

FOREF: Media - When the Label Becomes the Verdict

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MEDIA - When the Label Becomes the Verdict

A religious minority does not have to commit a crime to become suspect. Sometimes, it only needs a label.

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Shuya Fukumoto (福本修也), counsel for the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, leaving the Tokyo High Court on 4 March 2026 after the court upheld the dissolution order. He told reporters the ruling was incompatible with a state under the rule of law and said the organisation would file a special appeal to the Supreme Court.

Call a community a *cult*. Describe its leader as a *guru*. Replace religious conviction with *brainwashing*, evangelism with *recruitment*, commitment with *psychological dependence*. Repeat these words often enough and something begins to change.

The burden of proof shifts.

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Instead of accusers having to substantiate their allegations, the religious community is increasingly expected to prove its innocence. Members defending their faith are dismissed

as indoctrinated, while hostile former members may be treated as inherently more credible. Employers become nervous. Banks reconsider accounts. Politicians take notice. Public authorities begin asking questions.

Eventually, the label can become the verdict.

This was the disturbing theme running through the **Central Europe Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief (CEFoRB)** webinar on 3 September, *“From Misunderstanding to Dialogue: Practical Strategies for Media Narratives of Religions.”*



CEFoRB — Austria · Czechia · Slovakia · Hungary. Steering Council chaired by Willy Fautré (HRWF), with InterBelief Relief and FOREF Europe.

CEFoRB is a grassroots-led regional initiative focusing on Austria, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary. Its purpose is to bridge the often considerable gap between the human-rights commitments European democracies have made and the reality experienced by religious and belief communities on the ground. It combines country-specific evidence, dialogue with policymakers and civil society, concrete recommendations and follow-up. (ceforb.org -)

A key driving force is **Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)**, the Brussels-based organization led by Willy Fautré, which provides grassroots leadership and methodological support. InterBelief Relief coordinates regional implementation, while FOREF Europe is a strategic partner. (ceforb.org -)

The September webinar brought together journalists, lawyers, human-rights advocates and representatives of religious minorities from across Europe and beyond. But this was not another exercise in complaining about “media bias.”

It confronted a much more consequential question:

What happens when a hostile media narrative moves from the newspaper into society—and from society into public policy?

And equally important: **What can be done before that happens?**

How to manufacture a “cult”

Zoehrer opened one of the most revealing windows into the problem.

He had recently revisited articles published by the Austrian news magazine *profil* in **1978 and 1979** about Scientology, the Unification Church, Transcendental Meditation and the Children of God. What struck him was not how dated the articles seemed—but how familiar they sounded. Almost half a century later, many of the same mechanisms remain recognizable.

His observations can be distilled into **five remarkably persistent techniques**.

First, label before investigating. Place radically different religious movements under the emotionally charged category *cult* or *sect*. Once the label sticks, everything that follows is interpreted through it.

Second, divide and conquer. Set established religions against newcomers, parents against adult children, “respectable” believers against supposedly dangerous minorities. The unfamiliar faith becomes the threatening outsider.

Third, choose your experts carefully. Give prominence to anti-cult activists, hostile former members or psychologists willing to diagnose communities from a distance, while credible independent voices—and frequently the believers themselves—remain marginal.

Fourth, replace religion with psychology. Spiritual searching becomes *brainwashing*. Commitment becomes *dependency*. Missionary activity becomes *manipulation*. Religious devotion is no longer understood as a possible exercise of conscience but as evidence that conscience has been taken away.

Finally, deny believers their agency. Adults joining an unconventional religion are subtly portrayed as incapable of making an informed decision. If they defend their faith, their defence itself may be interpreted as further evidence of indoctrination.

That is the trap.

Once believers are presumed incapable of speaking for themselves, almost anything can be justified “for their own good.”

And history demonstrates where that logic can lead.

Japan: when “deprogramming” became kidnapping

Sam Nagasaka joined the discussion from Tokyo. He was not speaking theoretically.

Nagasaka was himself a victim of religious kidnapping and attempted forced de-conversion.



Tokyo District Court, Kasumigaseki. On 25 March 2025 this court ordered the dissolution of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification as a religious corporation—the first step from media stigma to a binding legal verdict.

Beginning in the late 1960s, thousands of Japanese Unificationists were reportedly abducted, confined and subjected to coercive efforts to make them renounce their faith. The church and victims’ organizations estimate that approximately **4,300 members** underwent such abduction and attempted forced de-conversion over several decades.

The logic behind “deprogramming” illustrates the danger of language. If a believer has been *brainwashed*, kidnapping can be rebranded as *rescue*. Confinement becomes *protection*. Coercing an adult to renounce his religion becomes *deprogramming*.

Words prepare the moral ground.

The most notorious case was **Toru Goto**, who was confined for **12 years and five months** before escaping in 2008, severely emaciated. **In 2015, Japan’s Supreme Court finalized a civil judgment awarding him damages against those responsible for his confinement.**



Toru Goto after 4,536 days of confinement for his faith. Tokyo, 2008. Supreme Court of Japan awarded damages in 2015. Photo: Japan Victims’ Association Against Religious Kidnapping and Forced Conversion / court record.

Yet the Japanese story did not end when forced de-conversion largely subsided.

After the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by a man who blamed the Unification Church for his family's financial difficulties, the Family Federation became the focus of an unprecedented political and media storm. In **March 2025**, the Tokyo District Court ordered the dissolution of the church as a religious corporation. In **March 2026**, the Tokyo High Court upheld that decision, setting court-supervised liquidation in motion.

These events belong to different periods and involve different actors and legal questions. They should not be simplistically conflated.

But the broader lesson should make Europe uncomfortable:

Social stigma does not always remain social. Given enough time and political momentum, it can acquire institutional and legal consequences.

When the presumption of innocence disappears

This is where Michael Langhans, Executive Director of FOREF Germany, introduced another crucial dimension.

He suggested abandoning the word *cult* in favour of “**socially stigmatized groups.**” The change turns the telescope around. Instead of immediately asking, *What is wrong with this cult?*, we ask: **Who applied the stigma? On what evidence? And with what consequences?**

Langhans described what he sees as a dangerous **reversal of the burden of proof**. Once a community has been successfully stigmatized, it can find itself expected to demonstrate that it is *not* manipulative, fraudulent or dangerous.

That mentality is profoundly at odds with one of the foundations of democratic justice: **the presumption of innocence.**

Of course, journalism is not a criminal court. But responsible journalism shares something fundamental with the rule of law: allegations require evidence; serious charges demand verification; the accused must be allowed to answer; and individuals should be held responsible for their own actions rather than entire communities being subjected to collective guilt.



From left: Michael Langhans (FOREF Germany, Peter Zoehrer (FOREF Europe), and Ján Figel’ (former EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief). National Council of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava...

The media therefore play a pivotal role.

A free press must investigate genuine wrongdoing—including wrongdoing inside religious organizations. But when journalists abandon evidence for labels, repeat allegations without adequate scrutiny or systematically deny the accused a meaningful opportunity to respond, the watchdog risks becoming part of the mechanism of stigmatization.

From Prague to Budapest: warning signs

Kristýna Tomanová of InterBelief Relief demonstrated that this is not merely an Asian problem.

IBR’s Czech monitoring identified an increase in hateful media articles targeting new religious movements from **27 in 2016 to 524 in 2025**. Tomanová also presented cases in which religious affiliation and hostile media exposure were followed by devastating professional consequences.

Attila Miklovicz showed how in Hungary *cult* and *sect* can become political “**empty signifiers**”—labels filled with whatever meaning serves the political conflict of the moment.

His response was constructive: create a **CEFoRB Religious Literacy Toolkit for Media Professionals**, including neutral terminology, credible experts, reliable information about religious communities and practical guidelines for responsible reporting.

The purpose is not to tell journalists what to write. It is to make accurate journalism easier than lazy stereotyping.

Willy Fautré: insist on the right of reply

Willy Fautré moved the discussion decisively from diagnosis to action.



Press Club Brussels Europe, 29 June 2026. Human Rights Without Frontiers briefing, “Japan: The Hidden Story Behind the Eradication of a Religion (Photo: FOREF)

One of his strongest recommendations concerned a basic principle of journalism too often neglected when unpopular minorities are involved: **the right of reply**.

When a religious community is seriously misrepresented, Fautré argued, it should not simply complain internally or post an angry response on social media. It should answer professionally—and, where appropriate, involve a lawyer experienced in freedom of expression and media law.

A carefully formulated legal letter cannot simply be brushed aside like an emotional protest. Its purpose is not to intimidate journalists but to **re-establish facts and demand accountability**.

Fautré’s larger strategy is even more important: **do not wait for the attack**.

HRWF has developed databases of journalists covering religious issues—including some **400 contacts in France**—and regularly provides them with reliable information. The objective is not merely to rebut one hostile article, but to build long-term relationships and establish HRWF as a credible independent source on human rights and religious freedom.

He also stressed language. Religious minorities often speak to secular journalists in theological terminology that means little outside their own communities. Fautré

deliberately translates religious concerns into the language of **human rights, conscience, freedom of expression and equal citizenship**.

Religious communities cannot complain that society misunderstands them while continuing to speak primarily to themselves.

Build firebreaks before the fire

Perhaps the webinar’s most compelling metaphor was **building firebreaks before the fire**.

Participants repeatedly described communities as being one step behind—responding after a hostile documentary, political intervention or public scandal rather than developing relationships beforehand.

Nagasaka compared this to earthquake preparedness in Japan: after a disaster everyone understands the need to prepare, but as the years pass, vigilance fades.

The same happens with institutional memory.

Firebreaks mean relationships with journalists **before** the damaging headline; lawyers before the lawsuit; academics before questionable experts dominate the discussion; government officials before a political crisis; and other faith communities before a minority finds itself isolated.

The breakout discussions also revealed another problem: members of stigmatized religious minorities are often deeply distrustful of journalists because they have already been “burned.” That reaction is understandable—but potentially disastrous. Retreat reinforces isolation.

For that reason, participants proposed something highly practical: **a dedicated media-competence training webinar for representatives of religious minority communities**.

Such training could teach spokespersons and members how to deal with difficult journalists, prepare for interviews, formulate concise responses, distinguish legitimate criticism from misrepresentation, exercise the right of reply, use human-rights language, build media contacts and communicate effectively through both traditional and social media.

Fautré explicitly suggested that future CEFoRB activities include such training sessions so minority communities can learn how to interact confidently with journalists and the outside world.

That would turn the September webinar’s diagnosis into practical capacity building.

Preventing a copycat effect

This is increasingly urgent.

Developments surrounding the Family Federation in Japan and religious minorities such as **Shincheonji in South Korea** do not remain confined to Asia. Narratives travel. Anti-cult terminology travels. Activist networks communicate internationally. Political and regulatory ideas cross borders.

CEFoRB should therefore function as an **early-warning mechanism against a copycat effect in Europe**.

Not by defending any particular theology. Not by shielding religious organizations from legitimate scrutiny. And certainly not by asking journalists to ignore genuine abuse.

Rather, by insisting that **allegations never become collective guilt, suspicion never replace evidence, and stigmatizing labels never reverse the burden of proof**.



Willy Fautré, Eva Miškelová, Hans Noot, Peter Zoehrer, and David Burrowes enjoy a sightseeing moment together after the CEForb conference, with Bratislava Castle in the background.

David Burrowes, former UK Member of Parliament, captured CEFoRB's purpose well: bridging the gap between international human-rights commitments and the lived reality of minorities. He called for stronger monitoring, effective rights of reply, the religious-literacy

toolkit, better documentation and a FoRB resource hub connecting expertise across borders.

Hans Noot had expressed the principle underlying everything at the beginning:

No religion or religious minority should have to prove that it deserves its fundamental rights.

Press freedom and religious freedom are not enemies. On the contrary, they stand or fall together. Both depend on the democratic disciplines of **evidence before accusation, presumption of innocence, individual responsibility instead of collective guilt, the right of reply, proportionality and respect for human dignity.**

Europe still has the opportunity to learn from what happened elsewhere.

Because once prejudice becomes policy, correcting yesterday's newspaper headline is no longer enough.

The time to defend religious freedom is not after the fire has consumed the house. It is while we still have time to build the firebreaks.

CEFoRB's task is to help build them.

#FoRB #CEFoRB #ReligiousFreedom #MediaEthics #PresumptionOfInnocence
#RightOfReply #Japan #ToruGoto

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