

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: M. Introvigne on Civil Lawsuits as Weapons Against Religion

Knut Holdhus
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Dr. Massimo Introvigne, an Italian scholar specializing in the sociology of religion. He founded and serves as managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions, an international network of academics focused on the study of new religious movements. He has authored around 70 books and over 100 scholarly articles in this field. Here, speaking in Geneva, Switzerland 16th June 2025. Screenshot from video by UPF.



To dissolve the Family Federation, Japan relied on hostile legal activism, civil lawsuits, the rebranding of donations as "spiritual sales", and an abrupt reinterpretation of the law

In recent years, few legal controversies in Japan have attracted as much international attention as the government's effort to dissolve the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), previously known as the [Unification Church](#). The issue has generated intense debate not only within Japan but also among scholars of religion, legal experts, and advocates of human rights and religious liberty around the world. At the center of this debate lies the question: can a religious organization be dissolved on the basis of civil judgments and allegations of manipulative fundraising, even in the absence of criminal convictions against the organization itself?



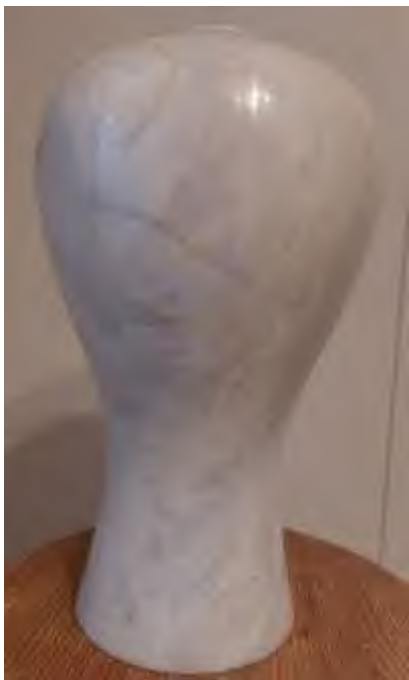
In an [article](#) published 28th March 2026, in [Bitter Winter](#), the leading global online magazine on religious liberty and human rights, sociologist of religion Dr. Massimo Introvigne examines the Tokyo High Court's reasoning in [affirming the dissolution](#) of the [Family Federation](#). His discussion focuses especially on accusations involving so-called "spiritual sales" and excessive donations, which Japanese courts and critics have presented as evidence that the [organization](#) psychologically manipulated followers into giving large sums of money.

See also [The Return of Labeling Faith as Manipulation](#)

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The [article](#) explores how the High Court in line with a negative narrative repeated for decades by hostile lawyers, portrayed the [Family Federation](#) as an organization driven less by spiritual

concerns than by financial interests. According to the court's interpretation, believers were allegedly pressured into making donations or purchasing religiously associated objects at inflated prices because they feared spiritual misfortune or hoped for blessings and protection.



Marble vase, one of the products sold by Happy World Co.

Activist critics even coined a special expression - "spiritual sales" - to describe these practices. Originally, the term referred to the sale of items such as seals, miniature pagodas, marble vases, and similar objects said to possess spiritual significance. Over time, however, a network of hostile activist lawyers expanded the concept to include donations themselves, even when no physical goods were involved.

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Dr. Introvigne notes that the court relied in part on several criminal cases from the late 2000s involving individuals connected to businesses operated by members of the faith then called the [Unification Church](#). One of the most important of these cases involved Shinsei Ltd., where executives received suspended prison sentences in addition to financial penalties. Yet the High Court did not formally treat these convictions as direct grounds for dissolving the [religious organization](#) itself. Instead, the judgments were presented more as background material intended to create an image of the [movement](#) as socially harmful.

This distinction is significant. The [article](#) stresses that crimes committed by individual members of a religious organization do not justify dissolving the organization as a whole. Dr. Introvigne argues that if such logic were applied consistently, many major religious institutions would face dissolution whenever some members committed criminal acts. He uses the example of abuse scandals involving Catholic clergy to illustrate the point that wrongdoing by individuals cannot automatically be equated with institutional criminality.

A substantial portion of the High Court's argument focused on the activities of a company known eventually as Happy World Co., Ltd. Founded by followers of the [Unification Church](#) in the early 1970s, the company sold products including ginseng, seals, marble items, and decorative religious objects. Although criminal charges against company executives had earlier resulted in acquittals in the Kobe District Court, the High Court nevertheless treated Happy World as a central actor in the phenomenon of "spiritual sales".



Former prime minister Fumio Kishida delivering a speech at the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26) 2nd Nov. 2, 2021

Dr. Introvigne acknowledges that some of Happy World's marketing methods were aggressive and objectionable. Even scholars associated with the [Family Federation](#) have admitted this point. However, he also emphasizes that the [religious organization](#) attempted to restrict such practices decades ago. As early as 1987, according to the court's own findings, Happy World informed Japanese authorities and consumer protection agencies that it had prohibited sales methods likely to create misunderstandings connected to "spiritual sales". Eventually, the company ceased operating altogether.

The [article](#) argues that these historical incidents, many of which occurred more than twenty years ago, were revived primarily to cast the [Family Federation](#) in a negative light rather than to establish present misconduct. The actual legal basis for dissolution, Dr. Introvigne explains, rested mainly on twenty-six civil court judgments and numerous settlements reached either in court or outside of court.

This raises what the author sees as the central legal problem in the case: whether civil decisions alone are sufficient grounds for

dissolving a religious organization. Historically, Japanese legal interpretation answered this question negatively. Previous governments repeatedly maintained that criminal convictions against the religious corporation itself were necessary before dissolution could be pursued.

The [article](#) recounts that in both 1994 and 1998, Japanese authorities resisted demands from "anti-cult" lawyers seeking dissolution of the [Unification Church](#). In 2012, those lawyers even sued the government

for refusing to initiate dissolution proceedings, but the government prevailed. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) in 2022, however, the political atmosphere changed dramatically. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (岸田文雄) initially stated that dissolution would not be legally possible without criminal convictions against the [religious organization](#). Yet within a day, he reversed his position and declared that civil judgments could provide adequate grounds.

According to Dr. Introvigne, the High Court attempted to justify this shift by referring to a 2025 Supreme Court ruling concerning a fine imposed on [Family Federation](#) president Tomihiro Tanaka (田中富広) for failing to fully answer questions from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. In that decision, the Supreme Court indicated that civil torts could indeed support dissolution proceedings against a religious organization.

To be continued. Part 2 coming soon

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The large Japanese news agency [Kyodo News](#) reported on 28th May 2026 on a new controversy that has emerged around the Supreme Court proceedings concerning the dissolution order against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#),

formerly known as the [Unification Church](#). The issue centers on Supreme Court Justice Masami Okino (沖野眞己), whose prior public comments about the [religious organization](#) became the basis for a motion seeking her disqualification from the case. On 27th May, however, the *First Petty Bench* of the Supreme Court rejected that motion, stating that the circumstances cited by the [religious organization](#) “cannot be regarded as impairing the fairness of the trial.”

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The dispute arises in the broader context of one of the most consequential religious freedom cases in postwar Japan. In March 2026, the *Tokyo High Court* upheld a court order dissolving the [Family Federation](#) as a religious corporation, citing allegations long advocated by a network of hostile activist lawyers. Several of those lawyers were appointed as advisors to the government, which built their dissolution case against the [Family Federation](#) on “harms” connected to large-scale donations and so-called “spiritual sales” practices.

As a last resort, the [religious organization](#) subsequently filed a special appeal with the Supreme Court, making the case a major test of the balance between state authority, and constitutional guarantees of religious liberty.

Concerns about judicial impartiality intensified after an article published on 22nd May by the Japanese online magazine BEST TIMES highlighted Justice Okino’s participation in a July 2024 seminar organized by the *Japan Federation of Bar Associations*. The seminar focused on “spiritual sales” issues and included lawyers associated with the *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales*, a group long critical of the [Family Federation](#).

According to the [religious organization](#)’s petition, Okino made remarks utterly condemning the [Federation](#) during the seminar suggesting that the Federation’s missionary activities themselves posed serious problems. She reportedly stated that there were “similarities with multi-level marketing schemes”. Critics of her involvement argue that such statements demonstrate a prejudgment of issues directly connected to the pending appeal.

The BEST TIMES article, written by political philosopher and commentator Masaki Nakamasa (仲正 昌樹), portrayed the situation as a profound threat to judicial neutrality and religious freedom in Japan. The article argued that Okino’s comments appeared to go beyond criticism of fundraising practices and instead treated the mere propagation of the [Family Federation](#)’s doctrine as inherently problematic.



AI-illustration of Justice Masami Okino (沖野眞己). Image: Grok xAI, 22nd May 2026



Professor Masaki Nakamasa (仲正 昌樹). Photo (Dec. 2025): [Sekai Nippo](#)



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nakamasa characterized this as incompatible with the principles of a state governed by the rule of law and questioned why the justice had not voluntarily withdrawn from the proceedings.

Against this backdrop, the Supreme Court's rejection of the recusal motion was brief and categorical. The *First Petty Bench* concluded that the circumstances raised by the [Family Federation](#) were insufficient to establish that Justice Okino's participation would compromise the fairness of the proceedings. The decision effectively allows her to remain involved in deliberations on the [organization's](#) special appeal.



Attorney Nobuya Fukumoto, here speaking at a press conference in Tokyo 8th September 2023. Screenshot from live transmission by [FFWPU](#)

The [Family Federation's](#) legal team reacted sharply. In a statement released on 28th May, Attorney Nobuya Fukumoto (福本修也) of [Fukumoto Law Office](#) stated:

“On 27th May 2026, the *First Petty Bench* of the Supreme Court rejected the motion to disqualify Justice Masami Okino (沖野眞巳). The stated reason for the rejection was that ‘the circumstances cited in this motion cannot be regarded as impairing the fairness of the trial.’ We cannot accept this

decision at all.”

For supporters of the [Family Federation](#), the issue has become symbolic of what they see as institutional prejudice against the [religious organization](#) in the aftermath of the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) in 2022, which triggered an intense wave of persecution of the [religious organization](#).

The organized opposition to what until 2015 In Japan was called the [Unification Church](#), can be traced back to the 1970's when members helped conservative candidates defeat leftwing politicians in local and national elections. After parties on the left of the political scale had suffered a series of such election losses, leftwing lawyers formed what became *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* in order to have the [Unification Church](#) – now the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) – dissolved by means of systematic lawfare.

Justice Okino herself is a prominent civil law scholar who served at the University of Tokyo and became the first female dean of its law faculty before being appointed to the Supreme Court by the former administration of Shigeru Ishiba (石破 茂) in July 2025. Her academic reputation and public comments have now placed her at the center of a legal and political battle with implications extending well beyond a single religious organization.

As the Supreme Court moves forward with the [Family Federation's](#) final appeal, the debate over judicial neutrality, freedom of religion, and the role of courts in politically charged cases is likely to intensify further.

See also [Supreme Court Justice with Hostile Views](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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The Tokyo High Court Unification Church Decision. 3. “Spiritual Sales” and Excessive Donations

by Massimo Introvigne | Mar 28, 2026 | [Op-eds Global](#)

Ultimately, the reason for the dissolution was the alleged manipulation of donors. Is there really enough evidence that it happened?

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 3 of 6. Read [article 1](#) and [article 2](#).



“Spiritual sales”: some of the items Japanese members of the Unification Church (rather than the Church itself) were accused of selling at excessive prices, claiming they would bring good luck.

The High Court decision affirming the dissolution of the Unification Church as a religious organization describes it as a profit-driven enterprise that uses psychological manipulation. The court argues that this manipulation leaves victims in a position where they are compelled to donate large sums of money, either directly or by purchasing artifacts such as seals, miniature pagodas, and other items at prices far exceeding their actual worth. Opponents called these “spiritual sales,” although later they extended the term to include donations where no physical objects were sold.

First, the Court references three criminal rulings from 2007 to 2009 involving executives and salespersons of companies that sold seals and other items. It highlights the decision regarding Shinsei Ltd., which was the only case to impose, in year and six months for the sales manager, both with a four-year probation period.

Importantly, these individual believers’ criminal convictions are not taken into account when assessing grounds for dissolution. The judgment merely references these cases as context, possibly to imply that the Church is “anti-social,” though this is not explicitly stated. Clearly, not all crimes committed by members of a religious organization can justify dissolving the entire organization. Otherwise, cases involving pedophile priests should be grounds to dissolve the Roman Catholic Church.

Furthermore, the court extensively discusses the activities of a company founded in 1971 by Unification Church followers as Kosei Shoji Co., Ltd., which later renamed itself Sekai no Shiawase Co., Ltd., and eventually became Happy World Co., Ltd. (“Happy World”). Its business involved selling ginseng products, marble vases, pagodas, and seals. Although it acknowledges that in 1977 the Kobe District Court acquitted its director and other executives of all criminal charges filed against them, the High Court identifies the company as the main culprit in the “spiritual sales.”

Happy World indeed engaged in aggressive and objectionable practices to sell its products. This is also acknowledged by scholars who are members of the Unification Church, such as Michael L. Mickler in his book “The Unification Church Movement” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. 26). The decision acknowledges that the Unification Church did try to rein in Happy World as early as 1987: “In April 1987, Happy World sent a document to the Ministry of Health and Welfare and to the National Consumer Affairs Center stating that, effective as of the end of March of that year, it had notified its affiliated dealers that the sale of goods in a manner likely to give rise to misunderstandings commonly referred to as ‘spiritual sales’ was to be completely prohibited.” Eventually, Happy World ceased its operations altogether.

The cases involving Happy World and other companies go back over twenty years. They are revisited through the decision to portray the Church negatively. However, the dissolution decision is not based on these cases but on 26 civil judgments and several in-court and out-of-court settlements.

The question is whether, in the absence of criminal verdicts, civil decisions are

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enough to order the dissolution of a religious organization. The High Court acknowledges that Japanese case law has consistently answered this question in the negative. Subsequent Japanese governments have also maintained this interpretation. In 1994 and 1998, they resisted pressure from the anti-cult Lawyers' Network to seek the Unification Church's dissolution. In 2012, the Network sued the government for its refusal to initiate a dissolution case, but the government won. After Shinzo Abe's assassination, Prime Minister Kishida initially said that pursuing a dissolution was impossible because there were no criminal convictions against the Church. However, as the High Court recalls, within 24 hours, Kishida reversed his stance and announced that civil verdicts were enough to pursue dissolution.

The High Court asserts it does not base its decision on Kishida's opinion but instead on a [Supreme Court ruling](#) from March 3, 2025. This ruling concerned a non-penal fine imposed on the Church's then President Tanaka for failing to fully respond to questions from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). In that ruling, which appeared intended to influence the Tokyo District Court's then-upcoming first-degree decision on dissolution, the Supreme Court emphasized that civil torts are sufficient grounds for dissolving a religious organization.

Neither the Supreme Court nor the High Court clarified why they reversed decades' worth of case law. It seems that this unconventional interpretation of the Religious Corporation Act was tailored specifically to target the Unification Church. Perhaps this was done without considering the possible effects on numerous other religious groups, most of which have never been accused of any crimes but could still face civil lawsuits. One of Japan's most prominent Buddhist monks [remarked in an interview](#) that this argument for dissolution threatens all religions and temples.

In addition to the 26 civil judgments, the High Court noted that the Church had settled several civil cases. It summarized the verdicts and settlements through calculations as evidence of illegal solicitation of donations.

This approach is inherently flawed. A settlement differs fundamentally from a verdict. In a settlement, parties, without admitting the opposing arguments, agree on a compromise to avoid prolonged litigation. Any law school undergraduate would see that comparing settlements with court decisions is illogical. Moreover, this position may deter religious corporations from settling civil cases in the future, fearing that their settlements could be used as evidence in later dissolution proceedings.



A victim of deprogramming: Unification Church member Dr. Hirohisa Koide tells his story at the United Nations in Geneva in 2025.

Perhaps because of widespread domestic and international criticism, the High Court decided to address the Unification Church's objection that "with respect to the cases involving judicial settlements and out-of-court settlements... most of the attorneys who accepted those cases were members of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, and such attorneys have habitually made false allegations and fabricated evidence, so their assertions lack credibility. Christian pastors hostile to the Appellant [the Unification Church] as heretical and professional deprogrammers have caused parents of believers of the Appellant to abduct and confine such believers, have gone to the places of confinement to persuade them to withdraw from the Appellant, and have forcibly made them renounce their faith, with the result that such 'apostates' came to harbor hostility and hatred toward the Appellant and to make false allegations and statements without hesitation; because the plaintiffs and claimants in the settlement cases are such 'apostates,' their allegations and statements lack credibility."

Actually, deprogrammed "apostates" not only hold "hostility" towards the Unification Church, but in several documented cases, they were told they might face re-confinement if they refused to sue the Church.

This is a serious and important issue, on which entire books have been written, raising doubts about the entire argument that, because the Church lost some civil cases and settled others, it should be dissolved. The High Court's response is, with all due respect, absurd.

The court states that "if the allegations and statements of the plaintiffs, claimants, or their attorneys in the settlement cases truly lacked all credibility, then there would be no possibility that tortious conduct had occurred. In that event... it is difficult to think that the Appellant [the Unification Church] would nevertheless have

agreed to judicial or out-of-court settlements. It must be said that no reasonable explanation has been provided for the fact that the Appellant did in fact agree to such settlements.”

This restates the flawed argument that settling is an admission of guilt and that, if the Church were innocent, it would not have settled. The High Court never considered that the Church, as the judges describe it, “had no choice but to agree to out-of-court settlements,” not because it was guilty, but because it was a target of a hostile social and judicial environment. In this climate, the Church knew that the stories the alleged “victims” were made to tell by deprogrammers and lawyers would be believed, regardless of their truth or falsehood.

The High Court’s bias is evident in its cavalier reliance on settlements to determine guilt. The Church has been dissolved without any criminal conviction. Overriding previous case law, civil decisions, and settlements were deemed sufficient for dissolution.

Japan, Religious Liberty, Unification Church



Massimo Introvigne

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions ([CESNUR](#)), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the [Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia](#) (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion](#) and of the executive board of University of California Press’ [Nova Religio](#). From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the “Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions” of the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

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