

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Unificationism, an Emerging World Religion

Knut Holdhus
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Unificationism. Illustration: ChatGPT

A world religion born in Korea: How Unificationism crossed the threshold to global religion



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)

The South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) carried on 3rd February an opinion piece by religious affairs correspondent Jeong Seong-su titled "[Unificationism, Having Grown into a World Religion, Is an Asset of Korea](#)".

Jeong describes how religion in contemporary South Korea remains a subject of active public debate. Questions about how religious communities should interact with society, politics, and civic life continue to surface, reflecting broader global concerns about pluralism, social responsibility, and cultural influence.

Within this context, [Unificationism](#) (통일교) - often referred to in the media as the [Unification Church](#) - has become a focal point of discussion, particularly regarding its global reach and its significance beyond Korea. To understand why it is increasingly described not merely as a Korean religious movement but as a "world religion", it is first necessary to clarify what scholars mean by that term.

In the field of religious studies, a "world religion" is not defined solely by age, size, or fame. The [article](#) points out that the term rather refers to a religious tradition that transcends ethnic, national, or regional boundaries and successfully takes root in diverse cultural contexts. Such religions articulate ethical and philosophical principles that claim universal relevance, develop

organizational structures capable of sustaining long-term global activity, and adapt to multicultural and multiracial societies without losing coherence.

When viewed through these criteria, [Unificationism](#) no longer fits comfortably into the categories of a local faith or a short-lived new religious movement. It has grown into a globally distributed religious system with an institutional presence in nearly every part of the world.

According to Jeong, [Unificationism](#) is today formally registered and active in 195 countries. Its global presence is not limited to missionary outposts directed from Korea, but instead relies heavily on local leadership in regions across North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. This emphasis on indigenized leadership has allowed the movement to embed itself within local cultures while maintaining a shared theological and organizational framework. From an academic standpoint, this degree of global integration is one of the clearest indicators that a religion has crossed the threshold into genuinely "world" status.



Dr. Eileen Barker, OBE, in 1997

This assessment is not limited to Korean observers. A number of prominent Western sociologists of religion have examined [Unificationism](#) and reached similar conclusions. The British scholar Eileen Barker (1938-), known for her extensive work on new religious movements, has described [Unificationism](#) as a rare case of a faith deliberately designed to give believers an identity that transcends traditional markers such as bloodline, nationality, and race - identities that historically predate the modern nation-state. In other words, adherents are encouraged to see themselves primarily as members of a global religious community rather than as representatives of a single ethnic or national group.

Brian Wilson (1926-2004) of Oxford University highlighted another dimension of [Unificationism](#) that aligns it with world religions: its scope of interpretation. Rather than focusing only on individual spiritual salvation, [Unificationism](#) has consistently offered a broader framework for understanding history, ideology, and global politics. Its teachings address phenomena such as communism, the Cold War, and the moral structure of international relations, presenting a coherent worldview that seeks to interpret - and respond to - large-scale historical forces. This ambition to explain and engage with the world as a whole is a defining characteristic of religions that aspire to universal relevance.

American sociologist Thomas Robbins (1943-2015) has gone further, describing [Unificationism](#) as one of the most ambitious attempts by a non-Western religious movement to establish itself within the cultural and institutional centers of the Western world.



David Bromley

David G. Bromley (1941-), another leading scholar in the field, frames it as a paradigmatic example of a "transnational religious network". In his analysis, the movement extends well beyond a formal [religious institution](#), encompassing non-governmental organizations, academic bodies, media platforms, and peace initiatives that operate together as an interconnected ecosystem. This networked structure reflects a distinctly 21st-century model of religion - less centralized, more relational, and deeply embedded in global civil society.

The [Segye Ilbo piece](#) points out that the global character of [Unificationism](#) is often symbolized by the international activities of its founders, [Sun Myung Moon](#) (1920-2012) and [Hak Ja Han](#). However, the true measure of a religion's global presence cannot be captured by statistics, conferences, or high-profile events alone. It is revealed most clearly in the lived experiences of ordinary believers. One telling account comes from a [Unificationist](#) clergyman who served as a missionary in China and Africa. He

recalls that even in extremely remote regions of Africa, he encountered [Unificationist](#) "Blessed Families" living established lives within local communities. Notably, many of their children bore Korean names, reflecting a symbolic link to the movement's origins.

Over a two-year period, this missionary personally named more than seventy children. Years later, families continued to contact him to request names for newborn siblings, asking him to follow traditional generational naming patterns. This practice may seem small, but it reveals something profound. Entrusting a religious leader with the naming of a child - one of the most intimate decisions a family can make - signals a deep level of trust. It demonstrates that [Unificationism](#)'s global influence operates not just through institutions, but through relationships that shape everyday life.

From this perspective, the success of a world religion is not measured by membership numbers alone, but by the degree to which it becomes woven into the most personal moments of human experience.

Ethically, [Unificationism](#) defines itself in universal terms. Jeong writes that it presents each human being as possessing messianic value and emphasizes a moral ideal known as "[true love](#)" - the principle of

responding to harm or loss not with retaliation, but with love and responsibility. Accounts from mission fields describe leaders who quietly support believers in practical ways, paying close attention to their health, financial struggles, and emotional well-being. Such actions are often compared to parental care for children living far from home. These everyday expressions of ethical commitment have played a crucial role in enabling the movement to establish long-lasting roots in diverse societies.



[Father Moon](#) and [Mother Han](#), the [True Parents](#), here 1st August 1996 in Washington DC. A key part of their teachings, [Unificationism](#), is [true love](#) and the ideal that all of us may embody such a love, enabling us to become true parents, true husbands and wives, and true sons and daughters

Against this background, religious affairs reporter Jeong writes that discussions in Korea increasingly describe [Unificationism](#) as a national "asset". Importantly, this does not imply immunity from criticism or public scrutiny. Rather, it raises a more nuanced question: how can a religious community that originated in Korea and grew into a world religion be responsibly understood and engaged within the public sphere? An "asset", in this sense, refers to potential - the capacity to contribute cultural, ethical, and relational value to society as a whole.

The case for viewing [Unificationism](#) in this way is straightforward. Few religious or ideological movements that began in Korea have sustained such extensive and long-term connections across global political, religious, and civil society arenas. According to Jeong, this achievement suggests that Korean society has already developed distinctive networks and modes of communication with the wider world.

Moreover, diplomacy and global influence are no longer exercised by governments alone. When culture, religion, and civil society interact constructively, a nation's soft power becomes deeper and more multidimensional. Seen in this light, the responsibility for stewarding this legacy belongs not only to the religious movement itself, but to society and the state as a whole.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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Dissolution Case: Courts Must Not Reward Terror

- February 1, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



Yamagami's life sentence closes the criminal case, but dissolution efforts backed by courts risk validating the very objectives of his terrorism



Logo of the Sekai Nippo

Tokyo, 30th January 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. *Original article*.

Judicial Integrity That Must Not “Reward” Terrorism

The “Yamagami Terror Attack” and the Dissolution of a Religious Organization

by Seisaku Morita (森田 清策)

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The Nara District Court has [sentenced](#) defendant Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也) to life imprisonment. By imposing the harshest penalty short of the death sentence, the court effectively



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recognized that the shooting of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) was a premeditated act of

terrorism. Although an appeal remains possible, the **first-instance judgment** brings a provisional conclusion to the criminal acts committed by the defendant.

While the **sentencing** itself can be regarded as appropriate, it is regrettable that the ruling did not delve into the political and social impact brought about by the terrorist act. That remains the unresolved issue. Only by drawing lessons from a terrorist attack that claimed the life of the politician who served the longest tenure as prime minister in Japan's constitutional history can recurrence be prevented – and such reflection would serve as the bare minimum form of requiem for Shinzo Abe.

When considering the societal problems caused by the “Yamagami terror attack”, the key point lies in the defendant’s objective in attempting to take Abe’s life. According to the judgment, Yamagami harbored resentment toward the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** (formerly the **Unification Church**), believing that his life had been ruined by his mother’s faith and her large financial donations to the **organization**.

Seeking to “strike back” at the **group**, he shot Abe, who had sent a video message to an event hosted by an organization affiliated with the **Federation**. The defendant believed that doing so would focus public criticism on the **religious organization**.

One particularly conspicuous development triggered by the terror attack was the move to seek a dissolution order against the **Family Federation**. In March of last year, the **Tokyo District Court** issued a **decision** ordering the dissolution of the **organization** under the **Religious Corporations Act**. The **organization** immediately filed an interlocutory **appeal** [Editor’s note: an appeal filed before a case has reached a final judgment, challenging a specific interim ruling made by a lower court]. The **Tokyo High Court** is expected to issue its decision within the current fiscal year [Editor’s note: which ends on 31st March].

In the context of terrorism, the question of what a court-issued dissolution order signifies is crucial: it would amount to the judiciary condoning a disregard for due process – the core of the rule of law. Since due process is a constitutional principle, its violation is a matter of grave concern.



Former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida swayed by hostile media campaign and changed the law overnight. Here, 16th April 2023. Photo: 首相官邸ホームページ / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 4.0 Int



Nara District Court. Photo (2007): 663highland / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp. Cropped



Paid the ultimate price: Shinzo Abe, here delivering a video message on 12th September 2021. Photo: Screenshot from live transmission via PeaceLink

The trigger for the dissolution request process was pulled by then-Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (岸田文雄), who was in office at the time of the attack. Immediately after the incident, the media launched intense criticism of the **religious organization**, and the **Liberal Democratic Party** – some of whose members had “ties” to groups friendly to the **organization** – was swept into the storm.

However, in October 2022, the Kishida administration issued a cabinet decision stating that a dissolution order could not be applied to an organization whose executives had not been criminally convicted, and it answered in the Diet that civil-law torts were “not included” among the requirements. Yet the very next day, Kishida **reversed his previous statement**, declaring that they “were included”.

Until that point, the **Agency for Cultural Affairs** had maintained that civil-law torts were not part of the requirements, in consideration of the gravity of the “freedom of religion” guaranteed by the Constitution. This position was **overturned overnight**.

Aside from objections raised by a small number of legal professionals, Kishida’s disregard for the principle of due process attracted little attention from opposition parties, the media, or public opinion. Everything unfolded in a manner consistent with the aims of defendant Yamagami.

The neglect of due process was subsequently endorsed by the judiciary as well. If, following the **Tokyo District Court**, the **Tokyo High Court** were also to issue a dissolution order, it would produce a result aligned with the defendant’s intent to “strike back” at the **organization** – effectively granting a “reward” to a terrorist.

In March 2019, following the mosque shootings in New Zealand, then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern stated in a parliamentary address, “We will give terrorists nothing.” What one hopes for from the **Tokyo High Court** is not a decision that rewards terrorism, but rather the sound judgment to send a clear message that society must never be allowed to be moved by violence.

See also **Court Rejects Media Narrative in Yamagami Case**

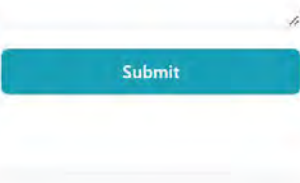
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Featured image above: Courts must not reward terror. Illustration: ChatGPT 1st February 2026.



Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand 2017-2023. Photo: New Zealand Government, Office of the Governor-General.



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