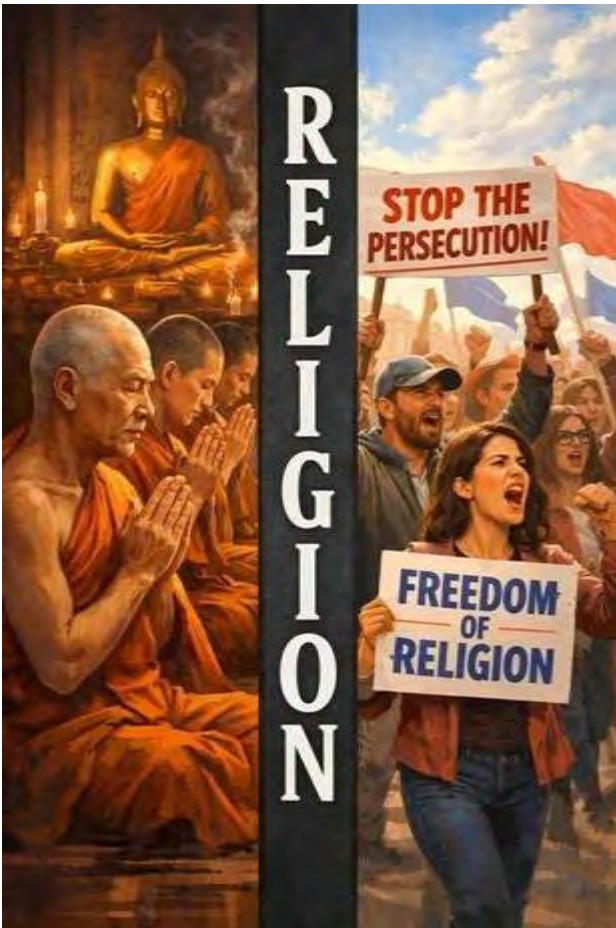


FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Religion in Korea Between Engagement and Withdrawal

Knut Holdhus
January 6, 2026



Religion, withdrawal and social engagement. Illustration



[Segye Ilbo](#)

From Catholicism to Buddhism: Faith in the public sphere and a long tradition of religious engagement with history

Jeong Seong-su (정성수), religious affairs correspondent of the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) had an article published 5th January titled "[Salvation-Centered Religion versus History-Engaged Religion](#)".



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

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The question of whether religion should limit itself to the realm of individual salvation or extend its concern to society and history has long occupied theologians, believers, and critics alike. At stake is not merely a doctrinal disagreement, but a fundamental divergence in how religion understands its mission in the world.

Some religious traditions and movements insist that faith must remain detached from social and political realities, warning that historical engagement contaminates spiritual purity. Others argue that religion, by its very nature, carries moral responsibilities that cannot be confined to the inner life of the individual. [Jeong's article](#) under discussion positions itself firmly within this latter view, presenting what it calls "history-engaged religion" as a recurring and legitimate pattern across world religions, and situating the [Family Federation](#) within this broader tradition.

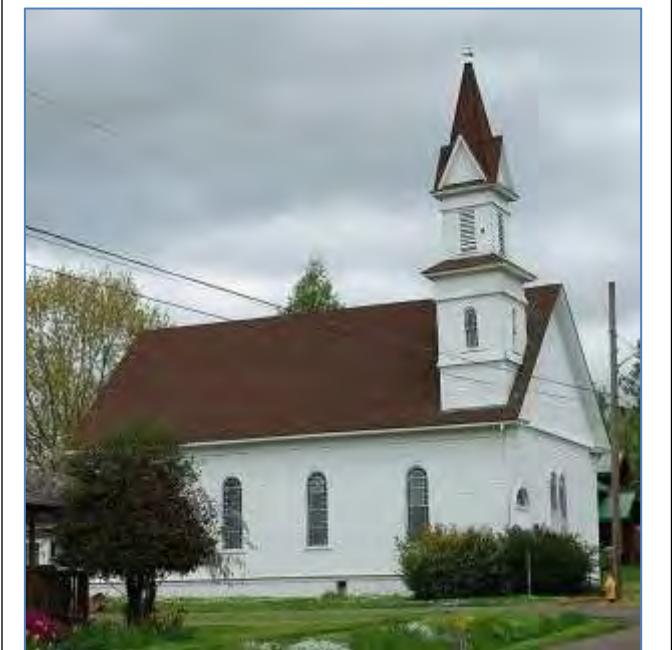
The author begins by distinguishing between salvation-oriented religions that emphasize withdrawal from society and history-engaged religions that regard social responsibility as integral to faith. According to Jeong, certain mystical Christian groups, apocalyptic movements, or separatist communities view the world as irredeemably fallen and see historical intervention as a distraction – or even a corruption – of true belief. From this perspective, religious authenticity is preserved through distance from politics, institutions, and public controversy.



Keeping a distance from politics: The Jehovah's Witnesses, who don't allow their members to vote in political elections



Catholicism: The facade of Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome, Italy



Protestantism: Evangelical Church of Lafayette, Oregon, USA

By contrast, history-engaged religion does not draw a sharp boundary between salvation and social order. It assumes that faith must be expressed not only through personal piety but also through ethical stances, institutional action, and engagement with the moral direction of society over time.

Crucially, the author emphasizes that this orientation is not an anomaly or a modern deviation. Rather, it has appeared repeatedly across major religious traditions. Catholicism, Protestantism, and Buddhism are cited as prominent examples of religions that, despite doctrinal differences, have consistently intersected with historical and political realities. These references are not incidental; they are intended to demonstrate that the [Family Federation's](#) social engagement is neither unprecedented nor inherently suspect, but instead reflects a well-established religious pattern.

In the case of Catholicism, the author points to its long history of institutional engagement with political authority, particularly around issues of labor rights, human dignity, and social justice. From papal encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* to modern interventions on immigration, poverty, and human rights, Catholicism has repeatedly asserted that moral truth cannot remain silent in the face of unjust social structures.

This stance has often brought the papal church into conflict with state power rather than alignment with it. The author's implication is that Catholic engagement with politics has not been understood simply as "collusion", but as a moral obligation rooted in theological convictions about human dignity and the common good. Catholicism thus exemplifies a religion that sees historical engagement as a consequence of faith, not a betrayal of it.

Protestantism – particularly evangelical Protestantism in the United States – is offered as a second illustration. Over the past century, evangelical movements have played a significant role in shaping political discourse, most notably within conservative politics. This involvement has included advocacy on issues such as communism, family values, religious freedom, and national identity.

While this political alignment has been controversial and frequently criticized, it is rarely dismissed outright as illegitimate simply because it reflects religious values entering the

public sphere. Instead, it is generally understood as an expression of a worldview that links moral order, national destiny, and religious conviction. By referencing Protestant evangelicalism, the author

underscores that sustained political influence does not automatically equate to improper entanglement with power; rather, it often reflects a conscious decision to engage history from within a religious framework.



Buddhism, often stereotyped as purely contemplative or otherworldly, is introduced to challenge the assumption that historical engagement is unique to Western monotheistic traditions. Across Asia, Buddhist institutions have frequently intertwined with national identity, resistance movements, and state formation. Examples range from Sri Lanka and Myanmar to Korea and Japan, where Buddhism has at various times supported political authority, resisted colonial domination, or shaped cultural definitions of the nation itself.

These cases illustrate that even traditions emphasizing enlightenment and detachment have, in practice, responded to historical circumstances and collective moral challenges. Buddhism's political roles demonstrate that engagement with history is not necessarily a deviation from spiritual aims, but can emerge organically from religious self-understanding.

Against this comparative backdrop, the author turns to the [Family Federation](#) and the accusation of "collusion between religion and politics" that has followed it especially in Japan and South Korea the last few years. The [article](#) argues that this label has been applied too loosely, without sufficient distinction between two fundamentally different phenomena: on the one hand, religion leveraging political power for institutional privilege, and on the other, religion articulating moral positions and acting on public issues as a member of civil society. According to the author, the [Family Federation](#) has been judged within the former framework even when its actions more closely resemble the latter.

The roots of this misinterpretation are traced to Cold War anti-communism and Korea's broader suspicion toward non-mainstream religions. The [Family Federation's](#) explicit value judgments about global order and its strong anti-communist stance were interpreted, in a cultural context that prized political neutrality, as improper intervention. Yet the author insists on a critical distinction: expressing values about history is not the same as seeking power over it. Where collusion concerns institutional exchange and control, value-based engagement concerns moral orientation.



While acknowledging controversies surrounding political donations and large-scale projects, the [Segye Ilbo opinion piece](#) suggests that many of the [Family Federation's](#) initiatives – such as advocacy for peace, reunification, and transnational infrastructure – are better understood as public-interest interventions grounded in religious belief rather than as strategies for power accumulation.

Like other history-engaged religions, the [Federation](#) risks criticism and distortion. History has of course shown examples of history-engaged religion treating its own historically conditioned beliefs, decisions, or institutional authority as absolute and

unquestionable. Thereby, faith was turned into rigid ideology, and the capacity for self-correction was weakened.

However, such risks do not negate the legitimacy of engagement itself.

Ultimately, [Jeong's article](#) reframes the debate as a broader societal question: in democratic societies, should religion retreat into private spirituality, or should it assume responsibility within history, even at the cost of controversy? The author argues that dismissing the [Family Federation](#) solely on the basis of its engagement obscures this deeper issue. To understand such a religion, one must begin not with suspicion, but with an acknowledgment of its refusal to separate salvation from history – and its insistence that faith, if it is to be meaningful, must confront the world as it is.

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- January 5, 2026
- Knut Holdhus

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Ruling Democratic Party wants to make large special prosecutor probe even bigger, fueling new political showdown in South Korea

On 5th January, the large South Korean daily *Chosun Ilbo* ran a news item which in English would be headlined "With 'Second Comprehensive Special Prosecutor Bill to Be Handled at the

朝鮮日報

The logo of the Chosun Ilbo

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The [article](#) written by Yoo Jong-heon (유종현) reports on a significant political and legal confrontation unfolding in South Korea at the start of 2026, centered on the ruling *Democratic Party of Korea's* push to launch new special prosecutor investigations. To understand the stakes, it is important first to clarify what "special prosecutors" are in the South Korean context and why they are politically sensitive.

In South Korea, a special prosecutor (often shortened to "special counsel" in English-language reporting) is an independent investigative body established by legislation to probe allegations that are considered too politically sensitive or complex to be handled solely by ordinary prosecutors.

These investigations typically target high-ranking officials, ruling-party figures, or matters involving alleged abuse of state power. Because special prosecutors are created by law and staffed separately from the regular prosecution service, **their establishment almost always reflects intense partisan conflict.**

The "second comprehensive special prosecutor bill" referenced in the [article](#) is an especially expansive proposal. It is called "comprehensive" because it consolidates multiple unresolved or controversial allegations into a single investigative framework rather than addressing them one by one. According to the *Democratic Party's* proposal, this second comprehensive investigation would **cover 14 separate allegations and operate for up to 170 days with a staff of as many as 156 investigators, making it one of the largest special prosecutor efforts in recent years.**

This proposed investigation **follows three earlier special prosecutor probes** – into an alleged insurrection, allegations involving former first lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희), and issues related to the Marine Corps – that concluded in late 2025.



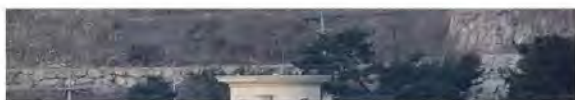
2024 logo of the Democratic Party of South Korea. [Public domain image.](#)

According to the *Chosun Ilbo*, the **Democratic Party argues that those earlier investigations were incomplete or insufficient and therefore justifies reopening or expanding scrutiny through a second, broader inquiry.** The opposition *People Power Party*, by contrast, criticizes the proposal as politically motivated, characterizing it as a "special prosecutor for local elections" designed to damage conservative candidates ahead of upcoming regional contests.

Alongside this sweeping investigation, the *Democratic Party* is also attempting to pass a **more targeted bill commonly referred to as the "Unification Church-Shincheonji special prosecutor"**. This bill focuses on allegations that certain religious organizations engaged in improper lobbying, political donations, or election interference involving politicians from both major parties.

The **Unification Church** – often known in the West for its [mass weddings](#) and founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) – is a religious movement **established** in South Korea more than 70 years ago, and which has since spread throughout the world. For 30 years, it has the name [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), but many still call it by its former name.

Recent allegations suggest that figures associated with the [Federation](#) may have provided money or other benefits to politicians, prompting police searches and seizures, including at the office of a former cabinet minister. These allegations have raised questions about undue religious influence on politics.



Shincheonji (신천지), the second group named in the bill, is a new

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The Shincheonji (신전지) Peace Palace in Cheongpyeong-myeon, Gapyeong, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea. Photo (2020): Jhcbs1019 / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#)

religious movement founded in the 1980s and widely known outside Korea due to its alleged role in the early spread of COVID-19 in the country. Unlike the [Family Federation](#), Shincheonji is not directly implicated

in the current lobbying allegations. Its inclusion in the bill is therefore politically contentious. Critics argue that Shincheonji is being added to broaden the scope of the investigation to include past claims that the group attempted to influence internal party primary elections, particularly within the conservative *People Power Party*.

This expansion is a key reason that negotiations between the parties have stalled. Originally, the idea of a [Family Federation](#)-focused investigation was supported by conservative lawmakers and a minor reform party. However, once the *Democratic Party* agreed to proceed, the bill was rebranded to include Shincheonji as well. **The People Power Party now insists that if Shincheonji is to be investigated, then another religious organization – Daesoon Jinrihoe (대순진리회) – should also be included.**

Daesoon Jinrihoe is a lesser known but influential Korean religious movement rooted in indigenous spiritual traditions rather than Christianity. It has periodically been accused in conservative circles of maintaining close ties with progressive politicians. In this case, the **opposition is calling for allegations of**



Sungdo Gate, Yeosu Temple of *Daesoon Jinrihoe*, Yeosu, South Korea. Photo (2017): Aidayoung / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#)

President Lee Jae-myung's (이재명) supposed links to Daesoon Jinrihoe to be investigated alongside those involving the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji. The *Democratic Party* rejects this demand, seeing it as an attempt to dilute or politicize the investigation.

Complicating matters further, President Lee has instructed authorities to consider forming a joint police-prosecutor task force to look into the [Family Federation](#) and Shincheonji allegations, potentially reducing the need for a separate special prosecutor. This move signals the executive branch's awareness of public concern while also suggesting **caution about launching yet another large-scale independent investigation.**

Procedurally, the *Democratic Party* aims to move both the second comprehensive special prosecutor bill and the religious-organization-related bill through the *National Assembly's Legislation and Judiciary Committee* between 5th and 7th January, with the goal of passing them at the plenary session on 8th January – the first full parliamentary session of the new year.

However, party leaders have acknowledged that agreement on the [Unification Church](#)-Shincheonji bill may not be reached in time. If talks fail, negotiations may be postponed until after the *Democratic Party* elects a new floor leader on 11th January.

The [Chosun Ilbo](#) article illustrates how **legal mechanisms designed to ensure accountability – special prosecutors – have become central instruments of partisan struggle in South Korea.** The **dispute is not only about alleged corruption or religious influence but also about who controls the narrative ahead of elections,** how far investigations should reach, and **whether religion and politics can realistically be disentangled in a highly polarized environment.**

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: South Korean politics with the Lee Jae-myung administration going after several religious organizations for allegedly influencing politics. Illustration of politician and praying couple by Grok xAI.

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