

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: USA upset by Japan and S Korea's bullying of religion

Knut Holdhus
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Paula White, Senior Adviser to the White House Faith Office, delivers a speech 2nd February 2026 in Washington, D.C., USA



[Sekai Nippo](#)

State interference in Japan and South Korea draws scrutiny at international religious freedom summit in Washington DC

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International Religious Freedom Summit Held in the U.S.

Persecution Domino Effect from Japan and South Korea

Concerns Raised by U.S. Faith Office Advisers over Detention of Elderly Hak Ja Han

by Yuya Kawase (川瀬 裕也)

The International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit 2026, aimed at promoting freedom of religion worldwide, was held in Washington, D.C., over a two-day period beginning on 2nd February. Government officials, religious leaders, and human rights activists from various countries participated, engaging in discussions on increasingly serious challenges to religious freedom around the world, including issues surrounding the Japanese government's request for a dissolution order against the religious corporation [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)).

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At a dinner reception on the first day, Paula White, Senior Adviser to the White House Faith Office, emphasized that Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보), who had been detained in South Korea, was released as a result of efforts by the Trump administration. She appealed for cooperation among people who follow [God](#) and their conscience, declaring that "chains are broken, and freedom prevails."

At the same time, she referred to the continued detention of [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), president of the [Family Federation](#), expressing "serious concerns" regarding her health, dignity, and human rights. She further named Japan and South Korea explicitly, calling on them to protect religious freedom "fully, fairly, and

consistently."



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



Masaichi Hori, here in Gapyeong, South Korea 24th Aug. 2025

Former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich also delivered a video message, stressing that religious freedom is "an unalienable right given by the Creator." He pointed out that state intervention between [God](#) and citizens represents "the essence of the growing crisis in Japan and South Korea." He went on to criticize as "a grave abuse of power" the situation in which the 83-year-old [Han](#), who suffers from visual impairment and difficulty walking, remains in detention, and urged the South Korean government to consider her release.

Subsequently, Masaichi Hori (堀正一), president of the Japan-based religious corporation [Family Federation](#), took the stage and cited reports that in December last year South Korean President Lee Jae-myung (이재명) instructed the Minister of Justice to investigate Japan's move toward a dissolution order and examine whether similar measures could be applied in South Korea. Hori warned that "a domino effect has begun in which religious persecution spreads to other democratic nations, Asian countries, and the world."

He further quoted Italian sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne, who has argued that "China is the force driving this domino effect," and appealed that "only the United States and its allies can put a stop to religious persecution."

In addition to these speeches, panel discussions were held featuring speakers such as Katrina Lantos Swett, former chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF); Thomas McDevitt, chairman of The Washington Times; and international lawyer Tatsuki Nakayama (中山達樹), among others.

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Unificationism Emerging As A World Religion

- February 3, 2026
- Knut Holdhus

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



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): *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".



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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.

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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. Photo: LSE Library / Wikimedia Commons. Public domain image. Cropped

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 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.



David Bromley. Photo: Bitter Winter

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



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. Photo: Paolo Galli / FFWPU.

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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.

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.

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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