

## FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Key Questions Ignored by Media Chasing Ratings

Knut Holdhus  
September 2, 2024



Tetsuya Yamagami, the man who killed Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan and blamed it on the Unification Church



[Sekai Nippo](#)

### Japanese author and TV personality: Key questions ignored by media "increasingly desperate to chase ratings"

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[Original article](#)

Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 4: Media Crossing the Line - Concerns Over One-Sided Reporting

### Hikari Ota comes under fire for "defending a cult"

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai](#)

[Nippo](#)

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"TV has become obsessed with pursuing the connections between Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members and the former [Unification Church](#). I think TV has a bad habit of getting 'overheated' in one direction."

At the end of September 2022, Hikari Ota (太田光) from the comedy duo Bakusho Mondai published a book titled "Geinin Ningo: Corona Pandemic, Ukraine, and Election Special - The Great Displeasure Edition". This 333-page book, which is quite thick to be a recent publication, was published by Asahi Shimbun and includes revised and expanded versions of his serialized essays from the literary monthly magazine "One Book" from December 2020 to August 2022. The opening words were written at the beginning of August in the afterword.

Hikari Ota serves as the MC for the Sunday morning current affairs variety show "Sunday Japan" (TBS),

which discusses political and social issues. TV "wide shows" [Editor's note: Japanese term for news and talk shows] have predominantly focused on criticizing the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) over issues such as "spiritual sales" and high donations. Ota, on the other hand, often made statements that set him apart from other commentators, such as "No one can say that the teachings themselves are wrong." However, other participants immediately refuted his comments. Additionally, on social media, he was criticized with comments like "He's defending them!" and "Don't put him on TV!"



Front page of *Geinin Ningo: Corona Pandemic, Ukraine, and Election Special - The Great Displeasure Edition* by Hikari Ota, published on Asahi Shimbun Publishing.



Shinzo Abe in March 2022, just months before his assassination



Eito Suzuki, born as Kiyofumi Tanaka

For Ota, what matters most is not politics or religion, but "television". This reflects his deep attachment to the medium. This is likely why, even though only a little over a month had passed since the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), he was concerned about how television reporting was 'overheating' in one direction.

Immediately after the incident [Editor's note: the assassination of Shinzo Abe], it was reported that the suspect, Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也), had told the police that his motive was "a grudge against the [religious organization](#)". The media repeatedly criticized it, assuming that this grudge led to the assassination of Abe, who had sent a video message to an event related to the [religious organization](#).

Regarding this media situation, Ota lamented in the afterword,

"Is it really okay to base our understanding of the entire incident on fragments of statements we've heard and turn it into a discussion about 'politics and religion'?"

It is unnatural for a grudge against the [religious organization](#) to be directed at Shinzo Abe, who was not a member. Moreover, it is said that the suspect's mother made large donations to the [organization](#) and went bankrupt in 2002, which was 20 years ago when the suspect was 21 years old. If the motive for the crime was hatred towards the [religious organization](#), too much time has passed. There is not only a distance between the assassination and the motive, but also a significant time gap between when the grudge was formed and the incident occurred. What happened to the suspect during this time?

There were some TV commentators who expressed how they felt uneasy about the gap between the fragmentary reports of the motive and the horrific crime that actually took place. However, this crucial question - a key to understanding the full scope of the incident - was pushed aside as the media, particularly on "wide shows", became overly focused on criticizing the [organization](#).

It's not that the concept of "freedom of religion" didn't cross the minds of the program producers. However, in the post-war social climate where being "non-religious" is considered the norm, there are likely few media professionals who have deeply considered the importance of faith. Moreover, the idea that infringing on 'freedom of religion' is a serious issue that shakes the very foundation of democracy may not have been fully considered.

With television struggling to maintain viewership in the face of competition from YouTube and other platforms, broadcasters have become increasingly desperate to chase ratings. This may have led to the overheated criticism of the [religious organization](#).

In the afterword, Ota reveals an important fact when considering why "wide shows" have been biased against the [Family Federation](#). He notes about his own show, which has been running for over 20 years,

"I don't recall ever covering the [Unification Church](#) before Abe's assassination. Most of the younger staff don't even know the name '[Unification Church](#)'."



Masaki Kubota. Photo (2023)

This situation is not limited to television staff but also extends to newspaper reporters and other journalists. As a result, program producers and reporters have relied on sources like lawyers who have long represented former members claiming damages from the [religious organization](#), as well as activists like Eito Suzuki (鈴木エイト) and others who have opposed the [organization](#). These individuals became regular guests on news and talk shows. Meanwhile, according to the [Family Federation's](#) Public Relations Department, Sunday Japon has not even once requested an appearance from them.

Regarding the media coverage of the [Family Federation](#), nonfiction writer Masaki Kubota (窪田順生), author of "Infiltrating the Former Unification Church" (潜入旧統一教会), points out that while it's referred to as

"reporting on the former [Unification Church](#)", it has essentially become "reporting on 'victims'".

The media, which should protect freedom of religion, has instead become overly critical, crossing the line and spiraling out of control. This is how the situation has developed.

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# More And More Believers Raising Their Voices

August 19, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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*A growing number of religious minority believers have started raising their voices*



Logo of the Sekai Nippo








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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat – Part 3: **Believers Suffering Discrimination and Human Rights Violations**

## Believers Speak Out

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of *Sekai Nippo*

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A request for a court order to dissolve the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the *Unification Church*) was issued in October last year. Many of the religious organization's followers have been waiting to see how the organization would respond, but some have independently taken to the streets and begun to make their opinions known to society.



Location of the cities mentioned. Illustration: Maximilian Dörrbecker (Chumhwa) / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp

Kazuya Miseki (a pseudonym), a man in his 30s living in Adachi Ward, Tokyo, joined the religious organization after being approached in Shinjuku [Editor's note: Tokyo's major commercial and administrative center] at the age of 20. Since last October, he has been street preaching at JR Matsudo Station in Chiba Prefecture. He had felt since the shooting incident involving former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,

"There are too few voices from people of faith. Can't someone counter this terrible media coverage?"

He said,

"Some church staff members have been hurt by past critical reports. Church staff are not the only believers, so I thought that if I want to do something, I should speak up without hesitation."

Naturally, he was worried that if he stood on the street, he would be criticized, his private life might be negatively affected, and he might even be harmed. But once he started, more and more believers joined him, and some even began drawing illustrations for the flyers they distributed. Recently, he has also been talking about how he has matured through his faith.

In January this year, the "Chiba Prefecture Citizens' Association to Protect Freedom of Religion and Human Rights" was established, mainly by believers. Hiroshi Ogasawara (小笠原裕) (61) from Yachiyo City became the representative. He emphasized the **social backlash against the religious organization**, stating,

**"The proposition to socially exclude religion is spreading throughout society. The religious community needs to consciously stand up, and for that to happen, we, the people involved, must first raise our voices."**



Hiroshi Ogasawara. Photo: X



From the Chiba Prefectural Convention of the "Symposium to Protect Freedom of Religion and Human Rights", held in Chiba City 20th March 2024. From left: Hiroshi Ogasawara, Yoshiaki Kawahara, Rev. Haruhisa Nakagawa, Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama. Photo: Tsuyoshi Toyoda (豊田剛) / Sekai Nippo.

In March, they held a **symposium in Chiba City**. They invited members of parliament, lawyers, and Christian pastors, but what Ogasawara values most is for the believers themselves to take to the streets and directly express their honest feelings to the public.

Yoshiaki Kawahara (川原義昭) (63), a board member of the organization living in Chiba City, also began giving speeches on the street in front of JR Chiba Station last autumn. Kawahara has expanded his street preaching efforts nationwide through connections among believers of the *Family Federation* community. **The circle is steadily expanding, with the number of locations holding such speeches exceeding 140 in**

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July.

Being active on the streets, however, often led to disruptions. Around May of this year, a passerby repeatedly hurled insult at him. Even someone who initially stepped in to mediate turned against Kawahara and joined in the verbal abuse after learning he was associated with the former [Unification Church](#). Although Kawahara called the police, the officers didn't take the incident seriously and eventually left without resolving the issue.

Kawahara says,

**"It is not easy to correct people's prejudices, but it is important to sincerely convey the truth and find people who can empathize."**

He also hopes that this street speech activity may bring about internal reforms within the [Family Federation](#).

He explains,

"Believers tend to operate in a top-down manner, which leaves little opportunity to express their own words and opinions. By taking to the streets, we hope to foster individual initiatives and open up new possibilities."

Daichi Ito (伊藤大地) (70) from Fukuoka City shares this sentiment. Feeling the recent media coverage was unjust, he began speaking out about religious freedom through street campaigns after September 2022. When he shared these activities online, he received a flood of responses from believers nationwide, praising his courageous actions. Ito argues, "If the church as an organization isn't going to act, then the believers must rise up."

Furthermore, he enthusiastically states,

**"It's not just about asserting our own viewpoints, but also about considering what Japan, in its current national crisis, should be like. We need to send out a strong message with the country's best interests in mind."**



On June 16, 2024, the 'Kumamoto Citizens' Association for the Protection of Basic Human Rights and Freedom of Religion' held a protest march in the arcade district of Kumamoto City against the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's request for a dissolution order for the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

In June this year, believers formed the "Kumamoto Prefecture Citizens' Association to Protect Basic Human Rights and Freedom of Religion" in Kumamoto City and held a [protest march](#) in the city. These **efforts to appeal to the general public are spreading across the country.**

End of part 3 (16th – 22nd article).

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**Featured image** above: Yoshiaki Kawahara sharing his experiences of street preaching at a symposium in March in Chiba City, Chiba Prefecture. Photo: Tsuyoshi Toyoda (豊田剛) / [Sekai Nippo](#)

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