the reporting. This, in his view, illustrates why stronger standards for factual verification are necessary.

At the same time, the author explicitly cautions against interpreting the new law as retroactively determining the truth or falsity of previous reporting. He stresses that each individual case must still be assessed independently through established judicial procedures. The mere fact that certain allegations were not included in a criminal indictment or did not result in prosecution does not automatically render earlier reporting false. Questions concerning the accuracy of particular reports remain matters for the courts to determine on a case-by-case basis.

For Jeong, however, the principal significance of the legislation lies elsewhere. He argues that its most important message is symbolic rather than punitive. In his reading, the law represents a societal commitment to placing greater

emphasis on the responsibility to verify facts before disseminating potentially damaging information. Rather than simply increasing legal penalties, it signals that factual accuracy should receive greater weight throughout the reporting process.

If that objective is achieved, Jeong believes several practical changes may follow. Journalists may become more cautious about using definitive language before allegations have been independently confirmed. Greater attention may be devoted to evaluating the credibility of sources and corroborating claims with objective evidence. News organizations may also become more attentive to presenting responses from those who are the subject of allegations and to conducting more thorough cross-checking before publication.

Importantly, the columnist argues that these principles should apply equally to all religious traditions rather than benefiting any single organization. Whether the subject is Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, the [Family Federation](#), or a smaller religious movement, every religious community, he writes, deserves to be evaluated on the basis of verified facts rather than rumor or social prejudice. Public criticism remains entirely appropriate where misconduct is supported by evidence, but criticism founded on speculation or unverified accusations should not be confused with responsible journalism.

Jeong concludes by placing this discussion within the broader framework of religious liberty. Freedom of religion, he argues, encompasses more than the right to worship or organize religious activities. It also includes protection against having a religious community's reputation unfairly damaged through false statements or manipulated information. In his view, safeguarding communities against demonstrably false claims complements rather than contradicts democratic values such as freedom of expression.

At the same time, the columnist acknowledges that the new law will not eliminate every difficulty surrounding media reporting or public debate. Freedom of the press and reporting in the public interest remain essential principles that should continue to be protected. Nevertheless, he argues that the legislation conveys an important reminder: regardless of whether the subject is a politician, a business, a religious organization, or an ordinary citizen, no one should be publicly condemned solely on the basis of allegations that have not been established as fact. By encouraging more rigorous verification before publication, Jeong suggests, the law may ultimately contribute to a fairer and more responsible media environment.

Text: *Knut Holdhus, editor*

Featured image above: *New standards for reporting in South Korea. Illustration: ChatGPT, 9th July 2026*

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