

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: FoRB: Japan's Believers Denied Most Basic Human Right

Knut Holdhus
January 23, 2025



Marco Respinti speaking in Tokyo December 8, 2024

In light of gross violations in Japan: FoRB - **Freedom of Religion or Belief** - a most vital human right for a healthy society, spelt out to Tokyo audience

Religious liberty extends beyond the mere freedom to believe or not believe. It encompasses the right to live in accordance with one's beliefs or lack thereof. However, Japan continues to restrict religious freedom, as evidenced by the case of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

BITTER WINTER [Bitter Winter](#), the leading international online magazine for religious freedom and human rights, featured on 26th December 2024 the first of four articles by Marco Respinti, the magazine's Director-in-Charge. The articles were based on a series of lectures he gave in four Japanese cities - Hiroshima, Tokyo, Nagoya, and Fukuoka - from 6th to 10th December 2024, organized by the Japan Committee of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF).



Marco Respinti speaking at a conference in Tokyo, Japan December 8, 2024

The first [Bitter Winter](#) article carried the headline "[Made in Japan: No FoRB for the Family Federation. 1. Denying the First Political Human Right](#)"

The lecture tour highlighted a pressing issue: the ongoing challenges to religious liberty in Japan. Respinti pointed out that he had gained valuable insights into this critical matter through discussions with esteemed colleagues, lawyers, activists, and specialists. As a foreign guest, he did not claim the authority to judge Japan, but as a global citizen, he advocated for the universal importance of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). This right is foundational to healthy societies and genuine democracies.

Respinti emphasized,

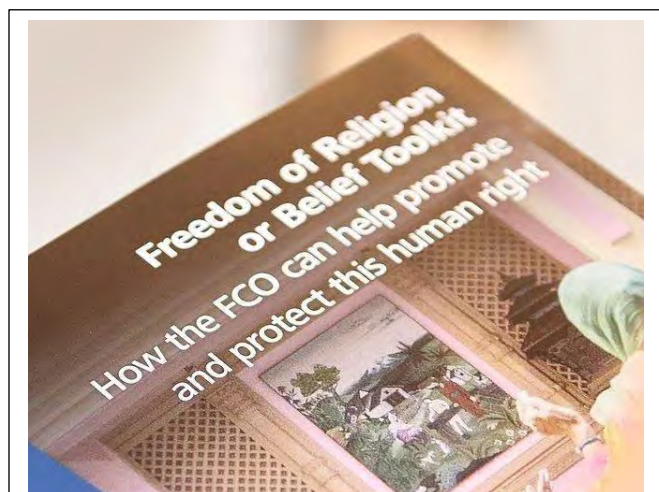
"A pivotal element of a healthy society and a distinctive character of a true democracy is freedom of religion, belief, or creed for everyone. International treaties call it 'FoRB': freedom of religion 'or belief'. This is actually important. Practices that are not technically 'religion' are still manifestations of 'belief' and are thus

protected by FoRB."

The universality of FoRB

FoRB is recognized as a fundamental human right by international treaties. It encompasses not only traditional religious practices but also non-religious beliefs, ensuring protection for all forms of

conscience. In fact, FoRB is the first "political" human right, second only to the right to life. Without life, human rights have no bearer; without FoRB, individuals lack the freedom to explore and express their most profound convictions.



Increased focus on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Here, the cover of a booklet produced by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in relation to a seminar in October 2016

This right involves the freedom to engage with life's ultimate questions, such as the existence of a higher power or cosmic principle. When people can freely address these existential queries, they achieve true liberty. Moreover, FoRB is not confined to private belief but extends to the public sphere, influencing how individuals organize their lives and contribute to society.

Marco Respinti emphasized that FoRB also underpins other essential rights, such as freedom of expression, association, and education. These freedoms derive from the ability to live authentically according to one's beliefs. Thus, FoRB is not only the cornerstone of individual dignity but also a crucial element of societal health and democratic integrity.

The far-reaching impact of FoRB

Throughout history, the presence or absence of FoRB has shaped civilizations. According to Respinti, societies rise or fall based on their ability to uphold this right. When even one individual's FoRB is restricted, the entire society suffers. This demonstrates that religious liberty is not a niche concern but a universal imperative.

Today, FoRB is among the most threatened human rights worldwide. In many countries, authoritarian regimes suppress religious freedom, destabilizing communities with hatred, ideology, and power struggles. However, even democracies are not immune to this problem. When democratic nations fail to safeguard FoRB, they become incomplete democracies in need of reform. These violations can manifest through fiscal policies, administrative actions, cultural biases, and organizational restrictions.

The case of Japan



Shinzo Abe in March 2022, few months before he was assassinated

Unfortunately, Japan is not exempt from these challenges. [Bitter Winter](#), an online magazine dedicated to religious freedom, has documented significant threats to FoRB in Japan, particularly following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三, 1954 - 2022) on 8th July 2022, in Kashihara, Nara Prefecture.

Abe, who served as Japan's Prime Minister from 2006 - 2007 and 2012 - 2020, was tragically killed by Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也), a former member of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. This event ignited a public controversy surrounding the [Family Federation](#).

Respinti mentions how the fallout from Abe's assassination has brought increased scrutiny to the [Family Federation](#). Activists campaigning against the [religious organization](#) accuse it of financial exploitation and unethical practices, leading to government interventions that have had significant implications for FoRB in Japan. While the government's actions are ostensibly

aimed at protecting citizens, the same actions raise concerns about the broader erosion of religious freedom.

A call for vigilance

Japan's vibrant democracy and remarkable cultural heritage make the current threats to FoRB particularly troubling. A true democracy must protect the rights of all citizens, ensuring that no individual or group is denied the freedom to live according to their beliefs. When FoRB is diminished, it jeopardizes not only individual rights but the very foundation of democratic society.

Marco Respinti emphasizes that religious liberty should concern everyone. It is not merely an abstract principle but a tangible safeguard of human dignity and societal harmony. As Japan grapples with these challenges, it is imperative for policymakers, civil society, and the international community to uphold FoRB as a universal and inviolable right.

Conclusion

FoRB is the bedrock of all human rights and the hallmark of a thriving democracy. Its preservation requires vigilance and commitment from individuals and institutions alike. As we reflect on the situation in Japan, let us reaffirm our dedication to ensuring that religious liberty is not just an ideal but a lived reality for all. The stakes are high, but the rewards - peace, justice, and freedom - are immeasurable.

Text: Knut Holdhus

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BITTER WINTER

A MAGAZINE ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Made in Japan: No FoRB for the Family Federation. 1. Denying the First Political Human Right

12/26/2024 MARCO RESPINTI

A+ | A-

Religious liberty is not only the freedom of believing or non-believing, but that of living one's life according to one's belief or non-belief. Yet, Japan curtails it. The case of the Family Federation.

by *Marco Respinti**

Article 1 of 4.



Marco Respinti speaking in Tokyo, December 8, 2024.

"Under the title "The Crisis of Religious Freedom and Democracy in Japan," this paper was presented in different versions at conferences organized and hosted in December 2024 by the [International Coalition for Religious Freedom \(ICRF\) Japan Committee](#) and constituting a lecture tour in Japan that brought the author to speak at [Bunka Koryu Kaika](#), in Hiroshima, on the 6th, at [Tokyo City Vision Center](#) in Tokyo Kyobashi on the 8th, at [Niterra Civic Hall](#) in Nagoya, on the 9th, and at [ACROS Fukuoka](#), in Fukuoka, on the 10th.

It is with sincere gratitude that I accepted the flattering invitation from the Japan Committee of the [International Coalition for Religious Freedom \(ICRF\)](#) to visit again your beautiful country. On July 22, 2024, I had the honor of delivering a few remarks before the [General Assembly of the Japanese Committee of ICRF](#), which gathered on the theme "Religious Freedom and Future of Democracy." And I had also earlier opportunities to visit beautiful Japan. Now the ICRF has requested me to conduct a lecture tour that is bringing your servant in four different venues of four Japanese cities, again under the general title "The Crisis of Religious Freedom and Democracy in Japan." It is a clear sign that the problem is still there. For me, it is a wonderful opportunity to learn more about Japan and religious liberty from colleagues, friends, lawyers, specialists, activists, and other speakers who are addressing the same topic during these days.

Let me immediately express my deep sympathy and admiration for Japan, its history, and its culture. I also admire Japan as a vibrant democracy. It is a country that has suffered much, including unprecedented and unique horrors from which other nations have been, thanks to God, spared.

I am a foreign citizen and cannot speak your language. I am a guest and of course I have no title to judge Japan—nor is it my intention to do it. But one thing I know for sure, and this is universal. A pivotal element of a healthy society and a distinctive character of a true democracy is freedom of religion, belief, or creed for everyone. International treaties call it "FoRB": freedom of religion "or belief." This is actually important. Practices that are not technically "religion" are still manifestations of "belief" and are thus protected by FoRB. I want to push this statement even farther: FoRB for everyone is the first "political" human right, immediately following the right to life of all human beings.

Human beings are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Life is the first, because, without it, there are no human beings. The second is the right to freely address the most important question of life. It is the question

regarding the existence, or non-existence, of God, a Supreme Being, an Ordinating Principle, an Ultimate Cosmic Force, or whatever name you may give to it. If and when human beings are free to address that decisive and final question, they are indeed truly and ultimately free.

Religious liberty is not only the freedom of believing or non-believing, but that of living one's life according to one's belief or non-belief. Belief and non-belief directly concern the organization of life, not only in the private sphere (where no one can really curtail that right), but in the public sphere as well. This is why I define FoRB for everyone not only as the fundamental right of human beings, but also as their first political right. It deals in fact with the "polis," πόλις, the ancient Greek term meaning the "public sphere," from which the word "politics" derives.



Moses Jacob Ezekiel (1844–1917), Statue of Religious Liberty, Philadelphia. Credits.

Furthermore, from FoRB come all other human rights. In fact, if and when human beings are left free to address that ultimate, decisive, intimate as well as public question, they can live their life accordingly and enjoy all its implications in terms of liberties and rights. Freedom of expression, association, and education are important, intimate, and public rights but in an ideal list or hierarchy they come after FoRB, and it can even be argued that they derive from it.

FoRB should then concern every human being, every protagonist of a healthy society, and every true builder of democracy. Directly or indirectly, FoRB is always at stake everywhere. It has been so throughout human history, directly or indirectly. Societies and empires, nations and political communities have been built or destroyed, came and went in time, because of the direct or indirect implications that FoRB has with the organization of the public lives of people and with all other human rights.

Let me repeat it clearly, FoRB should always concern every human being—not at the individual level only, but for society as a whole and for all humanity. If and when even one single human being does not fully enjoy FoRB, then all human beings suffer the consequences of this loss. This demonstrates that the question of religious liberty is the most serious question of them all.

Scholars have identified FoRB as the **most threatened human right** in the world today.

FoRB is threatened and persecuted in too many different countries, where social cohesion, peace, and harmony are undermined by hatred, ideology, and lust for power. We call those countries non-democratic regimes. We understand democracy, whatever institutional form a country's political community may have, not as yet another regime, but as the good exercise of power by authorities who aim at the common good and the participation of the people to the life of the "polis."

Unfortunately, though, even democratic countries may and do suffer the diminishment of the right of their citizens to FoRB. Persecutions may manifest themselves differently: for example, at the fiscal, administrative, organizational, and cultural levels. Those democracies that curtail or deny FoRB are then incomplete democracies. They need substantial reform.



The United Nations against violations of religious liberty. AI elaboration from posters of the 1960s.

We understand that also in Japan FoRB is today diminished or threatened.

"Bitter Winter," the online daily magazine specialized in religious liberty that I have the honor to serve as Director-in-Charge, a capacity that brings me in this country as a concerned observer to learn and discuss the topic, has covered the difficulties of FoRB in Japan in the last few years. They greatly increased after the assassination of Abe Shinzō (安倍晋三, 1954–2022)—in Asian names, the family name comes first—in the city of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture, Japan, on July 8, 2022.

Former Prime Minister of Japan, from 2006 to 2007 and from 2012 to 2020, Abe was shot dead by Yamagami Tetsuya (山上徹也), 41, a former member of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. Following that tragic event, a controversy started over the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, addressed to simply as "Family Federation" (FF) from now on in this speech.



TAGGED WITH: HUMAN RIGHTS, JAPAN, RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, UNIFICATION CHURCH



Marco Respinti

Marco Respinti is an Italian professional journalist, member of the [International Federation of Journalists \(IFJ\)](#), author, translator, and lecturer. He has contributed and contributes to several journals and magazines both in print and online, both in Italy and abroad. Author of books and chapter in books, he has translated and/or edited works by, among others, Edmund Burke, Charles Dickens, T.S. Eliot, Russell Kirk, J.R.R. Tolkien, Régine Pernoud and Gustave Thibon. A Senior fellow at the [Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal](#) (a non-partisan, non-profit U.S. educational organization based in Mecosta, Michigan), he is also a founding member as well as a member of the Advisory Council of the [Center for European Renewal](#) (a non-profit, non-partisan pan-European educational organization based in The Hague, The Netherlands). A member of the Advisory Council of the [European Federation for Freedom of Belief](#), in December 2022, the [Universal Peace Federation](#) bestowed on him, among others, the title of Ambassador of Peace. From February 2018 to December 2022, he has been the Editor-in-Chief of [International Family News](#). He serves as Director-in-Charge of the academic publication [The Journal of CESNUR](#) and [Bitter Winter: A Magazine on Religious Liberty and Human Rights](#).

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The Global Religious Liberty Community Gathers to Denounce Religious Liberty Crisis in Japan

As the year comes to an end, leaders from the academic, human rights, and religious activism's world come together to express concern for what is happening in the Asian country.



Made in Japan: No FoRB for the Family Federation. 4. Weaponizing Non-Existing Crimes

Defending the rights of Japanese citizens is a duty of Japan's democratic government. It is not happening in the case of the Family Federation and other religious minorities.

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