FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Religions Pawns in S Korea's Political War

Knut Holdhus
January 8, 2026

Imitating the Family Federation's World Culture and Sports Festival? On September 16, 2012, Shinchonji hosted its own World Peace Festival – the 6th Shincheonji National Olympiad in Olympic Stadium in Seoul.

朝鮮日報
Chosun Ilbo

South Korea expands probe into alleged coordinated political collusion by faiths, targeting their claimed benchmarking of tactics

The major South Korean daily Chosun Ilbo published 8th January an article by reporter Yu hee-gon (유희곤) with the headline "[Exclusive] Did the Unification Church and Shincheonji Benchmark Each Other? Prosecutors and Police to Investigate Both Religions".


Lee Man-hee, founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth)


Hak Ja Han (also called Mother Han, in Munich, Germany May 19, 2024

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In early January 2026, South Korean authorities announced a significant expansion of an ongoing investigation into the intersection of religion and politics. What began as a probe into the Family Federation (formerly the Unification Church) – an internationally known Korean-founded religious movement – has now widened to include Shincheonji (신천지) [See editor's note below], another new religious group founded in South Korea. The move has become one of the top media stories in the country claiming that certain religious organizations may have systematically attempted to influence national elections, political parties, and lawmakers through coordinated membership drives, financial lobbying, and informal networks of power.

Imitating the Family Federation? Here, the Shincheonji Peace Palace in Cheongpyeong-myeon, on the same lake where the Family Federation has large facilities, in Gapyeong, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea

A closure order put up by the public health authorities at the main entrance of the Daegu branch of Shincheonji at the start of the Corona epidemic in 2020, when the Shincheonji Church of Jesus faced intense scrutiny and persecution - rooted more in stigma than purely public health concerns. It happened after a woman, later dubbed "Patient 31", attended two services in Daegu at Shincheonji's regional branch. She unknowingly became a super-spreader, infecting dozens of worshippers in tightly packed masses

For Western audiences, the story requires some background. South Korea has a vibrant religious landscape that includes not only mainstream Christianity and Buddhism but also a number of homegrown "new religious movements". According to the Chosun Ilbo, "two of South Korea's most representative new religious movements" are the Family Federation – led by its co-founder Hak Ja Han (한학자 – 82) – and Shincheonji [See editor's note below], led by its founder and chairman, Lee Man-hee (이만희 – 95). Both groups have become subjects of extensive probes by special prosecutors appointed by the current Lee administration in order to investigate alleged unlawful acts by the former Yoon administration and groups claimed to have supported him.

The current investigation is being led by a joint task force of prosecutors and police, formed to examine allegations of "politics-religion collusion". Authorities say they are looking into whether these groups provided unlawful funds or favors to politicians, and whether they organized their followers to join political parties en masse in order to sway internal party primaries. Such practices, while not always illegal on their face, may violate election laws or political finance regulations if carried out in a coordinated and deceptive manner.

The Chosun Ilbo writes that this overlap is documented in internal Family Federation materials known as the "TM (True Mother) Reports", thousands of pages of reports compiled by senior Federation officials for Chairwoman Hak Ja Han (한학자). In these documents, according to the large daily, Shincheonji [See editor's note below] is mentioned dozens of times, often as a point of comparison or competition. One report explicitly notes that Shincheonji had been "benchmarking" the Family Federation. The report also suggests that internal turmoil within Shincheonji [See editor's note below] – particularly the defection of a high-ranking female leader – represented a critical turning point for the group.

A key theme emerging from the current investigation is the apparent parallel - and possible mutual imitation - between the Family Federation and Shincheonji [See editor's note below]. According to investigative reporting by Chosun Ilbo, South Korea's largest conservative newspaper, Shincheonji's leadership long viewed the Family Federation as a "success model" among new religions: a group that grew from a fringe movement into a global organization with political access, financial resources, and international influence. At the same time, the Family Federation is now accused of having adopted tactics similar to those Shincheonji [See editor's note below] was previously suspected of using, particularly in relation to election interference.

That former Shincheonji leader, Kim Nam-hee (김남희), plays an important role in the broader narrative.

Once regarded as second only to Lee Man-hee (이만희), Kim left the organization in 2017 and later became a vocal critic, accusing Shincheonji's leadership of financial misconduct and abuse of power. Her allegations contributed to criminal complaints against Lee, who was eventually convicted – though on narrower charges than initially alleged – related to embezzlement and obstruction of public health efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The political dimension of Shincheonji's activities has been controversial for more than a decade. Critics allege that the group systematically encouraged its members to join conservative political parties under false pretenses, then vote as a bloc in party primaries. The goal, according to these claims, was not ideological alignment but strategic influence: ensuring that candidates perceived as friendly or non-hostile to the group would advance. Similar allegations surfaced during the elections that brought former Presidents Lee Myung-bak (이명박) and Park Geun-hye (박근혜) to power, though investigations at the time did not result in major prosecutions.

These accusations resurfaced with renewed force during the 2022 presidential election. Shincheonji [See editor's note below] is suspected of having mobilized large numbers of members to join the conservative People Power Party ahead of its internal primary. One losing candidate later alleged that as many as 100,000 Shincheonji followers became voting party members as part of an informal quid pro quo involving prosecutorial leniency toward the group. While these claims remain contested, they have placed Shincheonji back under official scrutiny for the first time in several years.

Yoon Yeong-ho, Dec 6, 2020

Pastor Son Hyun-bo, here August 2025

The Family Federation, meanwhile, faces its own legal troubles, largely stemming from the years that Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) held a key leadership position. Prosecutors allege that Federation officials provided unlawful political funding and organizational support to the conservative presidential campaign in 2022.

Unlike earlier Shincheonji cases [See editor's note below], these allegations have already resulted in indictments, and court proceedings are ongoing. The irony, highlighted by Chosun Ilbo, is that in the realm of political intervention, Shincheonji appears to have pioneered certain methods before Yoon Yeong-ho of the Family Federation later adopted similar approaches – raising questions about whether the "benchmarking" may have run in both directions.

The political fallout has been immediate. As police recently uncovered evidence suggesting the Family Federation also lobbied lawmakers from the liberal Democratic Party, President Lee Jae-myung (이재명) ordered the creation of a broader joint investigative task force that includes Shincheonji [See editor's note below]. Opposition parties, however, argue that expanding the probe is a strategic distraction – an attempt to dilute scrutiny of alleged lobbying involving ruling-party figures by lumping multiple religious organizations together. They are calling for an independent special prosecutor to ensure political neutrality.

What is already clear, however, is that the huge investigation with hundreds of investigators and police involved has implications that extend well beyond any single religious organization. More churches have been raided by police and are under investigation. Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보), the head of a large Christian megachurch, has been held in detention since early September, in the same detention center where Hak Ja Han, the co-founder of the Family Federation, has been detained for more than 100 days in a tiny cell.

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[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.]

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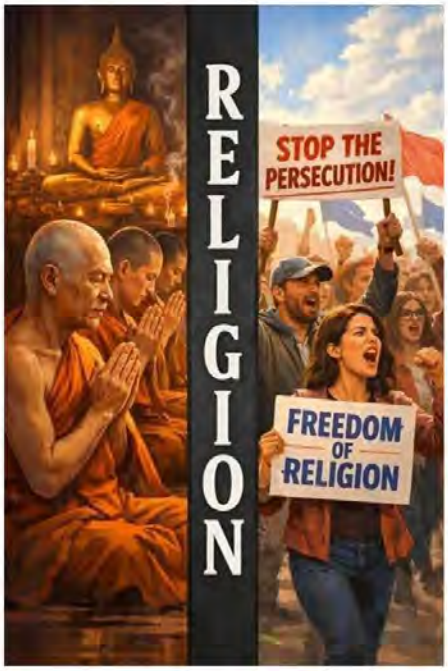
- January 7, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



From Catholicism to Buddhism: Faith in the public sphere and a long tradition of religious engagement with history

Jeong Seong-su (정성수), religious affairs correspondent of the South Korean daily Segye Ilbo had an article published 5th January titled "Salvation-Centered Religion versus History-Engaged Religion".

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The question of whether religion should limit itself to the realm of individual salvation or extend its concern to society and history has long occupied theologians, believers, and critics alike. At stake is not merely a doctrinal disagreement, but a fundamental divergence in how religion understands its mission in the world.

Some religious traditions and movements insist that faith must remain detached from social and political realities, warning that historical engagement contaminates spiritual purity. Others argue that religion, by its very nature, carries moral responsibilities that cannot be confined to the inner life of the individual. Jeong's article under discussion positions itself firmly within this latter view, presenting what it calls "history-engaged religion" as a recurring and legitimate pattern across world religions, and situating the Family Federation within this broader tradition.

The author begins by distinguishing between salvation-oriented religions that emphasize withdrawal from society and history-engaged religions that regard social responsibility as integral to faith. According to Jeong, certain mystical Christian groups, apocalyptic movements, or separatist communities view the world as irredeemably fallen and see historical intervention as a distraction – or even a corruption – of true belief. From this perspective, religious authenticity is preserved through distance from politics, institutions, and public controversy.

***Keeping a distance from politics**: The Jehovah's Witnesses, who don't allow their members to vote in political electons. Here from a street information stand in Brixton, London, UK 28th August 2018. Photo: Brixton: Jehovah's Witnesses by Jim Osley. License: CC ASA 2.0 Gen. Cropped*

By contrast, history-engaged religion does not draw a sharp boundary between salvation and social order. It assumes that faith must be expressed not only through personal piety but also through ethical stances, institutional action, and engagement with the moral direction of society over time.

Crucially, the author emphasizes that this orientation is not an anomaly or a modern deviation. Rather, it has appeared repeatedly across major religious traditions. Catholicism, Protestantism, and Buddhism are cited as prominent examples of religions that, despite doctrinal differences, have consistently intersected with historical and political realities. These references are not incidental; they are intended to demonstrate that the Family Federation's social engagement is neither unprecedented nor inherently suspect, but instead reflects a well-established religious pattern.

***Catholicism**: The facade of Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome, Italy. Photo (2013): Jebulon / Wikimedia Commons. Public domain image. Cropped*

In the case of Catholicism, the author points to its long history of institutional engagement with political authority, particularly around issues of labor rights, human dignity, and social justice. From papal encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* to modern interventions on immigration, poverty, and human rights, Catholicism has repeatedly asserted that moral truth cannot remain silent in the face of unjust social structures.

This stance has often brought the papal church into conflict with state power rather than alignment with it. The author's implication is that Catholic engagement with

politics has not been understood simply as "collusion", but as a moral obligation rooted in theological convictions about human dignity and the common good. Catholicism thus exemplifies a religion that sees historical engagement as a consequence of faith, not a betrayal of it.

Protestantism – particularly evangelical Protestantism in the United States – is offered as a second illustration. Over the past century, evangelical movements have played a significant role in shaping political discourse, most notably within conservative politics. This involvement has included advocacy on issues such as communism, family values, religious freedom, and national identity.

***Protestantism**: Evangelical Church of Lafayette, Oregon, USA. Photo (2009): M.O. Stevens / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 3.0 Unp*

While this political alignment has been controversial and frequently criticized, it is rarely dismissed outright as illegitimate simply because it reflects religious values entering the public sphere. Instead, it is generally understood as an expression of a worldview that links moral order, national destiny, and religious conviction. By referencing Protestant evangelicalism, the author underscores that sustained political influence does not automatically equate to improper entanglement with power; rather, it often reflects a conscious decision to engage history from within a religious framework.

***Buddhism**: Venerable Seewalie receiving gift from Mahinda Rajapakse, President of Sri Lanka. Photo (2011): Dhamma26 / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp*

Buddhism, often stereotyped as purely contemplative or otherworldly, is introduced to challenge the assumption that historical engagement is unique to Western monotheistic traditions. Across Asia, Buddhist institutions have frequently intertwined with national identity, resistance movements, and state formation. Examples range from Sri Lanka and Myanmar to Korea and Japan, where Buddhism has at various times supported political authority, resisted colonial domination, or shaped cultural definitions of the nation itself.

These cases illustrate that even traditions emphasizing enlightenment and detachment have, in practice, responded to historical circumstances and collective moral challenges. Buddhism's political roles demonstrate that engagement with history is not necessarily a deviation from spiritual aims, but can emerge organically from religious self-understanding.

Against this comparative backdrop, the author turns to the Family Federation and the accusation of "collusion between religion and politics" that has followed it especially in Japan and South Korea the last few years. The article argues that this label has been applied too loosely, without sufficient distinction between two fundamentally different phenomena: on the one hand, religion leveraging political power for institutional privilege, and on the other, religion articulating moral positions and acting on public issues as a member of civil society. According to the author, the Family Federation has been judged within the former framework even when its actions more closely resemble the latter.

The roots of this misinterpretation are traced to Cold War anti-communism and Korea's broader suspicion toward non-mainstream religions. The Family Federation's explicit value judgments about global order and its strong anti-communist stance were interpreted, in a cultural context that prized political neutrality, as improper intervention. Yet the author insists on a critical distinction: expressing values about history is not the same as seeking power over it. Where collusion concerns institutional exchange and control, value-based engagement concerns moral orientation.

Mother Han, Hak Ja Han, speaking at a large rally in Seoul for the peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula 11th November 2017. Photo: Graeme Carmichael / HSA-UWC

While acknowledging controversies surrounding political donations and large-scale projects, the Segye Ilbo opinion piece suggests that many of the Family Federation's initiatives – such as advocacy for peace, reunification, and transnational infrastructure – are better understood as public-interest interventions grounded in religious belief rather than as strategies for power accumulation.

Like other history-engaged religions, the Federation risks criticism and distortion. History has of course shown examples of history-engaged religion treating its own historically conditioned beliefs, decisions, or institutional authority as absolute and unquestionable. Thereby, faith was turned into rigid ideology, and the capacity for self-correction was weakened.

However, such risks do not negate the legitimacy of engagement itself.

Ultimately, Jeong's article reframes the debate as a broader societal question: in democratic societies, should religion retreat into private spirituality, or should it assume responsibility within history, even at the cost of controversy? The author argues that dismissing the Family Federation solely on the basis of its engagement obscures this deeper issue. To understand such a religion, one must begin not with suspicion, but with an acknowledgment of its refusal to separate salvation from history – and its insistence that faith, if it is to be meaningful, must confront the world as it is.

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Featured image *above: Religion, withdrawal and social engagement. Illustration: Chat GPT, 7th January 2026*

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