

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Intersection of Politics and Religion in USA

Knut Holdhus
December 16, 2024



President Donald J. Trump joins members of his Cabinet in a prayer led by Secretary of Energy Rick Perry during a Cabinet Meeting Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2019, in the Cabinet Room of the White House



Tokyo paper takes a look at a USA where politics and religion intersect and compares it to the vastly different scenario unfolding in Japan with its LDP-supported anti-religious measures

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Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 7: Religion in Japan in a Global Context

Politics and Religion in America

The Background of Trump's Overwhelming Support

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

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In late October 2024, just days before the U.S. presidential election, a gathering in the Atlanta suburbs of the key battleground state of Georgia attracted over 1,000 Christian pastors supporting Republican candidate and former President Donald Trump.



President Donald J. Trump participates in a prayer with African American Leaders and Pastor Paula White Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020, in the Cabinet Room of the White House

During a discussion with Pastor Paula White, Trump's "spiritual advisor", he addressed the assembled pastors, calling them "the most important people" and declaring:

"This will connect you directly with the Oval Office - directly with me."



Dr. Jack Graham, Senior Pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church, Plano, Texas

During his first term, Trump established a "Faith Office" at the White House as a liaison with religious leaders. He promised to reinstate this office to provide direct access to the president.

At the end of the gathering, over ten pastors surrounded Trump on stage to pray. Among them, Pastor Jack Graham, leader of a megachurch in Texas, prayed:

"We thank you for raising up Trump as a warrior for Your word and wisdom. As You make him our president once again, we pray You grant him strength, wisdom, and joy."

What if this happened in Japan?

If similar interactions between politicians and religious leaders were observed in Japan, it would undoubtedly provoke fierce criticism as a "collusive relationship". While leftist forces in the U.S. do criticize the significant influence of Christian conservatives on American politics, there is almost no widespread discourse labeling close ties between politicians and

religious organizations as inherently inappropriate.

Trump's close relationship with Christianity is evidenced by countless examples. For instance, he categorically rejected transgender ideology from a religious perspective, asserting,

"God created two genders, male and female."

His bold stance against extreme LGBT policies, undeterred by leftist backlash, helped him gain broader support among Christians.

Trump's choice for running mate and religious appeals

Senator J.D. Vance, whom Trump selected as his running mate, is a devout Catholic. During an October campaign rally, when someone in the crowd shouted, "Jesus is King," Vance responded, "That's right. Jesus is King," earning thunderous applause. His comment was also a jab at Democratic candidate Vice

President Kamala Harris, who, days earlier, had dismissed a Christian student declaring, "Jesus is Lord," by saying, "You're at the wrong rally."



Senator Vance official portrait. 118th Congress, Jan. 26, 2023

According to an NBC News exit poll from the presidential election, 82% of conservative white evangelical Christians, who made up 23% of voters, cast their ballots for Trump. Additionally, 63% of Catholic voters supported him. There's no doubt that consolidating Christian support was a major factor in Trump's overwhelming success.

Harris' reliance on the "religious vote"

Harris, too, sought to harness the "religious vote". She actively visited Black churches, which have historically been a cornerstone of Democratic electoral support, especially within the devoutly Christian black community.

In late October, Harris attended a worship service at a black church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a key battleground state. She shared her childhood experiences of attending church and emphasized how those experiences helped her "fully understand the teachings of the Bible and the power of faith." Naturally, no one derided her actions as "too close" to religion.

Contrasting Japan's religious and political landscape



Vice President Kamala Harris takes her official portrait Thursday, March 4, 2021, in the South Court Auditorium in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building at the White House

In contrast, Japan's reaction to the intersection of religion and politics is starkly different. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, public attention turned to the ties between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). This led to widespread condemnation, and the LDP announced a complete severance of ties with the [organization](#). The backlash created a social climate in which any religious involvement in politics seemed taboo, as though religion must have no place in political matters whatsoever.

This perspective is far removed from the norms in the United States.

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Openness And Transparency Stressed In Interview

• December 15, 2024 • Knut Holdhus



Openness and transparency emphasized as part of reforms of organizational culture

Tokyo, 3rd December 2024 – Published as the **46th article** in a series in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. *Original article*

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

Reform Means Changing Culture

Part 3 of interview with Tomihiro Tanaka (田中富広), President of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in Japan

See part 1, part 2 of interview



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
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Q: As a result of the government's request for the dissolution order, many believers interviewed by [this newspaper](#) have been criticized and [discriminated](#) against by those around them. There were also voices calling for the [religious organization](#) to provide mental care to second-generation believers who are particularly hurt.

A: There are likely various areas where people have been hurt, and we may not fully understand what the best form of mental health care is. However, we must do what we can. One initiative the [organization](#) undertook, albeit belatedly after this incident [[Editor's note: the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe \(安倍晋三\) in July 2022](#)], is the establishment of "Certified Family Counselors". Around 1,450 individuals have registered after completing organizational training, and we have created a system where members can request consultations through a dedicated app.



Family counselor with young couple. Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 15th Dec. 2024

In the past, people might have thought, "If my consultation gets reported back to the staff in charge of my group, it's better not to say anything." Now, individuals can make appointments on their own and even specify the person they want to consult with.

However, for members who have been hurt and distanced themselves from the group, the most critical aspect is likely the [organization's](#) culture itself. I feel the best way forward is to demonstrate how the culture of the [organization](#) has changed.

Q: Although the [organization](#) issued a compliance declaration in 2009, wasn't the reform insufficiently thorough?

A: I acknowledge that it was inadequate. I feel the [church's](#) approach to families was lacking. The failure to adequately address this in our education efforts hindered reform.

In 2009, the organization issued a compliance declaration

This declaration emphasized that members must not be pressured to donate out of fear or anxiety related to ancestral issues and that no donations should exceed what is reasonable given a



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person's financial situation. We repeatedly gave guidance on these points and insisted on transparency in evangelism by identifying the [organization](#) from the outset. As a result, the number of lawsuits dropped significantly.



A Japanese woman offering a donation at a meeting. Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 18th November 2024.

Since the compliance declaration, there have been only four civil lawsuits filed by former members involving donations, all before 2016. No such lawsuits have occurred since then.

Even so, we have been criticized by the *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology* (MEXT) for "not adequately educating on compliance". One of MEXT's questions, as part of its exercise of inquiry rights, was: "Provide proof of compliance education." We have submitted substantial evidence, including compliance education topics from national conferences, lecture outlines, and official documents circulated nationwide.

Q: Are you investigating the progress of organizational reforms?

A: Our reform efforts are centered on two main pillars:

1. Urgent measures:

When accepting donations, we ensure they are not funded by loans, tied to disputes, or likely to harm family life. Both the [organization](#) and the individual must be mutually satisfied before any donation is made. This has been a major focus due to significant public scrutiny.

Regarding donations, we have fundamentally changed our practices. We introduced strict guidelines to ensure compliance, strengthened verification processes, and now issue official receipts to donors.

2. Cultural transformation:

Without a shift in culture, there is no future. We aim for fundamental reform to establish an open and transparent [organization](#). This is not something that can be achieved overnight, but we are committed to this vision as a major pillar of our efforts.

Currently, second-generation members have taken on leadership roles, with one-third of regional leaders nationwide being second-generation members. Their approaches to engaging with members, managing families, operating the [organization](#), and conducting meetings reflect a new era for the [organization](#).

This marks a significant transformation for our community and its culture.

See [part 1](#), [part 2](#) of interview

End of part 6 of the series

Featured image above: Tomihiro Tanaka (田中富広), President of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), during the interview conducted 15th November 2024. Photo: Kato Reiwa (加藤 玲和)

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