

## S Korea's President Lee and 9 religious leaders demand religions they think are *heretical* be disbanded

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[www.koreatimes.co.kr/opinion/20260115/president-lee-religious-leaders-call-for-heretical-religions-to-be-disbanded](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/opinion/20260115/president-lee-religious-leaders-call-for-heretical-religions-to-be-disbanded)



The call this week by major religious leaders, backed by President Lee Jae Myung, to disband two minor religions - the Unification Church and Shincheonji - for being "illegitimate" and "heretical" reveals an astonishing misreading of the basic values that underpin Korea's democracy.

That the religious leaders wish to see off pesky, cultish rivals is at least understandable, given their particular focus as heads of faith groups jostling in the highly competitive marketplace of Korean religion.

But that the president, who represents all Koreans - including those in the North, according to the Constitution - would pass judgment in this way, as if he were the nation's chief priest, and call for the organizational equivalent of the death penalty, is quite shocking.

You may think I'm getting hysterical. But bear with me.

You do not need to be a heretic yourself to support the rights of unpopular new faiths. At the same time, nor should heresy be the excuse to deny them rights. Heresy is not a crime in this country. Personally, I approve of heresy. In religion, it is the source of innovation. We allow it, and we expect as grown-ups to be able to consider good and bad ideas, or ignore them, as we see fit.

The context of Lee's judgment is that the head of the Unification Church, legally known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, is on trial for bribery and involvement in politics (which is illegal for religious organizations under Korean law). If she and other officials are found to have broken the law, they will be punished. But the system should not be able to crucify the faith in its entirety. That is because religious freedom is not simply guaranteed in the Constitution. In practice, there is greater religious freedom in this country than in most democracies. That works because Korea has no official or unofficial state religion. There's no real religious authority hammering in the nails. The leaders in the photo with Lee do not carry much political weight.

But that is not the main point.

What is most troubling is how Lee seems to view his job. It appears to me that his values are the wrong way around. Let's face it: He wants to crush these two religions for political reasons. They appeared to

support his predecessor. Then, when it turned out that the Unification Church had donated political funds to his side as well, it was embarrassing. He was doubly motivated. But the fact that he acted on it and spoke in this way is an indication that political interests come first. Any question of liberty is far down the ladder. If the religious leaders had called for cults to be removed, he should be the one to point to the Constitution.

Truth be told, the prioritization of political power and the minimization of individual liberty is the reality in practice in Korea, despite the promise of the Constitution. It is this country's weakness.

This attack on unpopular religions is important to fend off. Not simply for long-term reasons, in that all religions were unpopular cults at one point. But because of all the freedoms, freedom of religion is the most fundamental. The others flow from it.

Let's face it: We tolerate the 9,999 religions we don't believe in with ease because we ignore them. For atheists, that applies to all 10,000. When we do notice a religion that is not ours, we probably find it weird, even repellent. In fact, the major tenets of all religions look ridiculous if you list them out and post them on social media. But when one faith group is threatened, we should pay attention, not to the beliefs themselves or to the form of worship, but to the right to belief and worship.

That is because, at the core of our system, the individual is most prized, and at the heart of the individual lies the conscience. It has mystical value. It must be protected from abuse by the state. The democratic system commits to guaranteeing us as much liberty as is reasonable in a collective so that we may exercise our conscience.

This beautiful and hard-won Korean version of democracy is not some fake copy of an American brand of governance that exists for the convenience of power-seeking politicians who would rule over us. It is the expression of values so profound that, if it came to it, men would shield their families and die for them.

Yet there they stood for the photograph in the newspapers this week - our President and the grinning religious leaders, apparently ignorant of the values that are supposed to underpin our democracy. Did no one say, "Steady on, Pontius Pilate. Isn't that a bit extreme? Shouldn't the courts just jail whoever is found guilty of wrongdoing when the trial is over?"

Nope. Apparently, no one did.

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