FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Why are "Event Religions" Controversial?

Knut Holdhus
January 13, 2026

Religion and society. When lived faith brings change. Illustration: Chat GPT

세계일보

Segye Ilbo


Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su

When lived faith brings change – Why real-world religion easily becomes an issue, making some feel uneasy

Modern discussions of religion often assume that faith belongs primarily to the private sphere: beliefs held in the mind, rituals practiced in designated spaces, and moral principles applied individually. In an article headlined "Why Do 'Event Religions' Always Become Controversial?" in the South Korean daily Segye Ilbo 13th January 2026, religious affairs correspondent Jeong Seong-su points out that when religion stays within those boundaries, it is generally tolerated – even when its doctrines are unusual or demanding.

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Problems tend to arise, however, when religion moves beyond belief and attempts to reorganize everyday life, social relationships, and public order. Jeong's opinion piece addresses this precise tension by introducing a distinction that is rarely made explicit in Western discourse: the difference between "doctrinal religion" and what the author calls "event religion". The headline asks why religions that insist on realizing their truth in real historical life ("event religions") – rather than remaining as abstract beliefs (doctrinal religions) – inevitably provoke controversy and social resistance.

The Korean expression translated as "event religion" – 사건 종교 – means a religion that grounds its truth in historical action, seeks realization in lived reality, and demands social, relational, or structural change.

According to the article, religions follow one of two broad paths. Some remain primarily as doctrines – systems of belief, theology, and moral teaching that people accept, debate, or reject intellectually. Others originate as events: concrete historical interventions that do not merely propose ideas about how life should be lived, but attempt to demonstrate and embody those ideas within the real world. An "event religion" does not remain content with faith as inner conviction; it insists on manifesting itself through

relationships, families, social structures, and history itself. And for precisely that reason, the author argues, event religions almost always become controversial.

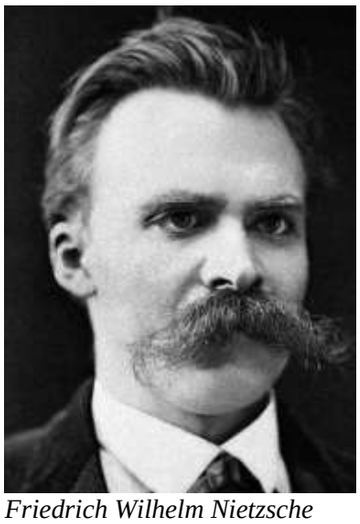
This controversy is not caused by irrational belief or theological impurity. On the contrary, the problem is that event religions are very realistic. They intrude into areas that societies tend to guard carefully: marriage, family formation, authority, lineage, social norms, and collective identity. Historically, many of the religions now regarded as established traditions began as event religions.

The Pharaoh tried to stop the Exodus faith of the ancient Israelites. Illustration

The early Jesus movement before Christianity became an institution, the Exodus faith of ancient Israel, early Buddhism, and Islam all began not as abstract philosophies but as lived historical disruptions. They demanded change not only in belief, but in how people organized their lives together. Societies, the Segye Ilbo article suggests, have always found this unsettling.

The figure of Jesus is central to this kind of argument. From this perspective, Jesus was not primarily a teacher of doctrine or a founder of an organized religion. He did not leave behind a systematic theology, a legal code, or an ecclesiastical structure. Instead, his message was embodied in how he lived: radical love without resentment, forgiveness without conditions, and ethical action focused on the present rather than rewards in the afterlife. Jesus did not explain his vision in theoretical terms; he enacted it.

Saint Paul (ca. 10-67 AD), one of the apostles of the early church and author of several letters in the New Testament. From painting by El Greco



Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) about 1875

Yet this way of life, the article emphasizes, remained historically unfinished. Jesus did not establish a family, leave descendants, or stabilize his movement within existing social structures. His execution ended the event without bringing it to completion. What followed, therefore, was not simply continuation but reinterpretation. That role fell to the apostle Paul.

Paul, who never met Jesus during his lifetime, transformed what appeared to be historical failure into theological success. The crucifixion was reframed as a necessary condition for salvation rather than a defeat. The unfulfilled hopes of history were redirected toward the afterlife. This reinterpretation allowed Christianity to survive, spread, and eventually become a world religion. However, it also fundamentally changed the nature of the movement. The life of Jesus ceased to be primarily a path to be followed and became instead a doctrine to be believed. The disruptive "event" was sealed into a manageable belief system. In the language of Jeong's article, Christianity ceased to function as an event religion.

This transition is where the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) enters the discussion. Nietzsche's famous critique of Christianity, the article argues, was not aimed at Jesus himself but at the religion that developed after Paul. Nietzsche saw Christianity as a moral system that glorified weakness, suffering, and failure. Yet paradoxically, he held a certain respect for Jesus as a human figure – someone who lived without resentment, deferred judgment, and affirmed life in the present moment. This is why Nietzsche has sometimes been called "the thirteenth disciple": while the institutional Church preserved Jesus as doctrine, Nietzsche sought to destroy that doctrine in order to recover the vitality of Jesus' life and movement.

According to religious affairs reporter Jeong, Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead," from this viewpoint, was not a simple rejection of faith. It was a diagnosis: a statement that what had once been a living, transformative event had hardened into lifeless dogma. Still, Nietzsche's critique stopped at exposure. He could explain why the original event failed, but he could not offer a practical way to reestablish such an event within history.

The article then turns to the Family Federation, formerly the Unification Church, as a radically different response to this dilemma. Unlike mainstream Christianity, the Family Federation does not view the crucifixion as the

completion of salvation. Instead, it is understood as an unfinished historical moment – something that must still be fulfilled in human society. Salvation, in this framework, is not primarily about individual belief or personal redemption after death. It is about the restoration of relationships, families, and social structures in the present world.

Christ Crucified, painting by Diego Velázquez (1599 - 1660)

Central to this vision is the idea of the "True Parents", figures who complete what Jesus could not by forming a family and establishing a lineage centered on goodness. In this model, salvation becomes something that must be verified within history rather than merely affirmed by faith. It is no longer enough to believe correctly; the truth of the religion must be demonstrated through lived, social reality.

This is where the Family Federation fully embraces the burden of being an event religion. Its most visible and controversial practice – the Marriage Blessing – is not presented merely as a religious ritual but as a means of restructuring human relationships around the ideal of "one human family under God". When such practices aim to extend beyond a single religious community and propose a universal social order, tension is inevitable. Religion, at that point, stops asking only for belief and begins to challenge how society itself is organized.

The article makes a striking claim at this juncture: if an event religion truly succeeds, it should eventually disappear as a religion. Once its core structures are established in reality – true families, restored lineages, stable social patterns – there is no longer a need for ongoing doctrinal expansion or religious instruction. According to Jeong, authority does not pass endlessly from leader to leader; it is fixed in the structure that has already been realized. Subsequent leadership exists to manage, not to recreate, the original event.

From this perspective, controversy surrounding the Family Federation is not accidental or merely the result of misunderstanding. It is structurally inevitable. Any religion that insists on embodying salvation within real human life must accept constant scrutiny, criticism, and the risk of failure. Event religions have no right to remain comfortable or unchallenged.

Jeong's article concludes with a clear thesis: event religions become problematic not because they are false, but because they are so real. The path of the Family Federation is difficult not because it rejects society or seeks attention, but because it refuses to reduce salvation to words, doctrines, or explanations. It attempts, instead, to complete salvation through lived human experience. And that, the author suggests, is precisely why it provokes unease – and why it cannot avoid controversy.

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State Coercion Justified By Invoking Religion

- January 12, 2026
- Knut Holdhus

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South Korean daily warns of religion being invoked as justification for severe measures and the use of state coercion against religion deemed by Lee administration as undesirable

If we translated a headline in the South Korean daily Segye Ilbo 12th January it would say, "A Dangerous

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The logo of the Segye

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Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): Segye Ilbo

Moment: Undermining State Authority in the Name of Religion". This headline does not mean that religion itself is attacking the state. Rather, it implies that religion is being invoked as justification (*"in the name of religion"*), to influence, pressure, or destabilize state authority.

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On 12th January 2026, a piece of news emerged from South Korea that, at first glance, might have seemed routine: the president hosted a luncheon at the Blue House (the South Korean equivalent of the White House), inviting senior leaders from various religious communities. Such meetings are not unusual in Korea, where religious organizations – Buddhist, Protestant, Catholic, and others – have long played visible roles in social welfare, moral discourse, and public life.

Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su, authored the opinion piece. According to him, what transpired at this meeting, as reported by the press, raised deeply unsettling questions about the boundaries between religion and state power in a democratic society. As stated in the media reports, prominent religious leaders jointly identified specific religious organizations as "pseudo-religions", characterized them as socially harmful, and formally urged the government to dissolve them and confiscate their assets. Even more alarming was the president's reported response: an expression of sympathy with these demands, coupled with the remark that the damage caused by such groups had been "left unattended for far too long".

According to media reports, identified by President Lee Jae-myung as "pseudo-religion": the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. Here its logo

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

If these accounts are accurate, South Korea now faces a profoundly serious constitutional and democratic dilemma – one that resonates far beyond its borders.

Jeong emphasizes that in a democratic republic, religion does not stand above the state, nor does it function as a judicial authority. Religious leaders may offer moral guidance, ethical reflection, or social criticism, but they do not possess the legitimate power to declare organizations illegal, to issue verdicts, or to demand punishment. Those functions belong exclusively to the legal system, operating through established procedures, evidence, and due process.

If a particular group – religious or otherwise – has committed crimes, it is the responsibility of prosecutors and courts to investigate, judge, and, if necessary, punish wrongdoing. When religious figures publicly label a group a "social harm" and demand its dissolution and the seizure of its property, they step beyond moral counsel and into the realm of quasi-judicial judgment. When the head of the executive branch appears to endorse such language, the issue ceases to be an internal debate within religious circles and becomes a matter of constitutional neutrality and the rule of law.

The Segye Ilbo opinion piece

Being judged by the court of public opinion. Illustration: Chat GPT, 12th January 2026.

points out something it finds especially troubling. It is a suggestion, reportedly voiced at this meeting, that "the public would also agree" with dissolving religious organizations deemed harmful to the state or the people. This framing implies that majority sentiment can replace constitutional safeguards, legal standards, and due process. But democracy, properly understood, is not rule by popular emotion. It is a system deliberately designed to limit power – precisely to protect minorities, dissenters, and unpopular groups from the passions or fears of the majority.

South Korean history offers sobering reminders of how vague accusations such as "harmful to the state" have been weaponized. During authoritarian periods in the twentieth century, such language was repeatedly used to justify repression, censorship, and imprisonment. The lesson is clear: once abstract moral judgments begin to substitute for legal criteria, the door to abuse opens quickly.

The entanglement of religion and political power is not new in Korea. During the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), the colonial authorities enforced participation in Shinto shrine worship as a means of ideological control and assimilation. Religion was compelled to serve the state's demand for loyalty, resulting in deep wounds – collaboration, silence, and lasting internal divisions within religious communities.

Decades later, under President Park Chung-hee (박정희) and his authoritarian Yushin regime from 1972 to 1979, emergency powers and extra-constitutional measures were normalized in the name of national crisis and unity. Once again, political power sought moral legitimacy, and religious institutions were often called upon to provide it. In such moments, religion lost its role as a critical conscience and instead became a decorative moral shield for power. History shows that when religious language bends to political authority, the damage is not temporary; it leaves long-term scars on both faith communities and society as a whole.

Park Chung-hee (박정희 – 1917-1979), a politician and general who served as the third president of South Korea from 1962 after he seized power in a coup the year before, until he was assassinated in 1979. Photo: Korea.net / Korean Culture and Information Service. License: CC ASA 2.0 Gen

One of the gravest dangers religion faces when approaching state power is the temptation to designate an "enemy". At its core, religious language derives its moral force not from punishment but from self-examination, not from exclusion but from calls to repentance and transformation. When fused with the coercive authority of the state, however, that language can instantly change character. Naming a specific group as a social evil and calling for state intervention draws religion directly into political judgment and enforcement.

At that point, religion risks no longer being seen as a guardian of conscience standing apart from power, but as an institution that reinforces the moral legitimacy of governmental coercion. This transformation undermines both religious credibility and democratic accountability.

According to religious affairs correspondent Jeong, the call for "asset recovery" is particularly fraught. While it may sound like the language of justice, confiscating property before a judicial ruling directly threatens constitutionally protected rights, including freedom of religion and property rights. Today, such measures are proposed under the label of combating "pseudo-religions". Tomorrow, if this logic becomes normalized, there is no guarantee where the line will be drawn – or who will be next. The rule of law exists precisely to protect even those we find disturbing, offensive, or wrong.

Are we seeing personal hatred being amplified through power, labels, and authority? Illustration: Grok xAI, 14th December 2025, edited.

Ironically, the same meeting reportedly included denunciations of xenophobia toward migrants as a "breeding ground for fascism", along with calls to reject hatred from society. This raises an unavoidable question: is the rhetoric that singles out specific religious organizations as a social danger, demanding their dissolution and dispossession, truly unrelated to hatred? **Hatred is not merely a private emotion; it is produced and amplified through power, labels, and authority. Depending on who speaks and from what position, exclusion can easily be repackaged as justice**.

In a constitutional democracy, the president's foremost responsibility is to safeguard the legal and institutional order. Listening respectfully to concerns raised by religious communities is appropriate. Endorsing or echoing demands that blur the line between moral critique and state coercion is not. When those boundaries fade, public trust in both religion and government erodes, and the state is drawn into conflicts it should avoid.

The true danger facing South Korean society is not simply harsh criticism of a particular religious organization. It is the moment when, in the name of religion, the protections of law, freedom, and due process begin to loosen. When religion loses its critical distance from power, faith itself is compromised – and the state is tempted into perilous choices.

The events of this meeting compel an uncomfortable question: are we, at this moment, standing firmly on the side of constitutional democracy? What unfolded suggests a scene that shakes that confidence – and history warns us to take such moments seriously.

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***Text**: Knut Holdhus, editor*

***Featured image** above: Artistic impression of President Lee Jae-myung and South Korean religious leaders. Illustration: Grok xAI, 12th January 2026.*

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