FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Faith, Finance, Fairness and FFWPU

Knut Holdhus
December 18, 2025

Faith, finance, and fairness. Illustration: Chat GPT

세계일보
Segye Ilbo

Bias toward new religious movements: Why the Family Federation's finances require context, not prejudice

The South Korean daily Segye Ilbo carried on 17th December an opinion piece which in English would be headlined "After Faith, Is Finance the Next Target? Another Narrative Frame Around the Unification Church".

See also S. Korea: What Happens When Faith Becomes a Crime?


Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (Photo (2025)

The article written by religious affairs correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수), points out that in recent months, the Family Federation – formerly the Unification Church – a religious movement founded in Korea but now active worldwide, has once again become the subject of public controversy in South Korea. The immediate trigger was a police search of the Federation's headquarters, during which authorities discovered approximately 28 billion South Korean won in cash – roughly 19 million US dollars.

Once this figure was reported in the media, it quickly became the centerpiece of public debate. Headlines and commentary focused less on the legal details of the investigation and more on a broader, emotionally charged question: why would a religious organization hold that much money at all?

For many observers, particularly those already skeptical of the Family Federation, the number itself seemed self-evidently problematic. Questions followed almost automatically: Is it normal for a religious group to have such financial reserves? Could this money have been used for political influence? Does the mere possession of large sums indicate wrongdoing? These reactions, the article argues, reveal less about proven facts and more about deeply ingrained assumptions surrounding the Family Federation's identity and legitimacy.

The central claim of the article is straightforward but controversial: the financial figure, taken on its own, does not justify moral outrage or suspicion. In the context of large religious organizations, 28 billion won is not an extraordinary amount. To illustrate this, the author points to more familiar examples.

The Vatican, which governs the global Catholic Church, operates on an annual budget exceeding one trillion won – ca. 680 million US dollars.

Even within South Korea, the Jogye Order of Buddhism – the country's largest Buddhist denomination – has publicly disclosed annual operating budgets in the range of 100 billion won (ca. 68 million US dollars). In these cases, substantial financial resources are generally understood as a natural consequence of large-scale religious, cultural, and social activity.

St. Peter's Square and the Vatican. Photo (August 2024)

Yet the Family Federation is treated differently. Its finances are often framed not as functional resources but as inherently excessive or suspicious. The article suggests that this double standard arises from how the Federation is perceived in Korean society. Despite its international presence, many Koreans still see the Family Federation as a marginal or fringe group – a "cult", a small sect, or a religion confined to its country of origin. When such an organization is imagined as minor or illegitimate, any significant financial capacity is interpreted as inappropriate or undeserved.

This perception gap is crucial for Western readers to understand. In practice, the Family Federation operates far beyond the scale typically associated with small religious movements.

After delivering donations of ca. $ 62.000 for flood victims at the end of July 2025, Seo Tae-weon, Governor of Gapyeong County (second from the left), Lee Ki-seong, Director of the Family Federation's HJ Cheonju CheonBo Training Center and Cheonshimwon (third from the left), Kim Yeong-seok, Senior Vice President of the Family Federation (fourth from the left), and Park Jeong-hoon, Head of Management at Segye Ilbo (first from the left), pose for a commemorative photo.

It functions in many countries as both a religious body and a civil society organization. Over the decades, it has organized interfaith dialogues, international peace forums, and global conferences that have drawn

participation from former heads of state, diplomats, scholars, and religious leaders. It has also supported education, healthcare, and infrastructure projects in developing regions, funded scholarships and welfare programs for marginalized communities, and sponsored international awards recognizing contributions to peace. More recently, it has engaged in global discussions on climate change and sustainability.

Activities of this scope are not financed on a year-to-year basis alone. They require long-term planning, multi-year budgets, and financial reserves that can sustain projects across countries and political cycles. From this perspective, holding substantial cash assets or dedicated funds is not unusual but rather a practical necessity. Correspondent's Jeong's article emphasizes that focusing solely on the size or form of these assets, without examining how they were accumulated or used, leads to misleading conclusions.

The author also addresses a deeper ideological tension that often shapes public reactions to religious organizations. When religious groups engage actively in social or international issues, they are frequently criticized for being "too political".

On-the-ground Family Federation volunteers in Gapyeong, South Korea after the floods 20th July 2025.

When they withdraw from public life, they are accused of being irresponsible or indifferent to social problems. According to the article, the Family Federation has consistently chosen engagement over silence, grounding its actions in a theological interpretation that emphasizes responsibility not only to individual believers but to society and the world at large. This outward-looking approach, however, has also made the Federation more visible – and therefore more vulnerable – to criticism.

At the heart of the controversy lies a confusion between two distinct issues. One is the legitimate question of legality and transparency: how funds are raised, whether donations are voluntary, and whether money is used in accordance with the law. The other is a more subjective moral judgment based purely on the amount of money involved. The article argues that these two are often deliberately conflated. If unlawful fundraising methods or expenditures are proven, criticism is justified. But absent such proof, condemning a religious organization simply for possessing large financial resources reflects prejudice rather than principled oversight.

The article ultimately poses a provocative question: what is the real problem people have with the Family Federation? Is it concrete evidence of unlawful behavior, or is it discomfort with the idea that a religion originating in Korea has grown into a global movement with significant influence and resources? Implicitly, the author suggests that the latter plays a substantial role. As long as the Federation is viewed through the lens of being a "cult" or a "minor sect", it will be denied the legitimacy routinely granted to older or more familiar religious institutions.

The conclusion emphasizes the importance of fairness. Transparency and public accountability are essential standards for any religious organization, but they must be applied consistently and without prejudice. If the Family Federation's funds are built through voluntary donations, they fall under protections commonly associated with freedom of religion and property rights in democratic societies. In that case, the existence of large financial reserves should not automatically invite condemnation. Instead,

the debate should shift toward verifiable facts, the actual scale of the organization's activities, and the long-term vision guiding its work.

A donation of 10 million won (ca. 6.800 US dollars) by the above-mentioned large Buddhist Jogye Order to Busan Metropolitan City in February 2020 to combat the Corona virus. Photo: Busan Metropolitan City.

In short, the article calls for a more rational and even-handed discussion – one that replaces emotional reactions and inherited stereotypes with contextual understanding and evidence-based judgment.

See also S. Korea: What Happens When Faith Becomes a Crime?

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

See also President's Own Party Drawn into Lobbying Claims

See also Balcomb: "Prosecutors' Case Is Politically Driven"

See also Likely Long Legal Battle Ahead for Mother Han

See also Bail Hearing with Mother Han's Spiritual Message

See also Trial Day 1: Mother Han Denies All Allegations

See also Asia Today Editorial: "Avoid Detention of Clergy!"

See also Complaint Filed Against Lead Special Prosecutor

See also SKorea's Polarization Shapes Views of Mother Han

See also Inside the Detention Center: A 10-Minute Visit

See also Health Concerns: 82-Year-Old Pretrial Detainee

See also In Tiny Solitary Cell: Irreversible Harm Caused

See also Mother Han Briefly Released for Medical Reasons

See also Message of Religious Unity from Detention Cell

See also Over 50 Days in Vigil Outside Detention Center

Related to faith, finance, and fairness: Mother Han's December Trial: Long Detention Ahead

Also related to faith, finance, and fairness: A 10-Minute Visit to Mother Han in Detention

Also related to faith, finance, and fairness: Denying Allegations: Hak Ja Han (82) in Inquiry

Also related to faith, finance, and fairness: SKorean Court's Sharp Criticism of Prosecutors

And also related to faith, finance, and fairness: Detention: Harsh Cell Conditions Spark Outcry

More, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Ugly: Arrest Warrant Sought for Hak Ja Han (82)

And more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Critics Warn of "Authoritarian Drift" in SKorea

Even more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Court Decision to Prolong Detention Condemned

Still more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Co-Founder, 82, Questioned 9 Hours by Prosecutors

Also related to faith, finance, and fairness: Democratic Party's Assault on Family Federation

And even more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Mother Han (82) in Poor Health in Damp, Cold Cell

And still more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Korean Crisis: "True Democracy Must Serve Heaven"

And yet more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Faith Leaders Protest State Assault on Religion

Also related to faith, finance, and fairness: News Release Blasts Indictment of Hak Ja Han, 82

More, related to faith, finance, and fairness: 70 Years On: Detention History Repeats Itself

And more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Trump Raises Alarm Over Church Raids in Korea

Even more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Mike Pompeo Calls Probe of Co-Founder "Lawfare"

Still more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Korean Faith Crackdown: USA Urged to Confront It

Yet more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Korean Bribery Scandal: Media Clears Federation

And also related to faith, finance, and fairness: Raids Blur Line Between Justice and Politics

More, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Heavy-Handed Raid on Sacred Sites Condemned

And more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Scholar Sounds Alarm: State Raiding the Sacred

Even more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Raids as Political Spectacle and Media Trials

And even more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Religious Freedom: 330 Faith Leaders Speak Up

Yet more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Yonhap: Repeated Allegations Create Public Bias

Still more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Japan Following the Way of China

And still more, related to faith, finance, and fairness: Warning of Threat from CCP Fearing Korean Unity

And also related to faith, finance, and fairness: Japan's Dissolution Case Echoes China's Playbook

S. Korea: What Happens When Faith Becomes A Crime?

- December 17, 2025
- Knut Holdhus

Share:

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 (정성수). Photo (2025): Segye Ilbo

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.

세계일보

The logo of the Segye Ilbo

See also Faith, Finance, Fairness: Rethinking the Narrative

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

More Posts


Faith, Finance, Fairness: Rethinking The Narrative
December 18, 2025


Court Delays Bail Decision For Mother Han (82)
December 16, 2025


Christian Groups Decry Lee's Faith Control Laws
December 16, 2025


Investigators Investigated: South Korean Crisis
December 15, 2025


Lobbying Probe Risks Becoming A Witch Hunt
December 14, 2025


S. Korea: Federation Pledges Reform After Apology
December 13, 2025


SKorea: Bribery Probe Into Opposition Backfires
December 12, 2025

Search

Categories

Send us a message

First Name * Last Name

Email *

Email Address

Your Message *

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.

From a large demonstration rally near Seoul City Hall 2nd November 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. Photo: Masataka Asaoka.

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.

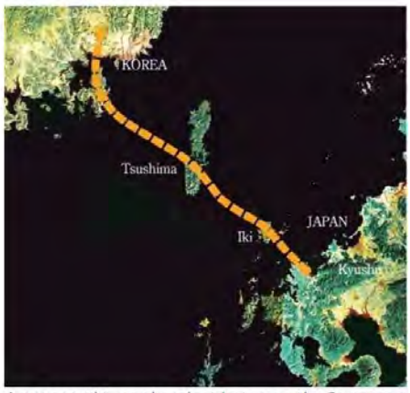
The article of Jeong does not deny that criticism may be warranted. History provides ample examples of religious institutions that have caused social harm, provoked legitimate controversy, or failed ethical standards. Accountability, in such cases, is essential.

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.

Humble beginnings in Busan during the Korean War in 1952: Sun Myung Moon with a handful of followers, all North Korean refugees, in front of the first Unification Church building, a tiny shack made partly of cardboard. Photo: FFWPU

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.

See also Faith, Finance, Fairness: Rethinking the Narrative

See also Court Delays Bail Decision for Mother Han (82)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

***Featured image** above: From a large demonstration by Family Federation supporters in support of religious freedom, held near Seoul City Hall 2nd November 2025. Photo: Masataka Asaoka.*

See also President's Own Party Drawn into Lobbying Claims

See also Balcomb: "Prosecutors' Case Is Politically Driven"

See also Likely Long Legal Battle Ahead for Mother Han

See also Bail Hearing with Mother Han's Spiritual Message

See also Trial Day 1: Mother Han Denies All Allegations

See also Asia Today Editorial: "Avoid Detention of Clergy!"

See also Complaint Filed Against Lead Special Prosecutor

See also SKorea's Polarization Shapes Views of Mother Han

See also Inside the Detention Center: A 10-Minute Visit

See also Health Concerns: 82-Year-Old Pretrial Detainee

See also In Tiny Solitary Cell: Irreversible Harm Caused

See also Mother Han Briefly Released for Medical Reasons

See also Message of Religious Unity from Detention Cell

See also Over 50 Days in Vigil Outside Detention Center

***Related to when faith becomes a crime:** Mother Han's December Trial: Long Detention Ahead*

Also related to when faith becomes a crime: A 10-Minute Visit to Mother Han in Detention

Also related to when faith becomes a crime: Denying Allegations: Hak Ja Han (82) in Inquiry

Also related to when faith becomes a crime: SKorean Court's Sharp Criticism of Prosecutors

And also related to when faith becomes a crime: Detention: Harsh Cell Conditions Spark Outcry

More, related to when faith becomes a crime: Ugly: Arrest Warrant Sought for Hak Ja

More, related to when faith becomes a crime: Ugly: Arrest Warrant Sought for Hak Ja Han (82)

And more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Critics Warn of "Authoritarian Drift" in SKorea

Even more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Court Decision to Prolong Detention Condemned

Still more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Co-Founder, 82, Questioned 9 Hours by Prosecutors

Also related to when faith becomes a crime: Democratic Party's Assault on Family Federation

And even more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Mother Han (82) in Poor Health in Damp, Cold Cell

And still more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Korean Crisis: "True Democracy Must Serve Heaven"

And yet more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Faith Leaders Protest State Assault on Religion

Also related to when faith becomes a crime: News Release Blasts Indictment of Hak Ja Han, 82

More, related to when faith becomes a crime: 70 Years On: Detention History Repeats Itself

And more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Trump Raises Alarm Over Church Raids in Korea

Even more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Mike Pompeo Calls Probe of Co-Founder "Lawfare"

Still more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Korean Faith Crackdown: USA Urged to Confront It

Yet more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Korean Bribery Scandal: Media Clears Federation

And also related to when faith becomes a crime: Raids Blur Line Between Justice and Politics

More, related to when faith becomes a crime: Heavy-Handed Raid on Sacred Sites Condemned

And more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Scholar Sounds Alarm: State Raiding the Sacred

Even more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Raids as Political Spectacle and Media Trials

And even more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Religious Freedom: 330 Faith Leaders Speak Up

Yet more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Yonhap: Repeated Allegations Create Public Bias

Still more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Japan Following the Way of China

And still more, related to when faith becomes a crime: Warning of Threat from CCP Fearing Korean Unity

And also related to when faith becomes a crime: Japan's Dissolution Case Echoes China's Playbook

« Previous
Court Delays Bail Decision For Mother...

Next
Faith, Finance, Fairness: Rethinking T... »