

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Official Statement Ahead of Final Hearing for Mother Han

Knut Holdhus
July 9, 2026



Hak Ja Han, aka. Mother Han, in Gapyeong, South Korea in 2025

Standing with Mother Han: Joint statement issued before final hearing in first of two "religion-politics collusion" cases brought by the current Lee administration



Seoul Central District Court. AI-illustration: ChatGPT

An official joint statement from [FFWPU](#) ([Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)) North America and [FFWPU](#) Europe and the Middle East regarding the [upcoming final arguments](#) in the legal proceedings in South Korea involving Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#) (83), Co-Founder of the [Family Federation](#).

Official Statement of FFWPU North America and FFWPU Europe and the Middle East on the Case of Republic of Korea v. Dr. Hak Ja Han

On July 10, 2026, prosecutors in South Korea are [expected to deliver the government's final arguments](#) against Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#), the Mother of Peace. It seems inevitable that they will ask for a conviction and seek a lengthy prison sentence for an 83-year-old spiritual leader whose life has been defined by the pursuit of peace, unity, and reconciliation for all humankind.



Min Joong-gi, the head of an army of special prosecutors with extensive investigative powers

After mobilizing hundreds of police and investigators, and spending millions of dollars, the prosecutors have failed to show that she ordered, directed, or intended any crime. After months of detention and interrogation, the government's case rests on innuendo, association, and a maze of technical accusations that obscure more than they prove.

As her life story confirms beyond any legitimate challenge, [Mother Han](#) answers to a higher calling. She knows what is in her heart and what she pursues, and even now, she asks us to respond not with bitterness or fear, but with prayer.

This is not the first time our founders, [Mother Han](#) and her late husband, Rev. [Sun Myung Moon](#) have stood before the powers of this world. Like so many other religious leaders, they have been misunderstood, accused, and persecuted for their faith and commitment to peace.

This moment is larger than one trial. This represents a test of whether people of faith in South Korea can still speak truth to power.

We will keep praying and remain strong. We are confident that the truth will be revealed, and [Mother Han](#)'s work for lasting peace will not stop. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. often said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

Michael and Fumiko Balcomb,
[FFWPU Europe and Middle East](#)

Demian and Yumiko Dunkley
[FFWPU North America](#)



*Co-defendant: Yoon Yeong-ho,
here August 9, 2020*



*Co-defendant: Jeong Won-ju
January 19, 2025*

[Editor's note: The trial of [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) - also called [Mother Han](#) - is [expected to conclude](#) on 10th July, when the special prosecutors appointed by the left-leaning Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration will deliver their closing arguments and recommend sentences for the defendants. [Dr. Han](#) and her co-defendants will then present their final statements before the court retires to deliberate and reach its verdict.

The case has become one of the most prominent examples of what South Korean media have described as "religion-politics collusion" - the alleged improper intertwining of religious organizations and political power. At the same time, the investigation has drawn criticism from opponents of the administration of Lee Jae-myung (이재명), as well as from those who argue that the special prosecutors have been granted unusually broad powers to investigate political and religious figures perceived to have supported the former administration of Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열). These critics contend that the investigation, initiated under Lee's administration, constitutes a campaign targeting political and ideological opponents.

The 27th Criminal Division of the Seoul Central District Court, presided over by Judge Woo In-seong (우인성), is expected to deliver its ruling several weeks after the final hearing on 10th July. That's not, however, the end of the story. A [second "religion-politics collusion" case](#) is due to open as soon as the first one is ended.]

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Brainwashing Theory Returns Under New Names

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Leading scholar describes how anti-religious activists have managed to bring back old, discredited brainwashing claims as new concepts, but with the same underlying

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assumptions



Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Italian sociologist of religion, founder of CESNUR, specializing in new religious movements and religious liberty. A prolific author, he has advised governments and international bodies, and served as OSCE Representative on combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Christians worldwide and comments on contemporary religious controversies. Here at the UN Office at Geneva 16th June 2025. Screenshot from video by UPF.

In an



Logo of *Bitter Winter*, the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights.

article, 6th July 2026, in *Bitter Winter*, the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights, Dr. Massimo Introvigne, a prominent Italian author and sociologist of religion, writes extensively about the reemergence of “brainwashing” [See editor's note 1 below] theories in today's world.

He points out that by the close of the twentieth century, many scholars who studied new religious movements believed that the debate over so-called “cult brainwashing” [See editor's note 1 below] had largely been settled. After decades of research spanning

sociology, psychology, religious studies, and law, a broad academic consensus had emerged: claims that minority religious groups possess unique techniques capable of overriding an individual's free will lacked credible scientific support.

Concepts such as “mind control” [See editor's note 2 below], “brainwashing” [See editor's note 1 below], and “coercive persuasion” were increasingly regarded not as established scientific theories but as speculative ideas that failed rigorous empirical scrutiny. Introvigne claims that rather than offering reliable explanations for religious commitment, these concepts often served as ideological tools that portrayed unpopular or unconventional faiths as inherently dangerous and helped justify discrimination, restrictive legislation, or state intervention.

This scholarly assessment gradually influenced public institutions as well. Long before governmental bodies formally addressed the issue, specialists had concluded that brainwashing [See editor's note 1 below] theories rested on weak methodological foundations and could not adequately explain why individuals joined or remained in new religious movements.

In 2020, for example, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reinforced this view by warning that “brainwashing” [See editor's note 1 below] rhetoric had become a characteristic feature of pseudo-scientific anti-cult ideology that threatened religious freedom. Although a small number of writers continued to



Logo of United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). The nine commissioners of the Commission are appointed by the President of the United States and the



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defend variations of these theories, their views occupied a distinctly marginal position within mainstream academic discourse. *congressional leadership of both political parties. [Public domain image.](#)*

According to Introvigne, the rejection of brainwashing [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#) theories was reflected not only in scholarship but also in the courts. Throughout the late twentieth century, judges in several democratic countries increasingly concluded that expert testimony based on claims of coercive persuasion failed to satisfy accepted standards of scientific reliability.

A landmark example came in the United States in 1990 with *United States v. Fishman*. During the proceedings, a federal court carefully evaluated testimony proposed by anti-cult psychologist Margaret Singer (1921-2003) and other proponents of coercive persuasion theory. After extensive examination, the court found that these theories lacked sufficient empirical validation, had not gained acceptance within the broader scientific community, and relied upon circular reasoning. As a result, the testimony was excluded, establishing an influential precedent that brainwashing [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#) theories did not meet the evidentiary standards required in federal courts.

1990–2020

ACADEMIC AND JUDICIAL REJECTION



- Scholars across disciplines find no scientific support for brainwashing theories
- Courts exclude testimony based on coercive persuasion (e.g., *U.S. v. Fishman*, 1990)
- Legal frameworks change: vague or unscientific concepts struck down (e.g., Italy 1981)
- Public institutions warn against pseudo-scientific “brainwashing” rhetoric (e.g., U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2020)

 Rejection by scholarship, courts and public institutions

Academic and judicial rejection of the brainwashing concept. Illustration: ChatGPT, 8th July 2026.

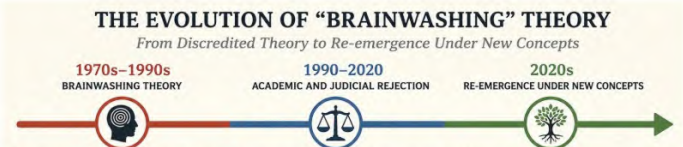
The [Bitter Winter article](#) describes how comparable developments occurred in Europe. Italy had already taken a significant step in 1981 when its Constitutional Court struck down the Fascist-era (1922-1943) criminal offense of *plagio* (enslaving another person's mind), a concept that broadly resembled allegations of psychological

domination or brainwashing [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#). The Court concluded that the offense rested on concepts too vague and scientifically uncertain to be compatible with constitutional protections, including freedom of religion.

Decades later, the *European Court of Human Rights* similarly observed that there is no universally accepted scientific definition of “mind control” [\[See editor's note 2 below\]](#). It also noted that characteristics frequently cited as evidence of coercion – strong commitment to a religious cause, communal lifestyles, deference to spiritual leaders, or energetic proselytizing – are not unique to minority religions but can be found across many established religious traditions.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, it appeared that brainwashing [\[See editor's note 1 below\]](#) theories had largely disappeared from judicial practice. While the concept continued to enjoy considerable visibility in popular media and among anti-cult activists, it no longer exercised the influence it once had in courtrooms. Public advocates continued to promote simplified versions of earlier coercive persuasion models, but these arguments generally failed to persuade judges applying contemporary standards of scientific evidence. France remained an important exception, where anti-cult legislation adopted in 2001 preserved similar concepts under different terminology and

where subsequent legal reforms expanded the notion of psychological subjection even further.



The evolution of “brainwashing” theory. Illustration: ChatGPT, 8th July 2026.

Yet the decline of explicit brainwashing [See editor’s note 1 below] theory did not mark its complete disappearance. Rather than returning under its original name, the underlying assumptions gradually resurfaced through new legal and conceptual frameworks. According to Dr. Massimo Introvigne, this resurgence has occurred indirectly rather than through an open rehabilitation of the discredited theory itself. Instead of speaking explicitly about “brainwashing” [See editor’s note 1 below], contemporary discussions increasingly employ alternative concepts that often perform similar functions.



The reemergence of the brainwashing concept. Illustration: ChatGPT, 8th July 2026.

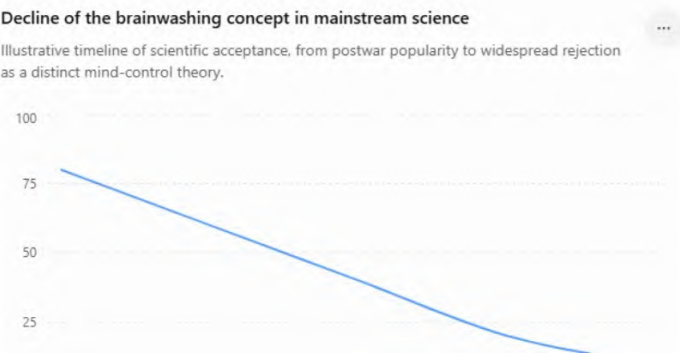
The paper argues that this revival can be observed along three principal trajectories. First, ideas originally developed in the context of domestic violence concerning coercive control have, in some instances, been extended into the religious sphere. Second, courts have increasingly been asked to evaluate allegations of

“spiritual abuse”, introducing new legal debates about the boundaries between religious authority, personal autonomy, and psychological influence. Third, language traditionally associated with brainwashing [See editor’s note 1 below] has begun to appear in interpretations of human trafficking legislation, broadening the application of coercion-based arguments beyond their original context.

These developments suggest that although the classical theory of cult brainwashing [See editor’s note 1 below] was widely rejected by scholars and courts alike, many of its core assumptions continue to re-emerge under new labels. The terminology may have changed, but the underlying questions concerning religious freedom, individual autonomy, and the state’s role in regulating controversial religious movements remain as contested as ever.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Brainwashing theory returns under new names. Illustration: ChatGPT, 7th July 2026.





Decline of the brainwashing concept in mainstream science. Illustration: ChatGPT, June 2026.

[Editor's note 1: "Brainwashing" was a popular term that emerged during the early Cold War to explain why some prisoners of war and political detainees appeared to adopt beliefs favored by their captors. The idea suggested that powerful psychological techniques could erase a person's existing beliefs and replace them with new ones against their will, almost like reprogramming a machine.

Over time, however, the concept was largely discarded by mainstream psychology and cognitive science as a scientific explanation of persuasion or belief change. Researchers found little evidence for such a process, that any special, unique process existed that could fundamentally override human autonomy and completely remake a person's personality or convictions.

Studies in psychology, sociology, and psychiatry showed that belief change is usually gradual, variable, and dependent on many factors: social pressure, isolation, coercion, rewards, threats, conformity, identity, and existing motivations. People can certainly be influenced, manipulated, indoctrinated, or coerced, but there is no scientifically demonstrated mechanism that allows a person's mind to be completely overwritten in the dramatic way implied by "brainwashing".

The concept came under especially heavy criticism in the 1970s–1990s during debates about new religious movements – by anti-religious activists and others often called "cults". Some experts testified that members had been brainwashed, while other scholars argued that the theory lacked clear definitions, reliable measurements, falsifiable predictions, and strong empirical support. Courts increasingly viewed brainwashing testimony skeptically because it often could not meet scientific standards of evidence.

A major problem was that "brainwashing" lacked a clear, measurable definition. Different writers used it to describe very different phenomena, from prisoner interrogation to religious conversion to participation in controversial groups. Because it could not be reliably operationalized or tested, it failed to meet basic scientific standards. Studies of prisoners of war and members of new religious movements showed that apparent ideological conversions were often temporary, strategic, situational, or reversible rather than evidence of a mysterious mind-control process.

By the 1970s and 1980s, many psychologists, sociologists, and legal scholars concluded that brainwashing functioned more as a cultural and political metaphor than as a validated scientific theory. Courts also became increasingly skeptical of expert testimony claiming that members of new religious movements had been "brainwashed". Today, scholars generally prefer more specific concepts – such as persuasion, coercive control, social influence, indoctrination, obedience, and group dynamics – rather than assuming the existence of a mysterious power that can completely rewrite a person's beliefs.]

[Editor's note 2: In Japan, the **"mind-control" myth** has been a powerful tool used to stigmatize and suppress new religious movements (NRMs), particularly since the 1980s. The concept suggests that NRMs manipulate or "brainwash" their followers, depriving them of free will and rational thought. This narrative gained traction after the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack, when public fear of dangerous cults intensified. Although Aum was an extreme and violent exception, the incident cast suspicion on all NRMs, allowing critics, media, and the government to label diverse groups as manipulative or psychologically coercive.

The “mind-control” myth serves multiple social and political functions. It simplifies complex questions of belief, making it easier to portray converts as victims rather than as individuals exercising spiritual agency. This framing justifies legal and social intervention, including the coercive “[deprogramming](#)” of believers – sometimes involving confinement or psychological pressure to force renunciation of faith. Lawyers, ex-member groups, and certain media outlets have used the idea of mind control to construct NRMs as threats to family stability and national order, reinforcing social conformity and Japan’s preference for established, non-controversial religions such as Buddhism and Shinto.

In recent years, the myth resurfaced following the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose attacker cited resentment toward the [Family Federation](#). A public outrage largely created by media reignited scrutiny of NRMs, and politicians and journalists revived “mind-control” rhetoric to explain fundraising and recruitment practices. Critics argue that this framing discourages genuine religious tolerance and critical examination of Japan’s restrictive religious climate. Overall, the “mind-control” myth functions less as a scientific or psychological concept and more as a moral panic – a cultural weapon used to delegitimize minority faiths and to reaffirm mainstream social norms about religion, obedience, and the boundaries of acceptable belief.]

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