

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Shameful Treatment Of Religious Leaders

Knut Holdhus
June 16, 2026



Hak Ja Han, aka. Mother Han in 2023. Photo: FFWPU, improved for higher resolution and sharpness by Grok xAI

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)

A portrait of Jeong Seong-su, a middle-aged man with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

[Segye Ilbo](#) Religious affairs reporter` Jeong Seong-su (2025)

Religious successors and the weight of history: Examples from Korea now and its past of preserving a movement in times of trial

On 15th June 2026, religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) of the South Korean newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#) published an [opinion column](#) reflecting on the public treatment of religious leaders and believers during periods of controversy. Although the [article](#) was prompted by recent [court proceedings](#) involving [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) - also known as [Mother Han](#) - the author's broader concern was not the legal case itself. Rather, he examined how societies talk about religion, how the media frames religious controversies, and what it means to inherit leadership of a religious movement after its founder has passed away.

The [column](#) is particularly significant because it appears at a time when the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) is facing intense public scrutiny in South Korea and elsewhere. The [movement](#), in Korea also known as [Unificationism](#) (통일교), has become the subject of political, legal, and media debates. Against this backdrop, Jeong argues that criticism of a religion and ridicule of its believers are not the same thing, and that the distinction matters.

The [article](#) begins with an observation about the nature of courtrooms. Courts, Jeong writes, are places governed by evidence, testimony, legal arguments, and judgments. Personal conviction, faith, tears, and a sense of divine mission do not carry legal weight. Normally, people appearing in court focus on defending themselves against allegations or challenging the claims of others.

According to the author, however, [Hak Ja Han](#)'s courtroom appearance departed from this pattern. After addressing accusations directed at her, she spoke about her life's purpose: her efforts to promote peace around the world and her belief that she has a mission connected to what she calls our "Heavenly Parent",

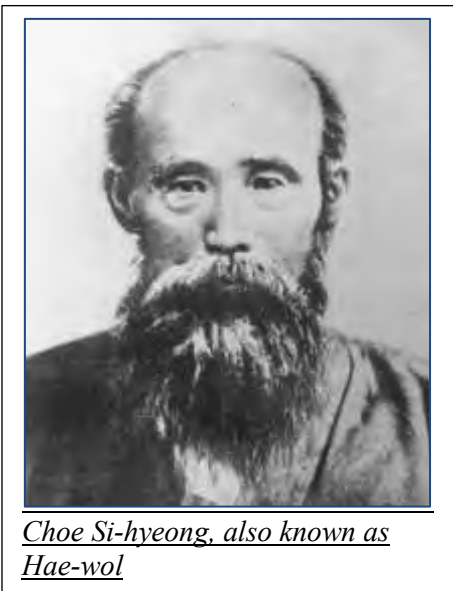
the term she uses to refer to [God](#).



Some commentators viewed this as inappropriate or irrelevant in a legal setting. One online media outlet, OhmyNews (오마이뉴스), characterized her remarks as a "ten-minute solo explanation of doctrine".

It is here that Jeong introduces his central argument. He does not object to criticism of religion. In fact, he explicitly states that journalists have every right - and indeed a responsibility - to investigate religious organizations, scrutinize religious leaders, and expose wrongdoing when it exists. What troubles him is something different: the use of language that moves beyond criticism into mockery.

For Jeong, phrases such as "solo doctrine lecture" carry a dismissive tone that implicitly treats the faith of believers as absurd. He argues that a journalist could simply describe what happened without adding wording designed to provoke ridicule. In his view, language shapes perception. The choice of words can influence whether readers approach a subject critically yet fairly, or whether they are encouraged to laugh at it before considering the facts.



To reinforce this point, Jeong cites another example from the same media outlet. During an earlier legal dispute involving figures connected with [Unificationism](#), the publication reportedly described the proceedings as a "dogfight". The columnist acknowledges that legal battles can be harsh and contentious. Nevertheless, he argues that when journalists use highly emotional labels, they stop functioning primarily as observers and begin acting as participants who guide readers toward a particular emotional reaction.

The author's concern is especially acute because of the current situation facing the [Family Federation](#). The [movement](#) is being intensely persecuted, and the left-leaning president of the country, Lee Jae-myung (이재명), has even introduced the idea of dissolving what he perceives as a conservative religious opponent. Yet Jeong reminds readers that behind headlines and controversies are ordinary believers who have organized their lives around sincere religious convictions. One can disagree with those beliefs, he argues, without treating the believers themselves as objects of contempt.

From this discussion of contemporary media and religion, the column shifts to a historical analogy. Jeong introduces Choe Si-hyeong (최시형), better known by his religious title Hae-wol (해월), the second leader of the nineteenth-century Korean religious movement Donghak (동학 - literally "Eastern Learning") [See editor's note 1 below]. This comparison forms the emotional and philosophical heart of the [article](#).



Donghak [See editor's note 1 below] was founded by Choe Je-u (최제우), also known as Su-un (수운), in the mid-nineteenth century. After the founder was executed by the Joseon government in 1864, the movement faced severe persecution. Followers were hunted, the organization seemed likely to disappear, and its future appeared bleak. According to Jeong, Hae-wol inherited leadership under these extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

Unlike the founder, who is remembered for creating a new vision, Hae-wol's task was simply to keep the movement alive. Forced into hiding, he spent decades moving from village to village carrying only a small bundle of belongings. This earned him the nickname "Choe with the Bundle". Through years of hardship, he preserved the movement until it survived long enough to develop into what later became known as Cheondogyo (천도교 - Cheondoism, literally "Religion of the Heavenly Way") [See editor's note 2 below].

Jeong cites a well-known saying among followers of that tradition: "Su-un founded it; Hae-wol preserved it." The phrase captures a distinction that he believes applies broadly throughout religious history. Founders often receive admiration because they create something new and inspire people with a

compelling vision. Successors, by contrast, inherit problems. They must defend institutions, navigate internal disagreements, withstand external attacks, and maintain continuity during times of crisis.

This leads to the [column](#)'s broader reflection on religious leadership. Jeong suggests that successors are frequently lonelier than founders. While founders are remembered for their charisma, successors bear the burden of sustaining communities after the excitement of creation has passed. Their role is less dramatic but no less important.

Seen through this lens, [Mother Han](#) appears in the [article](#) not primarily as a defendant in a legal controversy but as a religious successor carrying what the author views as a heavy historical responsibility. When she became emotional in court and spoke of her spiritual mission, Jeong says he was reminded of the many religious figures throughout history who have devoted their lives to preserving communities amid criticism and uncertainty.

The [article](#) concludes by emphasizing a principle of civic discourse. People are entitled to disagree about whether a religious mission is valid or misguided. They may criticize doctrines, institutions, and leaders. However, Jeong argues that there is no need to turn a person's lifelong convictions into an object of ridicule. Public criticism can be rigorous and even severe while still maintaining a basic respect for human dignity and sincere religious belief.



Jeonju Donghak Revolution Memorial Hall. The museum, located in the sothwestern city of Jeonju in North Jeolla province, was established by the Cheondoism (formerly Donghak) community to commemorate the Donghak Revolution and contains exhibits on the movement, its leaders, and its historical legacy

In essence, the [column](#) is less a defense of any particular doctrine than an appeal for restraint in public discussion. Jeong asks readers to distinguish between critical examination and mockery, and to remember that behind every religious controversy are real individuals whose identities, values, and sense of purpose are deeply connected to their faith. Whether one agrees with them or not, he argues, that reality deserves recognition.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note 1: Donghak (동학, "Eastern Learning") was a Korean religious, philosophical, and social movement founded in 1860 by Choe Je-u ((최제우 - 1824-1864) during the late Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897). It emerged as a response to growing foreign influence, especially Western Christianity ("Western Learning", Seohak), social inequality, corruption, and political instability.

Donghak combined elements of Korean folk beliefs, Confucian ethics, Buddhism, and Daoism. Its central teaching held that the divine is present within every person (Innaecheon, "humanity is heaven"), emphasizing human dignity, moral self-cultivation, and the spiritual equality of all people. This idea challenged the rigid social hierarchy of Joseon society.



Son Byeong-hui (1861-1922), the founder of Cheondoism

The movement gained a large following among peasants and marginalized groups. In 1894, dissatisfaction with government corruption and economic hardship contributed to the Donghak Peasant Revolution, a major uprising inspired in part by Donghak ideals. Although the revolt was suppressed, it helped trigger broader regional conflicts and reforms.

After persecution, Donghak evolved into Cheondoism ("Religion of the Heavenly Way"), which remains active in Korea today.]

[Editor's note 2: Cheondogyo or Cheondoism (천도교, "Religion of the Heavenly Way") is a Korean religion that developed from the earlier Donghak ("Eastern Learning") movement. In 1905, the movement was reorganized and renamed by Son Byeong-hui (손병희 - 1861-1922) to emphasize its spiritual character and adapt to the changing political conditions of Korea under increasing foreign domination.

The central doctrine of Cheondogyo is Innaecheon ("Humanity is Heaven"), the belief that the divine resides within every human being. As a result, all people possess inherent dignity and should be treated with respect and equality. Cheondogyo stresses moral cultivation, social responsibility, and the improvement of society through ethical action rather than withdrawal from the world.



The flag of Cheondogyo

Unlike many religions that sharply separate the sacred and the secular, Cheondogyo teaches that everyday life is the proper arena for spiritual practice. Historically, its followers played a significant role in Korea's modernization and independence movement, including participation in the March First Movement against Japanese colonial rule.

Today, Cheondogyo remains one of Korea's indigenous religions, preserving the humanistic and reformist ideals inherited from Donghak.]

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Defense Challenges Core Claims Of Indictment

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Court proceedings focus on key contradictions as defense presents evidence and witness accounts in 12th June hearing attended by Mother Han (83)



Kim Dong-yeon (김동연), Vice-President, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in South Korea.

Extracts from a [briefing](#) 13th June 2026 by Rev. Kim Dong-yeon (김동연), Vice-President, [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) in South Korea. Translated from Korean. Originally published by the Culture and Public Relations Office on the [website](#) of the Korean chapter of the [Family Federation \(FFWPU\)](#).

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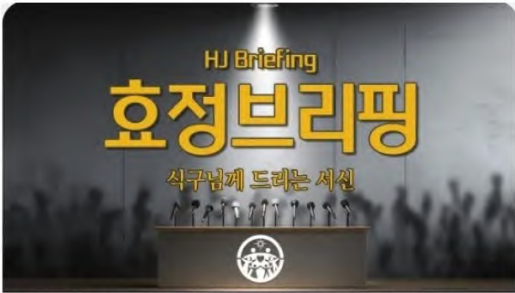
South Korea. Screenshot from video by FFWPU 17th Jan. 2026.

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and Their Heirs

True Mother has gradually regained strength and was finally able to appear in court on 12th June. We would like to provide a summary of her actions and the progress of the court proceedings, undertaken after she rose from her sickbed in order to reveal the truth.



From the [website](#) of the Korean chapter of the [Family Federation](#) (FFWPU).

True Mother’s Testimony and the Key Issues of the Hearing

Appearing in person at the 12th June hearing, True Mother stated immediately after taking the witness oath:

“I have never given 100 million won to Kweon Seong-dong (권성동). I have never given gifts to the President’s wife, Kim Keon-hee (김건희). Nor have I ever provided money as political funds to politicians.”

With these words, she firmly and clearly denied the core allegations contained in the indictment. She further made clear that the current situation originated from the false claims and misrepresentations of the [former headquarters director](#).

The defense team then focused on demonstrating that the special prosecutors had distorted the [Family Federation](#)’s distinctive religious concepts of “[Cheonil-guk](#)” (천일국) and “*national restoration*” (국가복귀) [[See editor’s note below](#)] into secular political lobbying.



Yoon Yeong-ho, former international HQ director of the [Family Federation](#). Here, 6th Dec. 2020. Screenshot from Peacelink TV

The defense also concentrated on establishing, as a matter of law, that the case arose from the [former headquarters director](#)’s unilateral working methods and personal misconduct.

In particular, the defense argued that the [former headquarters director](#) habitually carried out actions without prior approval and then reported them afterward only if they produced results, maintaining an arbitrary and independent style of operation. Most significantly, they identified what they described as a decisive contradiction: the “Special Report” file from the

relevant date, presented as key evidence, reportedly contains no reference whatsoever to providing funds to former lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong (권성동). Through this, the defense sought to undermine the opposing side’s claims.

The defense continues to argue before the court that this case represents a crime committed independently by the [former headquarters director](#) – who was once the most powerful official of our [religious organization](#) – in order to maintain his influence and accumulate personal wealth through the misuse of funds of our [religious organization](#), and that there was no instruction from or conspiracy involving True Mother.

Testimony from Key Individuals Supporting the Defense’s Position

During the recent trial proceedings, the principal arguments advanced by the defense have been further substantiated through the detailed testimony of witnesses who were responsible for finances and practical operations at the time, making the factual circumstances of the case clearer.

A former executive who had worked closely with the [former headquarters director](#) in planning activities testified that “True Mother’s actual statements and the direction of activities of Yoon Yeong-ho (윤영호) did not align with one another.” The witness further alleged that Yoon distributed a separate internal guideline called “Interpretation of the Word”, which reinterpreted and imposed True Mother’s sincere religious messages according to his own preferences in order to justify his independent actions. According to

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the briefing, this testimony demonstrates that the affair resulted from personal misconduct carried out in [True Mother's](#) name.

A former executive responsible for finances at the World Headquarters testified that funds disbursed immediately before the presidential election were executed not on [True Mother's](#) instructions but on direct orders from the [former headquarters director](#). The witness further stated that, according to the regulations of the [religious organization](#), the amount in question could legally be approved solely by the headquarters director, reinforcing the argument that the actions were carried out independently.

Staff members who were responsible for accounting subsequently testified that the [former headquarters director](#) and his spouse received reimbursement twice for luxury purchases and personal expenses amounting to tens or even hundreds of millions of won [[10 million won = ca. 7,250 US dollars](#)]. They also alleged indications of personal embezzlement. Furthermore, it was pointed out that there had been a practice of requesting budget allocations for items such as mission-support expenses without attaching specific supporting documentation, resulting in opaque funding requests. It was also revealed that, within a rigid top-down hierarchical structure, non-transparent expenditures of funds were carried out among operational staff.

See also [Mother Han Delivers 10-Minute Court Statement](#)

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Featured image above: Special prosecutors distorting the [Family Federation's](#) distinctive religious concepts of “[Cheonil-guk](#)” ([천일국](#)) and “national restoration” ([국가복귀](#)). Illustration: ChatGPT, 14th June 2026.



Kept long-term in tiny cell under inhuman conditions: [Hak Ja Han](#), the [True Mother](#), here on 27th March 2026 after more than 6 months in detention cell. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

[Editor's note: In the context of [Hak Ja Han](#) and the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (FFWPU), “national restoration” ([국가복귀](#), [국가복원](#), or related terms often translated as “restoration of the nation”) is primarily a religious and [providential](#) concept, not simply a political one.

The challenge – and the point raised in the [briefing](#) – is that prosecutors and the defense appear to disagree about whether references to “national restoration” should be understood as religious objectives or as political activities.

When [Hak Ja Han](#) speaks of “national restoration”, she is generally referring to the goal of [Unificationism](#) to transform a nation so that it reflects [God's ideal](#) and becomes part of the realization of [Cheonil-guk](#) (Kingdom of Heaven), rather than simply winning political influence or supporting particular politicians. Whether specific activities undertaken in pursuit of that goal crossed into political lobbying is precisely what seems to be contested in the proceedings described in the [briefing](#).]

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