

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Is Faith Becoming a Crime in South Korea?

Knut Holdhus
December 17, 2025



From a large demonstration by [Family Federation](#) supporters in support of religious freedom, held near Seoul City Hall November 2, 2025



A comment on President Lee's Dec. 2025 comments on dissolution: The erosion of religious freedom in public discourse when faith is treated as a social offense

Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su examines the question "[When Faith Becomes a Crime, Where Are We Headed?](#)" in an article published in the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) on 16th December.



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su Photo (2025)

See also [Court Delays Bail Decision for Mother Han \(82\)](#)

Jeong argues that in contemporary society, debates surrounding religion are no longer confined to theological disagreement or institutional critique. Increasingly, faith itself is treated as a source of suspicion, and in some cases as something approaching criminality. This shift marks a troubling moment. When belief systems are no longer merely questioned but are framed as inherently dangerous or morally suspect, society enters a zone where criticism risks transforming into condemnation.

Jeong's [opinion piece](#) examines this precarious boundary and asks a fundamental question: what happens to a democratic society when faith is no longer regarded as a protected freedom, but as a social offense?

According to the [Segye Ilbo article](#), public discourse toward certain religious groups has hardened noticeably. Rather than measured analysis, it often adopts the tone of prosecution.

Narratives accumulate and reinforce one another: accusations of rigid doctrinal absolutism, closed organizational cultures centered on powerful leaders, strategic engagement with political actors, and alleged attempts to fuse religious ideals with national policy or large-scale development initiatives.

Over time, these elements cease to be debated individually. Instead, they crystallize into a single, fixed image that defines an entire religion in the public imagination. Repeated across media platforms and social commentary, this image becomes less an argument than an assumption, resistant to nuance or contextual examination.

The [article of Jeong](#) does not deny that criticism may be warranted. History provides ample examples of religious institutions that have caused social harm, provoked legitimate controversy, or failed ethical standards. Accountability, in such cases, is essential.



From a large demonstration rally near Seoul City Hall November 2, 2025 organized by Incheon, Gyeonggi Northern Diocese of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#). The rally had the theme "One Heart, One Peace Rally for Religious Freedom and Peace". It was attended by about 2000 persons

The central concern, however, lies elsewhere: criticism increasingly operates not as a tool for correction or reform, but as a mechanism of collective judgment. Once a religion is framed as fundamentally culpable, facts and context lose relevance. Debate gives way to a presumption of guilt, and public conversation begins to resemble a trial in which the verdict has already been decided.

This transformation has serious consequences. Criticism serves a vital role in democratic society, particularly when belief systems intersect with power, politics, or public life. Yet when criticism expands into the assertion that faith itself is inherently dangerous, it crosses into the realm of social exclusion.

At that point, the issue is no longer misconduct or policy, but identity. Entire communities are repositioned as objects of fear or hostility, and the language of rational evaluation is replaced by emotional shorthand – suspicion, resentment, and moral panic. The erosion of

the boundary between critique and stigmatization signals a deeper erosion of democratic norms.

The [article in the Segye Ilbo](#) illustrates this dynamic through the example of the proposed [Korea-Japan undersea tunnel](#). As a massive infrastructure initiative with far-reaching economic, technical, diplomatic, and security implications, the project demands careful assessment within the framework of national strategy and public policy.



A proposed tunnel project between the Japanese island of Kyushu and South Korea. Illustration: [The International Highway Foundation](#) (IHF)

However, debate around the proposal is frequently diverted away from these substantive considerations and redirected toward the religious motivations allegedly associated with it. In doing so, a complex public-policy discussion is reduced to a question of religious legitimacy. The focus shifts from feasibility and public interest to an implicit interrogation of belief, turning civic debate into something resembling doctrinal scrutiny.

This tendency reflects a broader misconception: that the presence of religious motivation automatically negates public value. The [article](#) challenges this assumption by pointing to historical precedent. Many advances in peacebuilding, human rights, education, welfare, and social reform originated from religious moral frameworks before being translated into secular institutions

and widely accepted norms.

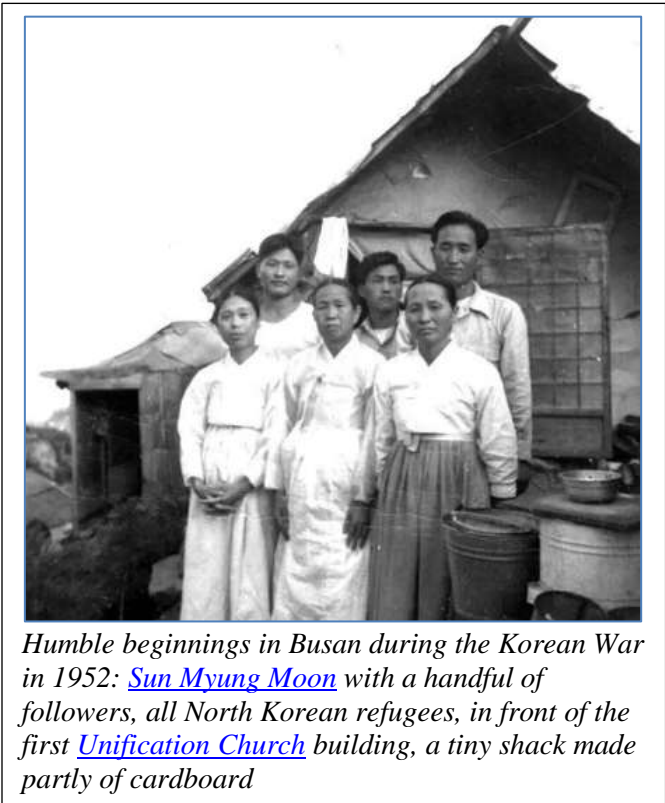
The decisive question has never been whether an idea was religiously inspired, but whether it met public standards of accountability, inclusiveness, and social consensus. Meaningful debate should therefore concentrate on outcomes, governance, and public impact – not on the legitimacy of belief itself.

Yet contemporary discourse often bypasses this evaluative process. Instead of scrutinizing individual actions or proposals, society increasingly applies a blanket logic: if a specific religion is involved, suspicion is intensified by default. Political engagement, civic participation, or social initiatives undertaken by religious groups are interpreted not on their merits, but through a predetermined negative frame.

As a result, case-specific judgment disappears, replaced by a simplistic and irrational formula that equates religious identity with inherent wrongdoing. [Jeong's article](#) argues that this approach resembles collective exclusion far more than principled critique.

Perhaps the most overlooked consequence of this climate is its impact on ordinary believers. These individuals are not abstract institutions or political actors; they are citizens who work, pay taxes, raise families, and participate in everyday social life. Nevertheless, as controversy escalates, they are stripped of individuality and absorbed into a stigmatized collective image.

The normalization of extreme rhetoric – such as calls for the dissolution of entire religious organizations – reveals how far discourse has drifted from democratic restraint. At that point, the question is no longer about regulation or accountability, but about the limits of permissible exclusion.



The [opinion piece](#) by Jeong Seong-su further complicates the prevailing narrative by highlighting the global footprint of a [religion](#) that [began modestly](#) in postwar Korea and expanded over several decades to nearly every corner of the world. Its involvement in interfaith dialogue, peace forums, humanitarian initiatives, education, healthcare, and cultural preservation challenges the reductive portrayal that dominates domestic debate.

Yet despite these contributions, the [religion](#) continues to be consumed through a narrow lens of doctrinal controversy, labeled and dismissed rather than examined in full context. This raises an uncomfortable question about whether a society that claims to value diversity is truly practicing inclusion.

The [article](#) draws a firm ethical line. Unlawful acts, violence, and human rights abuses committed in the name of religion must be confronted without hesitation. No belief

system is exempt from the rule of law.

However, when society moves from condemning actions to criminalizing belief itself, it undermines the very foundations of freedom and tolerance upon which democracy rests. A mature democratic society is not one that eradicates uncomfortable beliefs, but one that maintains principled standards ensuring criticism does not devolve into hatred. When faith itself becomes a crime, [Jeong's article](#) warns, society forfeits its claim to genuine freedom.

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"Hak Ja Han is about the same age as my parents. Every time I proceed with the trial, I think of my elderly parents and feel sympathy



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for **President Han**, now being detained.”

He stressed, however, that judicial decisions are guided by professional standards rather than personal feelings. Judge Woo noted that bail decisions require careful consideration of risks such as evidence destruction, flight, or potential for severe sentencing. Given that significant portions of the investigation remain incomplete, the court stated that it is too early to determine whether these risks have been mitigated. The presiding judge indicated that a decision on bail would be revisited once the evidence review progresses further.



Elderly South Korean couple like the judge's parents. Illustration: Grok xAI, 16th December 2025.

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To **Mother Han**'s followers, the judge's reasoning may translate to, "They haven't found any evidence!" For millions of believers, it seems most unreasonable and in fact dehumanizing to keep an octogenarian in poor health behind bars indefinitely.

Mother Han's legal team cites serious health concerns and claims that key accusations involve former **Family Federation** officials acting independently. Prosecutors maintain however that there is no change in the circumstances warranting her release. The court has, for the time being, deferred a decision, citing the complexity of the case and the early stage of the evidence review.

Mother Han has publicly asserted her innocence, describing herself as dedicated to her religious mission and disputing the portrayal presented by the special prosecutor. She invited observers to visit **Family Federation** sites to witness firsthand her activities, emphasizing her decades-long commitment to the **organization's** spiritual mission.

Prosecutors, however, countered that her health can be adequately managed while in detention and that there has been no substantive change in circumstances to justify release. They also highlighted documents indicating that some decisions attributed to **Mother Han** may have been formalized after



Not everyone agrees that **Mother Moon**'s health situation can be adequately managed while in detention in a tiny cell without windows. Here, a typical **cell at Seoul Detention Center** where **Mother Han** is being held, possibly for many months. Image: Chat GPT, 10th October 2025.

Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) had stepped down from his leadership position, underscoring the ongoing debate over her direct involvement in the alleged misconduct.

It looks like **Mother Han**, longtime leader of the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** – also known as the **Unification Church** – will be kept detained for an **unknown length of time**. News1 writes that she requested bail on 13th November to allow her to face ongoing criminal charges without remaining in detention. Her request comes as South Korean authorities continue a sprawling investigation into allegations of organized bribery and embezzlement tied to the **religious organization**, which has been accused of providing unlawful political support to lawmakers across party lines.

The investigation has intensified after South Korean police 15th December executed comprehensive raids on multiple **Family Federation** facilities, including the **organization's** headquarters and ceremonial sites in Gyeonggi Province. Police documents and warrants revealed that **Mother Han** is being treated as the ultimate authority behind the alleged distribution of money and gifts to politicians. Such a characterization frames the case as an organized bribery scandal rather than the isolated misconduct of a subordinate.



Yoon Yeong-ho, Dec 6, 2020. Screenshot from Peacelink TV

Authorities pointed specifically to the role of former World Headquarters Director **Yoon Yeong-ho**, who claimed during a special prosecutor investigation that he acted under **Mother Han**'s direction in providing funds to lawmakers. Police also cited internal **Federation** documents prepared by **Yoon** that appear to indicate direct meetings and plans involving **Mother Han**.

The charges against her involve alleged violations of South Korea's *Act on the Aggravated Punishment of Specific Economic Crimes*, which governs embezzlement and other financial misconduct. Her defense team has argued that **Yoon** acted independently and falsified testimony to cover up his actions. **Mother Han**'s lawyers emphasize that she has serious medical conditions –

including ophthalmic disease causing legal blindness, arrhythmia, and hyperthyroidism – and is over 80 years old.

Additionally – according to News1 – organizations claimed to be victims of the alleged embezzlement – the **Family Federation** and the **Hyojeong World Peace Foundation** – reportedly do not seek her punishment, a point **Mother Han**'s lawyers have used to underscore her claims of innocence.

The case has captured widespread attention in South Korea, not only because of the high-profile nature of the **Family Federation** but also because of its implications for political and financial accountability. The special prosecutors appointed by the current left-leaning Lee administration continue to search for evidence to determine whether

the [Federation's](#) top leadership orchestrated a coordinated effort to influence lawmakers. The outcome of [Mother Han's](#) bail request – and the broader investigation – will likely have significant ramifications for both the [religious organization](#) and the South Korean political landscape.

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