

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan's Mistrust of Religion: Japanese State Persecuting FFWPU

Knut Holdhus
November 27, 2024



Wako Higashi in January 2024

Buddhist chief priest points to the Japanese government's handling of religious minority as evidence of current authorities' general mistrust of religion

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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 6: Voices of Religious Leaders

Chief Priest of Chogyoan (聴行庵) Buddhist Temple, Wako Higashi (東和空)

Freedom of religion tying together state and individual

by the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

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Chief Priest Wako Higashi

First, as a Buddhist, I have been mindful not to irresponsibly voice opinions on matters without fully understanding the facts. In a sense, I have questioned the veracity of reporting that, in its approach, seems to belittle the personal faith of individuals and opportunistically broadens issues related to certain organizations without due consideration.

Against this backdrop, I cannot help but feel a tinge of unease at the prospect that this series of government procedures may reveal political motives targeting religious corporations. It raises a concern that this might well run counter to the lofty divine or spiritual intention behind the concept of "freedom", which is a profound blessing bestowed upon human society.

For example, I sensed [political motives](#) behind the timing of the government's request [Editor's note: request for a court order to dissolve the [Family Federation](#)], which coincided with an upcoming extraordinary Diet session and by-elections for the House of Representatives [Editor's note: Lower house in the national parliament] and the House of Councillors (upper house), as well as in their apparent intent to show a firm stance toward the [religious organization](#) in question.

Additionally, one approach to determining whether to issue a dissolution order considered the existence of criminal cases as a criterion. But it seems there now also exists a theoretical framework to justify the request for a dissolution order by directly [applying civil law](#) in order to highlight unlawful actions by the [organization](#).

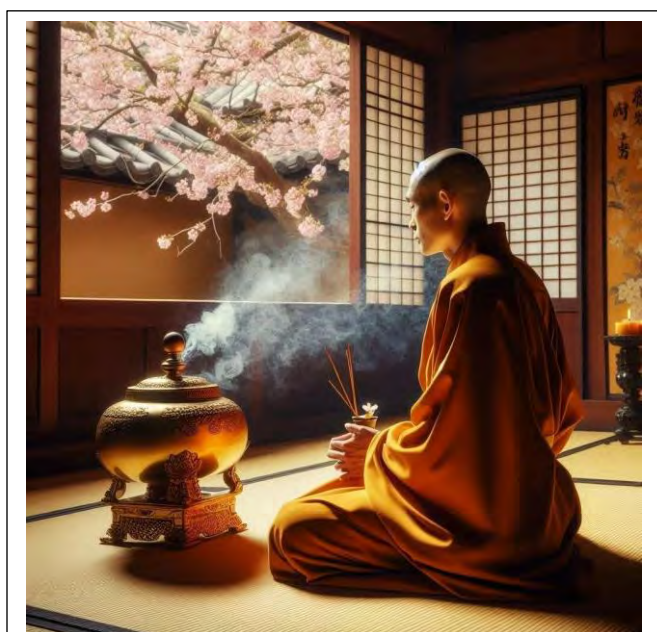


The Council of Religious Corporations discussing the use of the questioning rights by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (previously known as the [Unification Church](#)) - 14th December 2022, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo

Furthermore, it was decided not to open the Religious Corporation Council [Editor's note: The Religious Corporations Council in Japan is an advisory body to the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). It plays a role in overseeing and advising on matters related to religious corporations. The council is composed of experts, academics, and representatives from diverse fields, including legal scholars, sociologists, and individuals familiar with religious practices. Its members are appointed by the Minister of MEXT. The Council is meant to ensure that any government intervention respects the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom while maintaining public welfare.] to the public and not to disclose the minutes of the meetings.

This could be seen as a political disregard for religion. Therefore, it is essential to clarify the process and reasoning for calling into question - based on an arguably naive assumption of innate goodwill - the suitability of a religious corporation. Unless this is clarified to the roughly 650,000 religious instructors in Japan, the impression of mistrust of religion will be difficult to erase in the future.

For this reason, I sincerely hope that this series of deliberations and the public's interest in them will adhere to the fundamental principle of "freedom of religion" and be conducted with full democratic control and transparency.



Japanese Buddhist praying

In Buddhist teachings, 'freedom' means relying on oneself. It refers to a way of living that maintains relationships with the external social environment without being swayed by it - a state in which one's personal convictions are firmly established. While we are inherently free, we become trapped, biased, and fixated on ourselves, others, and our surroundings, which causes suffering.

In this context, the government's recent handling of religion in contemporary society has left a significant message about our freedom to pursue happiness. As we reflect on whether religion, which has historically served as a bridge between the nation and the individual, has upheld the spiritual freedom of human beings, we must also ask whether the state has truly respected freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Additionally, has the press

refrained from overreaching into matters of free expression and academic freedom?

Understanding that human ideals and happiness rely on the ability of free individuals to maximize their

potential within society, I, as a Buddhist monk, feel deeply the need to reconcile the enormous gap between these ideals and the current reality. This disparity significantly impacts the happiness of the Japanese people.

If this sense of stagnation or unease could be alleviated through the influence of religion, it would involve enhancing happiness through means beyond income or material wealth. Factors such as societal freedom, tolerance, and the absence of corruption play significant roles in this endeavor. Observing the ongoing individualization of society and the evolving personal nature of religious practice, it becomes clear that a warm-hearted freedom is increasingly intertwined with personal happiness.

When considering individual freedom, we must ask whether it is a freedom recognized by others, a freedom that does not harm either party, or a freedom that contributes to national interests. At the same time, it is crucial for society and organizations to recognize that the freedom of individual consciousness is inherently linked to the broader social freedom in parallel worlds [Editor's note: In Buddhism, "parallel worlds" can be understood as multiple coexisting realms of existence, infinite world-systems in the cosmos, or subjective realities created by karma and perception], and to be aware of the interdependent nature (interconnectedness) of all living beings.

To comprehend the true freedom and order that the divine and Buddha espouse amidst the chaos (entropy) of conflicting interests and impermanent activities, we pray not only to win by majority rule. Instead, we should aim for gradual reconciliation, where both sides stand on equal footing, respecting essential order and national interest with dignity. May this process lead to a harmonious resolution.

Sincerely, with hands joined in prayer,

Wako Higashi (東和空),
Chief Priest of Chogyoan (聴行庵) Temple

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New Laws Let Lawyers Aid Many To Pose As Victim

• November 25, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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Christian leader points out that new laws in Japan let lawyers assist many to exploit the laws, pose as victim, and extort money from religious minority in a way that resembles a "form of organized crime"










Logo of the Sekai Nippo

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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat – Part 6: **Voices of Religious Leaders**

Tsukishiro Christian Church – Pastor Ryuichi Sunagawa

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

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In front of the Okinawa Prefectural Office, there is a man who alone regularly delivers street speeches. He is Pastor Ryuichi Sunagawa (砂川竜一) of Tsukishiro Christian Church in Nanjo City, located in the southern part of Okinawa's main island.



Location of Nanjo City. Illustration: Maximilian Dörrbecker (Chumhwa) / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp

Pastor Sunagawa is known for his outspoken views, calling for the resignation of Governor Denny Tamaki (玉城デニ), whom he criticizes for failing to uphold a Supreme Court ruling regarding the relocation of a U.S. military base. Additionally, he identifies parental gambling addiction as the greatest factor contributing to children's unhappiness. This concern led him to run for the Nanjo City Council election for the first time in April 2022. Despite being a pastor, Sunagawa stands out for his strong interest and active engagement in politics.

Pastor Ryuichi Sunagawa has expressed strong anger over the government's request for a disbandment order against the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** (formerly the **Unification Church**). He questions why the media is so hostile toward the organization. Regarding its connections with former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), Sunagawa stated,

"Based on the facts I have seen and heard, there was nothing inappropriate about their relationship."

He was of the opinion that

"the public has been misled into accepting the narrative that 'Prime Minister Abe was assassinated because the **Unification Church** was evil.'"

Sunagawa pointed out that it was only natural for the former **Unification Church** to have close ties with former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (岸信介元) and members of the *Liberal Democratic Party*, considering that the church's founder, Reverend **Sun Myung Moon**, was a frontrunner in the fight against communism. He praised the **Family Federation** as "the



Sun Myung Moon and Nobusuke Kishi, Prime Minister of Japan 1957-1960, shaking hands in Tokyo. Photo: FFWPU

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only religious organization that has stood squarely against a demonic communism that denies [God](#)."

During a symposium on religious freedom held in Naha City on 3rd November 2024, Sunagawa quoted from John 8:44 to emphasize,

"The devil is a liar. The devil is a murderer. And the devil is the father of lies."

He argued,

"The International Federation for Victory over Communism (IFVOC) and the former [Unification Church](#), which supports it, are enemies of the devil. Therefore, we must stand with them."

Sunagawa praised the reforms undertaken by the [Family Federation](#) and said,

"There may have been issues in the past, such as large donations and 'spiritual sales' practices, but the attitude of reform and transformation is what truly matters."

Referring to the [organization's](#) rebranding as the [Family Federation](#), he expressed hope that it would continue evolving into "a group that brings joy to [God](#)."

Since its compliance declaration in 2009, the [Family Federation](#) has reportedly restrained excessive donations that conflict with donors' financial situations. However, Sunagawa criticized the media's failure to acknowledge these changes, remarking,

"Despite becoming an [organization](#) that values family, the public discourse continues to condemn it based solely on past scandals, without recognizing its progress. This is a dangerous tendency."

Nevertheless, the government enacted a [special law for victim relief](#) in December last year (2023). Sunagawa expressed concerns about potential repercussions for other religious groups. He warned that donation refund demands could arise from other religious organizations' members or their families. He noted,



On advice from hostile activist lawyers, the Japanese government changed the law to make it easy for many to exploit new laws and pose as victim to sue the [Family Federation](#). Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 31st July 2024.

"I can understand the psychology of former members who, due to a change of heart, demand the return of past donations. However, it is alarming that families or relatives who have not suffered any harm team up with lawyers and pose as victims to sue and extort money, exploiting these laws for financial gain. This 'victim business' is becoming a form of organized crime."

Sunagawa also critiqued Japan's religious corporation system. While acknowledging that religious entities enjoy strong protections, such as tax benefits, he highlighted abuses within the system, stating, "Many religious organizations exist primarily to evade taxes."

Ryuichi Sunagawa also pointed out the need to review the system surrounding religious corporations,

"Faith should inherently benefit believers, their families, and the community, and should not be a membership club for the benefit of specific organizations or political groups. To prevent illegal activities within these corporations, it may be necessary for the government to have some degree of oversight over all religious corporations in the future."

Featured image above: Pastor Ryuichi Sunagawa, Tsukishiro Christian Church, Nanjo City, Okinawa, Japan. Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

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