

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: The Danger of State Policing Religion

Knut Holdhus
January 31, 2026



Religion and state in South Korea: The danger of policing belief. Illustration: ChatGPT

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)



Segye Ilbo Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

South Korea's current danger of state overreach: The need to protect religious freedom by limiting state power

Debates about the proper relationship between religion and the state are not unique to Korea. Western democracies, from the United States to France, have long struggled to define where religious freedom ends and state authority begins. What makes the current Korean debate noteworthy, however, is that it is not being driven primarily by culture-war rhetoric or partisan hostility toward religion. Instead, it reflects a growing, sober reassessment of constitutional principles, historical experience, and the dangers that arise when the state begins to treat religion itself as an object of suspicion.

See also [Current Korean Situation: Context and Key Issues](#)

See also [Court: Prosecutors' Overreach in Politicized Case](#)

See also [S. Korea's Troubling Pattern of Selective Probes](#)

The 30th January article "[Signs of Hope Revealed Amid the Debate over the Separation of Religion and State](#)", written by religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) for the daily newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#), argues that South Korea has entered a

new phase in its public conversation about church-state relations. Rather than asking whether specific religious groups are "good" or "bad", recent media commentary has begun to ask a more fundamental question: does the government have the constitutional right to investigate, regulate, or judge religion as religion? This shift - from moral judgment to constitutional boundary-setting - is the author's central reason for cautious optimism.

A Changing Public Conversation

In January 2026, several major Korean newspapers published reflective articles examining the limits of state intervention in religious affairs. What distinguishes these articles from earlier coverage is their tone and focus. Instead of framing religion primarily as a social problem to be managed, journalists increasingly asked whether state power itself might be overreaching.

For Western readers, it may help to understand that South Korea has no established state religion and formally guarantees religious freedom. Yet in practice, tensions frequently arise when religious groups become politically visible or socially controversial.



Pushing for new anti-religious legislation, even dissolving entire religious organizations: President Lee Jae Myung of the Republic of Korea, here on October 29, 2025, at the Hilton Hotel in Gyeongju, South Korea

Recent investigations into certain new religious movements - often labeled "cults" in popular discourse - have reignited fears that the state could move from prosecuting illegal behavior to scrutinizing belief systems themselves.

Jeong's [article](#) emphasizes that the new debate is not about defending any particular religious group. Rather, it is about protecting a constitutional principle: the separation of religion and state exists to limit government power, not to silence religion.

Separation of Church and State: What It Really Means

One of the [article](#)'s key contributions is its clarification of what "separation of church and state" actually means in the Korean constitutional context. Drawing on a column in the prominent newspaper Hankyoreh titled "Render unto Caesar the Things That Are Caesar's," the author explains that this principle is often misunderstood.

In popular discourse - both in Korea and in the West - separation is sometimes interpreted as requiring religion to stay out of public life or political discussion. The [article](#) firmly rejects this interpretation. Historically, the separation principle was designed to prevent the state from interfering in religious belief, organization, and expression. It is a shield for religious freedom, not a gag order.

In South Korea, this principle entered constitutional law during the post-World War II period, influenced by American constitutional ideas during the U.S. military administration. Its original purpose was to reject the idea of a state-endorsed religion and to ensure that citizens could practice their faith without government coercion or discrimination. The author stresses that this history matters: separation was never meant to marginalize religion, but to protect pluralism.



Chun Doo-hwan (1931-2021), South Korean general who led a coup and seized power in December 1979. Served as the country's president 1980-1988

Lessons from History: When the State Overreaches

To underline the dangers of state interference in religion, the [article](#) turns to historical examples. One particularly painful episode occurred during the authoritarian rule of Chun Doo-hwan (전두환) in the 1980s. Under the banner of "purifying Buddhism" (불교정화), the regime carried out mass arrests, forced detentions, and acts of violence against Buddhist clergy. Decades later, the government formally apologized.

This episode serves as a warning: even when state intervention is framed as reform or public order, targeting religion itself leaves deep social scars. Once the government claims the authority to define what counts as "authentic", "healthy", or "acceptable" religion, abuse becomes almost inevitable.

The [article](#) also cites an international example that will resonate with Western readers: the United States' response to the 11th September terrorist attacks. While the U.S. government aggressively pursued those responsible for the attacks, it deliberately avoided treating Islam as a suspect religion. Criminal responsibility was assigned to individuals and organizations, not to a faith tradition. This distinction - between prosecuting crimes and policing belief - is presented as a cornerstone of democratic governance.

Concerns from Within Religious Communities

Importantly, the [article](#) notes that concern about state overreach is not limited to religious conservatives or those directly affected by investigations. Voices across ideological lines - including progressive media and mainstream Christian outlets - have expressed unease.

Some Christian commentators worry that once the state becomes comfortable labeling certain religious

groups as "heretical" or "social evils", that logic could eventually be extended to other forms of religion.



According to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as "pseudo-religion": the Shincheonji Church of Jesus.



According to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as "pseudo-religion": the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)



Pastor Son Hyun-bo of the large Segyero Church in Busan, released 30th January 2026 after 143 days of detention for warning his congregation about laws that would criminalize preaching biblical teaching on sexuality. He is however now effectively silenced as the court sentenced him to 6 months, suspended for 1 year, which means he cannot publicly criticize the current administration's policies. Here August 2025

Religious affairs correspondent Jeong writes,

"On January 26, the Christian media outlet 'News and Joy' raised concerns that, amid accelerating investigations into Shincheonji and the [Unification Church](#), this logic could easily spread to Christianity as a whole. When expressions labeling specific religious groups as "heresies" or "social evils" are repeatedly voiced through the mouth of state power, no one can guarantee how far that blade will extend."

The issue is not theological agreement or disagreement; it is institutional precedent. If the government begins to define religious legitimacy, no group can be certain it will remain protected.

The [article](#) is careful to emphasize that this is not a defense of controversial doctrines or abusive practices. Rather, it is a pragmatic concern about safeguarding religious freedom as a legal principle. Today's unpopular religion could become tomorrow's test case for broader repression.

Religion's Moral Voice Is Not the Enemy

A symbolic moment highlighted in the article is the selection of a Bible verse - Matthew 22:21, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to [God](#) what is [God's](#)" - as the "Verse of the Year" by the Christian Academic Society, a major Christian sholarly body. For the author, this choice captures the heart of the current debate.

The verse is interpreted not as a call for religious silence, but as a reminder of proper boundaries. The state governs law and order; religion speaks to moral conscience. When these domains are confused - either by religious domination of politics or by political domination of religion - both society and faith suffer.

The [article](#) argues that a healthy democracy allows religious voices to speak ethically and prophetically, while firmly rejecting any attempt by the state to regulate theology or belief.

A More Mature Democratic Moment

In its concluding sections, the [article](#) suggests that Korea's current debate marks a step toward democratic maturity. Earlier controversies over religion and politics often devolved into ideological battles or expressions of religious hostility. By contrast, the present discussion is increasingly grounded in constitutional law, historical memory, and comparative democratic practice.

The author is clear: illegal acts must be punished without exception. Religious organizations and individuals are not above the law. However, punishment must occur within existing legal frameworks - criminal law, election law, campaign finance law - not through ad hoc judgments about religious legitimacy. The moment the state begins to rule on doctrine or orthodoxy, separation of church and state collapses into a tool of governance.

Why This Moment Matters

For Western readers, the article's ultimate message will feel familiar yet timely. A society is healthiest when religion does not fear state control, and the state does not view religion as something to be managed or corrected. The emergence of a broad, cross-sector conversation - spanning media, religious communities, and academia - suggests that South Korea may be rediscovering the original meaning of church-state separation.

Given the country's history of authoritarian rule and religious persecution, this reassessment carries

particular weight. If the current debate leads to a renewed respect for constitutional boundaries, it may serve as a turning point - one that helps ensure both democratic integrity and genuine religious freedom in the years ahead.

See also [Current Korean Situation: Context and Key Issues](#)
See also [Court: Prosecutors' Overreach in Politicized Case](#)
See also [S. Korea's Troubling Pattern of Selective Probes](#)

See also [Turning Journalism into Moral Storytelling](#)
See also [When Special Prosecutors Become Political Tools](#)
See also [Religion Between Engagement and Withdrawal](#)

See also [Climate of Suspicion: Peace Reframed as Politics](#)
See also [Korea: Can Religion and Politics Be Disentangled?](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

See also [Some Religions Are Welcome in Politics, Some Not](#)
See also [Fact-Based Clarification of Media Misreporting](#)
See also [President's Own Party Drawn into Lobbying Claims](#)

See also [Faith, Finance, Fairness: Rethinking the Narrative](#)
See also [Balcomb: "Prosecutors' Case Is Politically Driven"](#)
See also [Likely Long Legal Battle Ahead for Mother Han](#)

See also [Bail Hearing with Mother Han's Spiritual Message](#)
See also [Trial Day 1: Mother Han Denies All Allegations](#)
See also [Asia Today Editorial: "Avoid Detention of Clergy!"](#)

See also [Complaint Filed Against Lead Special Prosecutor](#)
See also [SKorea's Polarization Shapes Views of Mother Han](#)
See also [Inside the Detention Center: A 10-Minute Visit](#)

See also [Health Concerns: 82-Year-Old Pretrial Detainee](#)
See also [In Tiny Solitary Cell: Irreversible Harm Caused](#)
See also [Mother Han Briefly Released for Medical Reasons](#)

See also [Message of Religious Unity from Detention Cell](#)
See also [Over 50 Days in Vigil Outside Detention Center](#)

Related to danger of policing belief: [Mother Han's December Trial: Long Detention Ahead](#)
Also related to danger of policing belief: [A 10-Minute Visit to Mother Han in Detention](#)
Also related to danger of policing belief: [Denying Allegations: Hak Ja Han \(82\) in Inquiry](#)

Also related to danger of policing belief: [SKorean Court's Sharp Criticism of Prosecutors](#)
And also related to danger of policing belief: [Detention: Harsh Cell Conditions Spark Outcry](#)
More, related to danger of policing belief: [Ugly: Arrest Warrant Sought for Hak Ja Han \(82\)](#)

And more, related to danger of policing belief: [Critics Warn of "Authoritarian Drift" in SKorea](#)
Even more, related to danger of policing belief: [Court Decision to Prolong Detention Condemned](#)
Still more, related to danger of policing belief: [Co-Founder, 82, Questioned 9 Hours by Prosecutors](#)

Also related to danger of policing belief: [Democratic Party's Assault on Family Federation](#)
And even more, related to danger of policing belief: [Mother Han \(82\) in Poor Health in Damp, Cold Cell](#)
And still more, related to danger of policing belief: [Korean Crisis: "True Democracy Must Serve Heaven"](#)

And yet more, related to danger of policing belief: [Faith Leaders Protest State Assault on Religion](#)
Also related to danger of policing belief: [News Release Blasts Indictment of Hak Ja Han, 82](#)
More, related to danger of policing belief: [70 Years On: Detention History Repeats Itself](#)

And more, related to danger of policing belief: [Trump Raises Alarm Over Church Raids in Korea](#)
Even more, related to danger of policing belief: [Mike Pompeo Calls Probe of Co-Founder "Lawfare"](#)
Still more, related to danger of policing belief: [Korean Faith Crackdown: USA Urged to Confront It](#)

Yet more, related to danger of policing belief: [Korean Bribery Scandal: Media Clears Federation](#)
And also related to danger of policing belief: [Raids Blur Line Between Justice and Politics](#)
More, related to danger of policing belief: [Heavy-Handed Raid on Sacred Sites Condemned](#)



Your Message *

1. The First Special Prosecutor Investigation

The first Special Prosecutor case was primarily focused on the former First Lady, Kim Keon-hee (김건희). According to publicly reported information, investigators examined whether gifts – including a handbag and a necklace – had been improperly provided. Former lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong (권성동) was also investigated for allegedly receiving funds.

This investigation did not directly involve True Mother. Earlier today (28th January), the Seoul Central District Court issued its rulings. The court found that the First Lady had received the items and imposed a 20-month prison sentence. Prosecutors had sought a longer term and have stated their intention to appeal.



Former First Lady of the Republic of Korea Kim Keon-hee posing for a photo, April 2023, in the White House. Official White House Photo by Erin Scott. Public domain image



Yoon Yeong-ho, 6th Dec. 2020. Screenshot from Peacelink TV

The court also found Dr. Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) guilty in relation to providing the items and funds, sentencing him to 14 months – less than the sentence prosecutors requested. Importantly, the court dismissed a charge related to alleged evidence destruction, stating that the Special Prosecutor did not have authority over that matter.

Finally, the court ruled on Representative Kweon's case, issuing a two-year sentence with an order to return the funds. He has indicated he will appeal.

As to motives, prosecutors alleged that Dr. Yoon was seeking political goodwill to support three initiatives: Korean government backing for a potential UN office in Asia, development of an economic zone in Cambodia, and the acquisition of a broadcast outlet. As I have said before, these goals, in themselves, are not improper; whether any personal benefit became involved remains unproven.

Much of the activity occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when severe restrictions limited access to True Mother and reduced normal oversight mechanisms. The court has acknowledged that inadequate internal controls contributed to the situation. Steps have since been taken to prevent similar vulnerabilities.



The interfaith cooperation the movement of Father Moon and Mother Han is so well-known for: Here, from an interreligious conference in Seoul 7th August 2025. Photo: UPF.

Public commentary has sometimes portrayed the Family Federation as motivated solely by self-interest, but those familiar with our history know of our longstanding commitment to interfaith cooperation, peacebuilding, and Korean unification.

2. The Second Special Prosecutor Investigation

The second Special Prosecutor inquiry does involve True Mother directly. From my perspective, the broader political environment appears highly charged, and various religious leaders and civil society figures have faced scrutiny recently. Even large and well-established churches have experienced investigations or media pressure.

As most of you know, True Mother voluntarily responded to questioning but was later detained. As of today, she has been held for 128 days. Her trial began on 1st December and is expected to continue several more weeks. Although some people have speculated about an imminent conclusion, this is not supported by available information.

Due to concerns about her health – including reports that she has suffered falls in detention – another bail application has been submitted. A decision has not yet been announced.



Hak Ja Han, True Mother, at the beginning of her detention in September 2025. Photo: Bitter Winter

3. National Police Investigation

A separate National Police probe commenced recently after Dr. Yoon stated that financial contributions had been made to individuals across the political spectrum. In response, opposition parties called for a broader inquiry, and a joint task force was formed.



Last week, additional searches were conducted at Federation facilities and related sites, including the detention center. It is expected that more individuals may be questioned, although no formal charges have been filed to date.

Political analysts in Korea have offered

Submit



Raided by special prosecutors: The Korean HQ of the [Family Federation](#) in Cheongpa-dong, Seoul, here at the inauguration in May 2005. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

Political analysts in Korea have offered differing interpretations of these developments. Some suggest the administration wishes to demonstrate a strong anti-corruption stance; others highlight the complexity of ongoing legal processes. It is publicly known that various figures across major parties have previously faced corruption allegations.

4. Legislative and Policy Initiatives Concerning Religion

Recent government discussions have included possible legislative changes

affecting smaller or unpopular religious groups. Some legal experts and commentators have expressed concern about the constitutionality of certain proposals, particularly regarding religious freedom. I will not make a legal judgment, but I note that these debates have generated significant discussion within Korean civil society.

Earlier this year, the President of South Korea held a luncheon with representatives of several major religious bodies and stated that they supported reforms. He specifically mentioned the [Unification Church](#) and Shincheonji [\[See editor's note below\]](#) as examples of organizations requiring oversight. Again, some public voices have raised concerns about potential overreach and the role of government in evaluating religious legitimacy.



According to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as “pseudo-religion”: the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. Here, its logo.

These issues remind me of Pastor Martin Niemöller’s well-known warning about remaining silent when minority groups are targeted. The principle is that restrictions placed on any religious group ultimately affect all.

5. The Media Environment
Media coverage of religious organizations has been intense, with many stories about the [Family Federation](#) appearing among the most-read articles today. A common theme in coverage is the suggestion that religious institutions should refrain entirely from political engagement. However, under the Korean constitution, religious believers have the same civic rights as all other citizens, including freedom of expression and association.

Although the current attention can feel overwhelming, it also means that almost everyone in Korea now knows about [True Mother](#), the Cheonwon complex [in Gapyeong], and our activities. Even headlines about unrelated political matters sometimes link back to the [Federation](#), for better or worse.

Conclusion and Spiritual Perspective

Despite the challenging circumstances, I believe opportunities remain. [True Mother](#) has long expressed the desire to reach one third of the world’s population, and historically, periods of adversity have sometimes produced unexpected breakthroughs. We can reflect on figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, [True Father](#) in Danbury, and even the Apostle Paul – individuals whose imprisonment became part of a larger narrative of transformation.



From a large prayer vigil in Gapyeong, South Korea in September 2025, soon after [Mother Han](#)’s detention started. Screenshot from live transmission by [FFWPU](#).

Yesterday, Ken Doo visited [True Mother](#), and she emphasized the importance of increased prayer at this time. Many of you join the daily vigil prayers, and I encourage you to continue.

We must also share the truthful and spiritual perspective behind these events. This is both a spiritual and societal struggle, and [True Mother](#) remains steadfast. From what I understand, she seeks not merely release, but clarity, vindication, and the establishment of truth.

Let us continue to pray for a fair process, especially concerning the pending bail decision. There is no compelling reason for continued detention, particularly given the dismissal of certain charges.

Thank you for allowing me the time to share my understanding of the current situation. Although the news is difficult, I remain hopeful, and I believe more developments are still to come in the weeks ahead.

See also [Court: Prosecutors’ Overreach in Politicized Case](#)

See also [S. Korea’s Troubling Pattern of Selective Probes](#)

See also [Religion-State: The Danger of Policing Belief](#)

See also [Turning Journalism into Moral Storytelling](#)

[See also *When Special Prosecutors Become Political Tools*](#)

[See also *Religion Between Engagement and Withdrawal*](#)

[See also *Climate of Suspicion: Peace Reframed as Politics*](#)

[See also *Korea: Can Religion and Politics Be Disentangled?*](#)

Text: [Dr. Michael Balcomb](#)

Featured image above: Artistic impression of the content of [Dr. Michael Balcomb's](#) message 28th January 2026. Illustration: ChatGPT, 29th January 2026.

[**Editor's note:** [Shincheonji](#), officially known as *Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony*, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation. Shincheonji teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee has received divine revelation to interpret it.]

[See also *Some Religions Are Welcome in Politics, Some Not*](#)

[See also *Fact-Based Clarification of Media Misreporting*](#)

[See also *President's Own Party Drawn into Lobbying Claims*](#)

[See also *Faith, Finance, Fairness: Rethinking the Narrative*](#)

[See also *Balcomb: "Prosecutors' Case Is Politically Driven"*](#)

[See also *Likely Long Legal Battle Ahead for Mother Han*](#)

[See also *Bail Hearing with Mother Han's Spiritual Message*](#)

[See also *Trial Day 1: Mother Han Denies All Allegations*](#)

[See also *Asia Today Editorial: "Avoid Detention of Clergy!"*](#)

[See also *Complaint Filed Against Lead Special Prosecutor*](#)

[See also *SKorea's Polarization Shapes Views of Mother Han*](#)

[See also *Inside the Detention Center: A 10-Minute Visit*](#)

[See also *Health Concerns: 82-Year-Old Pretrial Detainee*](#)

[See also *In Tiny Solitary Cell: Irreversible Harm Caused*](#)

[See also *Mother Han Briefly Released for Medical Reasons*](#)

[See also *Message of Religious Unity from Detention Cell*](#)

[See also *Over 50 Days in Vigil Outside Detention Center*](#)

Related to situation in South Korea: [Mother Han's December Trial: Long Detention Ahead](#)

Also related to situation in South Korea: [A 10-Minute Visit to Mother Han in Detention](#)

Also related to situation in South Korea: [Denying Allegations: Hak Ja Han \(82\) in Inquiry](#)

Also related to situation in South Korea: [SKorean Court's Sharp Criticism of Prosecutors](#)

And also related to situation in South Korea: [Detention: Harsh Cell Conditions Spark Outcry](#)

More, related to situation in South Korea: [Ugly: Arrest Warrant Sought for Hak Ja Han \(82\)](#)

And more, related to situation in South Korea: [Critics Warn of "Authoritarian Drift" in SKorea](#)

Even more, related to situation in South Korea: [Court Decision to Prolong Detention Condemned](#)

Still more, related to situation in South Korea: [Co-Founder, 82, Questioned 9 Hours by Prosecutors](#)

Also related to situation in South Korea: [Democratic Party's Assault on Family Federation](#)

And even more, related to situation in South Korea: [Mother Han \(82\) in Poor Health in Damp, Cold Cell](#)

And still more, related to situation in South Korea: [Korean Crisis: "True Democracy Must Serve Heaven"](#)

And yet more, related to situation in South Korea: [Faith Leaders Protest State Assault on Religion](#)

Also related to situation in South Korea: [News Release Blasts Indictment of Hak Ja Han, 82](#)

More, related to situation in South Korea: [70 Years On: Detention History Repeats Itself](#)

And more, related to situation in South Korea: [Trump Raises Alarm Over Church Raids in Korea](#)

Even more, related to situation in South Korea: [Mike Pompeo Calls Probe of Co-Founder "Lawfare"](#)

Still more, related to situation in South Korea: [Korean Faith Crackdown: USA Urged to Confront It](#)

Yet more, related to situation in South Korea: [Korean Bribery Scandal: Media Clears Federation](#)

And also related to situation in South Korea: [Raids Blur Line Between Justice and Politics](#)

More, related to situation in South Korea: [Heavy-Handed Raid on Sacred Sites Condemned](#)

«

Previous

Court: Prosecutors’ Overreach In Politi... Religion-State: The Danger Of Policin...

Next

»