

FOREF: Religious Liberty Crisis in Japan and the Anti-Cult Movement - The Vienna Videos

Alessandro Amicarelli
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Massimo Introvigne speaking at the Info Evening. Photo by Peter Zoehrer

FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom Europe) organized on October 4 an Info Evening on the Japanese witch hunt following the Abe assassination. Here are the videos. ([BITTER WINTER](#))

On July 8, 2022, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1954 - 2022) was assassinated in Nara, Japan. The assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, claimed he wanted to punish him for his cooperation with organizations connected with the Unification Church (now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification). Yamagami said he hated the Unification Church because his mother, a member, went bankrupt in 2002, allegedly because of excessive donations to the religious movement. He confessed he had also planned to assassinate Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, the leader of the Family Federation.

Anti-cultists and the media managed to persuade the Japanese public opinion, and the government itself, that the Unification Church was responsible for the crime. An unprecedented campaign against "cults" followed, with the enactment of new anti-cult laws and regulations and a governmental lawsuit seeking the dissolution of the Family Federation as a religious corporation.



Peter Zoehrer's introduction and Massimo Introvigne's presentation

FOREF, the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe, organized on October 4 in its center in Vienna an Info

Evening on the theme "Japan: The Ongoing Fight for Religious Freedom." Guests in a fully packed conference room included representatives of most religions present in the Austrian capital, journalists, human rights activists, and scholars, some of them from other parts of Austria and nearby countries.

Peter Zoehrer, a well-known Austrian journalist, and the Executive Director of FOREF introduced the event and presented the activities of FOREF in Europe and Africa, where a new [sister organization](#) has recently been established. He then presented the two speakers, Massimo Introvigne, an Italian sociologist and the Managing Director of CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, who also serves as editor-in-chief of "Bitter Winter," and Rosita Šorytė, a former Lithuanian diplomat and a member of the scientific committee of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB).



Šorytė presenting her paper at the FOREF Info Evening

Introvigne offered what some in the audience in the Q and A period that followed the presentations hailed as the best summary of Japan's religious liberty crisis offered so far. He denounced the twisted argument according to which, if Yamagami's mother had not become a member of, and donated significantly to the Church, the assassin would not have had a grudge against the religious group and its supporters, including Abe, and would not have killed the former Prime Minister. Obviously, the argument does not make sense, Introvigne said. He compared it to the defense often used by lawyers representing rapists that, if the girl had not showed herself as beautiful and sexy, she would not have been raped.

Acting against the Unification Church and seeking its legal dissolution, as the Japanese government is doing, also means that in Japan crime pays, Introvigne added. Through the government Yamagami is now achieving precisely what he wanted, i.e., destroying the Unification Church.



The full video of Šorytė's lecture

Šorytè offered a broader perspective on the international anti-cult movement. She noted that aggressive opposition to groups stigmatized as "cults" has (re-)emerged in recent years as a significant social force in countries as diverse as Russia and Japan. Her presentation examined six national situations - United States, China, Russia, France, Japan, and Argentina - and the different interests inspiring the local anti-cult campaigns.

In her second part, Šorytè argued that, while remaining different, anti-cult campaigns also have common elements and are supported by the lobbying efforts of diverse social actors such as the umbrella anti-cult federation FECRIS, the research consortium Invictus, the international diplomatic action of France, Russia, and China, Communist parties, international TV networks that have allied themselves with the anti-cult movements (primarily Netflix), anti-trafficking agencies interested in expanding their activity to "cults," and private individual and corporate donors. While there is not a single "hidden hand" coordinating the anti-cult activities throughout the world, the role of these coordinating agencies should not be under-estimated and is largely behind what is happening in Japan, Šorytè concluded.

The success of the initiative, and of a plenary session on October 5 on the same subject with Zoehrer, Introigne, and Šorytè at the 2024 Central European Symposium for the Academic Study of Religion (CESAR) at Vienna's Central European University familiarized scholars, reporters, activists, and religionists from several countries with the seriousness of the religious liberty crisis in Japan and its background. More advocacy may (and perhaps should) follow.

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A New Religious Liberty Organization Is Launched in Africa

12/23/2023 MASSIMO INTROVIGNE

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The African Forum for Religious and Spirituality Liberty (AFRSL) was solemnly inaugurated in Cape Town. It has the potentiality of changing the history of religious freedom on the continent.

by Massimo Introvigne



AFRSL Coordinator IMboni Dr. Samuel uZwi-Lezwe Radebe (second from left), FOREF Executive Director Peter Zoehrer (third from left), and Massimo Introvigne (third from right) with representatives of several churches and religious organizations who attended the AFRSL launching event.

On December 8, 2023, history was made at the Century City Convention Center in Cape Town, South Africa, as a new organization was born that vowed to protect freedom of religion or belief in the African continent. Inspired by the example of, and in cooperation with, FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe), with which a Memorandum of Understanding had been signed, the African Forum for Religious and Spirituality Liberty (AFRSL) was solemnly inaugurated.

It was a typical African event, full of passion and excitement. Representatives of dozens of different religious traditions attended with their multicolored garbs, from bishops of old and new forms of Christianity to traditional African healers. Some, however, wore just a clerical collar or a jacket and a tie. Three kings and other members of South African royal families also attended, as well as politicians and representatives of governmental institutions, including leaders of the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL), which "Bitter Winter" had criticized for a 2017 report influenced by the international anti-cult ideology—but its willingness to dialogue with the new organization is certainly welcome. Several mainline national media were also present and reported about the event.



Delegates at the launching event.

After an opening inter-religious prayer, Rosita Šorytė, who had been asked to serve as program director, introduced the conference. A former Lithuanian diplomat with twenty-five years of experience, Šorytė reported how she grew up in the Soviet Union and was educated in schools where any religious interest was discouraged and ridiculed. Yet, largely by herself, she developed a connection with the inner voice of the sacred, which she always maintained and also led her more recently to an appreciation of African spirituality. As a diplomat and, later, a human rights activist this was translated into a passion for religious liberty. She gave several examples—from Japan to Argentina, France, and the international propaganda of media hostile to religious minorities—confirming that even in democratic countries freedom of religion or belief cannot be taken for granted. Religious minorities slandered as “cults” and attacked cannot defend themselves alone, Šorytė concluded. Hence the urgent need for organizations such as the new AFRSL, where religious and spiritual groups with different theologies and worldview can unite to protect their common right to freedom of religion or belief.



Program director Rosita Šorytė introduces the event.

Aaron Rhodes, the senior human rights activist who serves as President of FOREF, could not attend the event due to health reasons but spoke about the history and aims of his organization through a video.



Aaron Rhodes' video.

FOREF's Executive Director, Austrian journalist Peter Zoehrer, was present and outlined how FOREF operates in practice to promote and protect religious liberty.



Peter Zoehrer's speech.

The leaders of two other European advocacy organizations for freedom of religion or belief also spoke. Eric Roux, Chairman of the European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom (EIFRF), and Alessandro Amicarelli, a London-based attorney who serves as President of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB), both told AFRSL that effective religious liberty organizations do not gather persons or organizations who agree on religion. On the contrary, they may vehemently disagree about issues of theological truth but, when they enter the common room of the religious liberty organizations, they leave their theologies outside. They only bring inside a shared commitment to the idea that states and governments should let religious and spiritual groups self-organize themselves as they deem fit with the

states and governments should let religious and spiritual groups self-organize themselves as they deem fit with the sole condition that they should respect the law and not commit common crimes (as opposite to imaginary crimes such as "being a cult" and "psychologically manipulate their followers").



Eric Roux (left) and Alessandro Amicarelli (right) at the launching event.

I spoke about the hidden snake that can jump out of the grass and bite unsuspecting religionists, the moral panic. I explained that moral panics, as studied by sociologists, are based on real critical incidents and crimes, which are however unduly generalized to attack entire categories and lumping together the guilty and the innocent. The fact that some Catholic priests are pedophiles, or some terrorists use or abuse the name of Islam is used to claim, falsely, that all priests are (at least potential) sexual abusers and all Muslims are (at least potential) terrorists. Criminal actions perpetrated by some new religious movements are used to pass laws targeting a large number of "cults," most of which have never committed any crime. This may also happen in Africa, I concluded, where the tragic deaths caused in Kenya by a Christian preacher who promoted an extreme form of fasting have been used by a Senate Committee to propose measures limiting the liberty of all religions.

Rosita Šorytė then announced that the founders of the AFRSL had elected the first officers of the organizations, each a member of a different religious or spiritual group. They had unanimously asked IMboni Dr. Samuel uZwi-Lezwe Radebe, founder and leader of **The Revelation Spiritual Home**, a movement promoting African traditional spirituality, to serve as the first African Coordinator of the AFRSL.



Rosita Šorytė announces the appointment of Dr. Radebe as African Coordinator of the AFRSL.

Dr. Radebe graciously accepted the appointment, and delivered a short speech received with great enthusiasm by an audience that was told that AFRSL is there not to defend a particular religious tradition but all of them. Via video, Aaron Rhodes on behalf of FOREF also endorsed Dr. Radebe's appointment as African Coordinator of AFRSL. Those of us who have met Dr. Radebe cannot but regard the choice as excellent. He is the leader of a fast-growing African religious movement, a promoter of national and international inter-religious initiatives, a charismatic speaker, and the founder of an organization that offers to its followers **not only spiritual but also economic empowerment and hope.**



Dr. Radebe's acceptance speech.

Prince Thulani Zulu added words of support on behalf of his and other South African royal families who attended the event. His words reminded the audience that the launch of the AFRSL was a conference with papers by scholars, an advocacy rally, and a feast, all at the same time.



Prince Thulani Zulu with program coordinator Rosita Šorytė.

This is Africa. As Europeans with experience in the field of promoting freedom of religion or belief, we cannot tell Africans what is needed in their beautiful and special context. They will find solutions and practices based on their own culture and traditions. But we can express our appreciation for AFRSL and for its young and energetic African Coordinator and his team, and our warning that the same forms of intolerance and discrimination we combat in Europe may raise their ugly head in Africa too. Now, however, they will find AFRSL to oppose and resist them.

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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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