FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Unificationism's True Place In Korean History

Knut Holdhus
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When faith met industry during a time of war anxiety during the 1960s and 1970s. Illustration: ChatGPT


Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

세계일보

Segye Ilbo

Rethinking Unificationism's place in modern Korean history: When faith met industry during a time of war anxiety during the 1960s and 1970s

In an article 6th February in the South Korean daily Segye Ilbo, religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) writes,

"In a reality where they are not easily protected by anyone in our society, this winter is likely to feel especially cold for believers of Unificationism (통일교). The political sphere and the media continue their harsh offensive against the faith. Though the issue has temporarily sunk below the surface, extreme expressions such as 'church-state collusion', 'antisocial group', and even 'dissolution of the religion' are still openly circulated."

For many observers - especially those outside Korea - this raises an obvious question: How did a religious movement come to be so controversial, and what role did it actually play in Korea's modern history?

Headlined "A Forgotten History Laid by Unificationism: The Cornerstone of Self-Reliant National Defense", the Segye Ilbo column by Jeong seeks to answer part of that question by revisiting a largely forgotten chapter of the past of Unificationism. Rather than focusing on theology,

internal practices, or recent media coverage, the article asks readers to step back into the 1960s and 1970s, when South Korea was a fragile, war-scarred state facing an existential threat from North Korea. According to the author, any fair evaluation of Unificationism must take into account what it did during this period of national vulnerability - particularly its involvement in building the foundations of South Korea's self-reliant defense capability.

South Korea in the Shadow of War

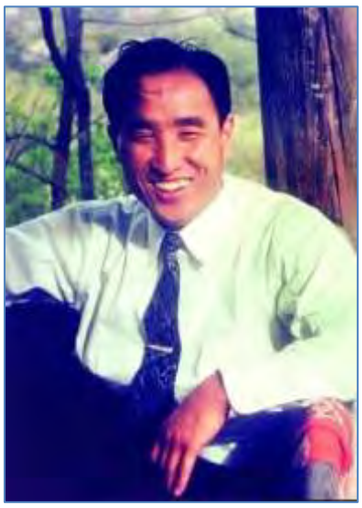
End of the Korean War in 1953: UN delegate Lieut. Gen. William K. Harrison, Jr. (seated left), and Korean People's Army and Chinese People's Volunteers delegate Gen. Nam Il (seated right) signing the Korean War armistice agreement at Panmunjom, Korea, 27th July 1953

To understand the article's argument, it is essential to understand the historical context. The Korean War (1950 - 1953) ended not with a peace treaty but with an armistice. Technically, North and South Korea remain at war to this day. During the decades that followed, the possibility of renewed conflict was not theoretical; it was an ever-present reality. North Korea maintained a large standing army, openly threatened invasion, and engaged in provocations ranging from border clashes to assassination attempts.

In the 1960s and 1970s, South Korea was still economically underdeveloped and militarily dependent on the United States and other allies. Most of its weapons, ammunition, and critical components were imported. This dependency created a dangerous vulnerability: in a crisis, foreign supply lines could be delayed, restricted, or cut off altogether. As a result, South Korea's leadership increasingly emphasized self-reliant national defense - the ability to produce essential military equipment domestically.

It is within this environment, the article argues, that the activities of Unificationism must be assessed.

Heavy Industry



Sun Myung Moon in the 1950s

Unificationism can trace its roots back to the time before the Korean War, but first became a registered organization in 1954, after the war had ended. Reverend Sun Myung Moon (문선명) and a handful of followers then founded the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, that became known as the Unification Church.

What distinguishes Moon from many other religious figures, according to the article, is that he did not limit his activities to spiritual or charitable work. Instead, during a period of acute national danger, he directed initiatives into one of the most technically demanding and politically sensitive fields imaginable: precision machinery and the defense industry.

His industrial venture began modestly. Tongil Industries (통일산업), the predecessor to Tongil Heavy Industries (통일중공업), reportedly started with little more than a secondhand lathe imported from Japan and a makeshift workshop in a repurposed building. Over time, however, this small operation evolved into a major industrial enterprise. By 1976, Tongil Heavy Industries had been officially designated a defense contractor by the South Korean government.

The company went on to manufacture and localize key components of South Korea's weapons systems. At a time when South Korea lacked both the technology and skilled workforce to produce such equipment independently, this contribution was strategically significant.

Beyond "Collusion": An Argument for Historical Reinterpretation

Critics of the movement that Sun Myung Moon founded often frame his industrial activities as evidence of improper closeness between religion and state power. The Segye Ilbo column challenges this interpretation. Rather than seeing the involvement in defense manufacturing as "collusion", the author frames it as a response to historical necessity.

Part of Sun Myung Moon's industrial projects: Korea Titanium Co. (1972)

From this perspective, Tongil Heavy Industries was not merely a factory producing parts for weapons. It functioned as a training ground for engineers, machinists, and technicians, many of whom later dispersed throughout South Korea's broader industrial sector. The skills, production methods, and organizational know-how developed there contributed to the overall advancement of the country's machinery and manufacturing capabilities.

Although Tongil Heavy Industries eventually declined - due to labor disputes, political pressure, and the economic shock of the late-1990s IMF crisis - its technological legacy did not disappear.

In his article, Jeong points out,

"Nevertheless, its technological legacy and human capital live on today through the SNT Group, one of Korea's leading precision machinery and defense companies, which continues to shoulder a key part of the nation's self-reliant defense."

While SNT is no longer affiliated with the movement of Sun Myung Moon (문선명) and Hak Ja Han (한학자) - also called Father Moon and Mother Han - the author argues that SNTs capabilities remain rooted in the earlier push for defense self-reliance.

Faith, Fear, and National Survival

Wanted to celebrate his 60th birthday in 1972 in Seoul: Kim Il-sung. Here, official portrait from 1966

The article also emphasizes that the sense of national responsibility found within Unificationism extended beyond industry into its religious life. In the early 1970s, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung (김일성) publicly intensified threats of invasion, reportedly declaring that he would celebrate his 60th birthday - in 1972 - in Seoul. Fear of war gripped South Korean society.

Within what was then called the Unification Church, members reportedly responded with intense collective prayer and fasting. One striking anecdote describes overnight prayer vigils aimed at preventing the Imjin River from freezing - a symbolic and strategic concern, as a frozen river could facilitate the movement of North Korean tanks. While modern readers may question the literal efficacy of such prayers, the author urges readers to see them as expressions of a deeper sense of responsibility: the belief that the survival of the nation and the survival of the faith community were inseparable.

Interestingly, the article notes that official records from the Korea Meteorological Administration show that the Han River did not freeze in 1972. Whether coincidence or not, the episode is presented as a reminder of the psychological and emotional climate of the time.

A Call for Historical Balance

The column concludes with a broader reflection on how societies judge religious organizations in

moments of crisis. The principle of separation between church and state, the author acknowledges, is essential. However, he argues that this principle should not be used to erase or ignore historical contributions that have already been absorbed into the national system.

From the author's standpoint, the Unification Church did not retreat into isolation when South Korea faced potential collapse. Instead, it assumed risks - economic, political, and reputational - in pursuit of what it saw as national survival. Whether one views the religious movement favorably or critically, the article contends that this record deserves sober consideration.

Ultimately, the piece is less a defense of the present activities of Unificationism than a plea for historical nuance. Before invoking terms like "antisocial group" or "dissolution", the author argues, Korean society should confront the full complexity of the past. How a society treats a contested religion in times of controversy, he concludes, is a measure of that society's maturity - and of its willingness to judge history with both clarity and restraint.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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Religious Freedom Threat: China-Led Alliance

- February 6, 2026
- Knut Holdhus

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U.S. hearing highlights freedom threat and China's role in driving global religious repression as the totalitarian state is accused of leading "dark alliance"

Tokyo, 5th February 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper Sekai Nippo. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. Original article.

Concerns Raised Over Religious Pressure in Japan and South Korea

Testimony by Former U.S. Officials on Detention of Hak Ja Han and Others at U.S. House Hearing

Logo of the Sekai Nippo

China's "Dark Alliance" Poses a Threat

by Yuya Kawase (川瀬 裕也)

Washington DC (Yuya Kawase) – On 4th February, the *U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee* held a hearing focused on religious freedom around the world. Testimony included not only criticism of the Chinese government for its continued religious repression, but also expressions of concern about pressure being placed on specific religious organizations by the governments of Japan and South Korea.

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At the hearing, former *U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom* Sam Brownback testified and addressed the situation in East Asia. He pointed out that a "dark alliance" of communist and authoritarian states that regard religious freedom as a threat is taking shape, asserting,

> "China exists behind it as the mastermind."

He went on to explain that China has invested tens of billions of dollars to build the world's most advanced surveillance technology and is thoroughly suppressing all forms of belief, including Uyghurs, Tibetans, Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners. He warned that China's provision of such surveillance technology to other authoritarian states constitutes an "unprecedented threat".

***Used against believers**: Advanced Chinese face recognition technology. Illustration: Chat GPT, 6th February 2026.*

Brownback also referred to the current detention of Hak Ja Han (한학자), president of the *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the Unification Church), stating,

> "In South Korea, leaders of Christian groups and the Family Federation who have drawn the attention of the government are being detained one after another."

He further noted that "Japan faces similar challenges," expressing concern about how both the Japanese and South Korean governments are dealing with religious organizations.

The hearing was also attended by Grace Drexel, the daughter of Christian pastor Ezra Jin, who is currently imprisoned in China. Speaking from the perspective of a family member directly affected, she warned of the dangers of the international community remaining silent in the face of religious persecution and called on the U.S. government to maintain sustained attention and action.

***Stephen Frederick Schneck**, American author, political philosopher, and Chair of United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2024-2025. Photo (2019): USCIRF. Public domain image*

In addition, Stephen F. Schneck, former chair of the *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom* (USCIRF) [See editor's note below], a U.S. government advisory body, also gave testimony.

On the same day, a kickoff breakfast meeting was held at the U.S. Capitol to discuss the same theme, where members of both chambers of Congress and scholars of religion called for strengthening international efforts to defend religious freedom.

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***Featured image** above: Former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback (center) testifies at a U.S. House hearing, 4th February 2026, Washington DC. Photo: Yuya Kawase (川瀬 裕也)*

[***Editor's note***: The **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government advisory body established by the **International Religious Freedom Act of 1998**. Its purpose is to monitor, analyze, and report on violations of **freedom of religion or belief** worldwide and to advise the U.S. government on policy responses.

USCIRF does not make or enforce law. Instead, it provides policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. One of its most influential roles is issuing an **annual report** that assesses religious freedom conditions in countries around the world. In this report, USCIRF recommends which governments should be designated as **"Countries of Particular Concern" (CPCs)** or placed on a **Special Watch List** for severe or systematic violations, such as imprisonment for religious belief, forced conversions, or repression of minority faiths.

The Commission consists of nine members: three appointed by the President, three by the Speaker of the House, and three by the Senate leadership. Commissioners come from both major political parties, reinforcing USCIRF's nonpartisan mandate.

USCIRF conducts fact-finding missions, holds public hearings, engages with civil society and religious leaders, and produces thematic reports on issues such as blasphemy laws, authoritarian surveillance, and persecution of religious minorities. Its work aims to integrate religious freedom into U.S. foreign policy as a core human rights concern.]

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