



## RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY: AN EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCES BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

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### Unifying or Dividing? Sun Myung Moon and the Origins of the Unification Church

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This paper explores the relationship between the Unification Church (now known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) and mainstream Christianity, principally in the U.S.A. and Britain. Although the UC hails democracy as the system of government that is favoured by God, and destined to win over Satanic communism, the UC has found considerable difficulty in gaining recognition from the dominant religion that prevails in these democratic countries. I shall explore the reasons for this, arguing the principal barriers are theological ones

Sun Myung Moon has repeatedly said that he never intended to found a new religion. It is therefore ironic that Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church (whose members are popularly known as „the Moonies“). Unificationists are adamant that they are a Christian organization, and, as the name „Unification“ suggests, seek to unite, not divide Christianity and the world's religious traditions more widely.

#### *Origins*

The basic story of the Unification Church's origins is fairly well known. Founder-leader Sun Myung Moon was born in North Korea. He frequently visited the Korean mountainside, which he found conducive to prayer, and on Easter Sunday 1935 he received a vision of Jesus, who commissioned him to complete his unfinished work. The crucifixion was not part of God's original plan of salvation, and it prevented Jesus from becoming married and fathering sinless children. If these commonly known facts about the movement's origins have been found inimical to mainstream Christianity, the less well-known details of the UC's inception have distanced it further from the Christian churches. Indeed, from the entire movement has been amidst sectarianism, as should be apparent from the fuller account that follows here.

Born Yong Myung Moon in Cheong-Ju in North Korea on 6 January 1920, Sun Myung Moon belonged to a family who converted to Presbyterianism when he was ten years of age. Moon's family had previously followed traditional Korean religions - a blend of Confucianism, Buddhism and folk shamanism ( until Sun Myung Moon was ten years old. Following a series of family misfortunes, they decided that the protection of the Christian God might improve their lot, and consequently they joined a local Presbyterian Church. As events turned out, misfortune continued, and Breen believes this caused Sun Myung Moon to reflect on the spiritual rather than pragmatic reasons for espousing the Christian faith. After his inaugural vision, Moon continued to pray and study the Bible, and claimed further revelations, not only from Jesus, but also from other religious leaders such as Confucius, Lao Tsu, the Buddha, and even God himself. When the final elements of the Principle (Moon's teachings) were fully disclosed, Moon began to preach and to attract followers. Rejected by mainstream Christians, Moon associated with a number of Korean new religions that were on the fringes of Christianity. I have described them in more detail in *The Advent of Sun Myung Moon*; in brief, they were characterized by an emphasis on prophesying, visions, trances and consultations with spirits, together with a questioning of the traditional Christian doctrine of the second coming: instead of Jesus returning on the clouds of heaven, they looked for a new messiah, a Lord of the Second Coming, to be born on earth ó more specifically in Korea. Moon failed to gain acceptance even by these groups, and therefore Moon and his followers established their own organization ( the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity in Seoul, Korea, in 1954.

Despite — probably unfounded — rumours about sexual malpractice within the UC, the main objection from the Christian churches related to Moon's teachings. Mike Breen, himself a Unificationist, writes:

... the main challenge as far as the churches were concerned was that Moon was teaching heresy. He was convincing people that the second coming of Christ would occur in Korea. Several ministers visited him to thrash out some theological issues, but gave up when he politely countered with biblical explanations. He fielded questions about his own role by telling people that they should pray about it.[1]

### ***Beginnings in the U.S.A.***

Unificationism's acceptance by the mainstream Christian Churches fared no better, and possibly worse, following its transmigration to the west. The year 1959 saw the beginnings of attempts to bring Unificationism to the United States. The initial attempts were largely the work of Miss Young Oon Kim, who departed for the U.S.A. and began a small group in Eugene, California. Its early activities are well documented in two principal sources: John Lofland's *Doomsday Cult*, [2] which presents an outsider's perspective, and, less accessibly, but from an insider's stance, in Michael Mickler's Master's dissertation, „A History of the Unification Church in the Bay Area.“ [3] Although Miss Kim claimed to have undergone training that made her eligible for the Methodist ministry, she decided to seek ordination in the Universal Church of the Master, a small organization founded in 1918, and combining ideas from liberal Christianity, Levi Dowling's *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, [4] and elements of the world's other major religious traditions. The fact that Dowling's Aquarian Gospel is supposedly a „channelled“ piece

of writing (that is to say, delivered by a spirit to Dowling, who served as a medium, or „channel“, for this message) indicates the continued emphasis on contact with the spirit world.

From the very outset, Kim's group was dogged by sectarianism. Two principal factors were influencing mainstream Christianity at the time of Unification Church's inception in the U.S.A.: the charismatic movement, and the ecumenical movement. The Unification Church endeavoured to tap on both these resources, seeking to demonstrate the enthusiasm and spontaneity of the charismatics on the one hand, and a professed desire to unite Christendom on the other. The UC's initial attempts therefore involved promoting itself as a brand of charismatic and ecumenical Christianity, with a view to being seen as part of the mainstream Christian tradition.

Although the Unification Church attracted criticism for its living conditions and methods of fund-raising, it was largely the movement's theological ideas that brought down the wrath of the mainstream Christian clergy. Initially, attempts were made to disseminate their theology by leafleting, by attempting to sell copies of *The Divine Principles*, and by endeavours to initiate contacts with local ministers. Such attempts were largely unsuccessful. One Baptist minister, to whom UC members had witnessed, bought Kim's Principle book, but paid for it with a cheque, the back of which he inscribed with the comment that it was a „spurious approach to Christianity“.[5] Other mainstream clergy were equally dismissive. A Methodist minister whom Miss Kim contacted said that Methodism had its own articles of faith, and that any attempt to introduce new doctrines would be a waste of time all round. She described her meeting with the minister of Calvary Presbyterian Church as „stormy“.[6] Attempts to forge links with the University Church Council at the University of California - an ecumenical body encompassing Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans and Presbyterians ( brought about rebuff, with one leading clergyman describing the UC member who initiated contact as neurotic, psychotic, a termite in the Christian Church.[7] When Unification members began to distribute literature outside Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, one of the priests came out, snatched their materials, and threatened them with more severe sanctions if they ever should return. This last incident led enabled Miss Kim to secure a meeting with North California's bishop Dr James Pike, well known for his liberal views. Pike went as far as to commend the group's religious zeal, and said he had no objection to their leaflet distribution.

The only organization with which Unificationists had limited success was a small local Spiritualist group, led by the Rev. Louis Lusardi and Julian Levi. Lusardi and Levi came to Unificationist meetings regularly during 1961 and 1962, and Unification members, being amenable to contacting discarnate spirits, attended Lusardi and Levi's weekly meetings, which took place in rented premises. There appear to have been tensions between the Unificationists and Spiritualists, however: UC members felt that Lusardi and Levi were more concerned to boost attendance at their own meetings than with studying the Principle; Lofland also hints that the pair may have been homosexual partners, and hence unlikely to have fitted in with the Unification Church.[8]

All these rebuffs did little to discourage the early Unificationists from continuing to proclaim their message. If anything, the vehemence of the opposition only demonstrated its sheer power. Miss Kim preached a sermon entitled „Suffering is a Privilege“, in which she wrote:

When we are insulted and rejected by the Christians because of our message, we know exactly how Jesus felt when he was insulted and rejected by the Jewish people. When we are rejected, mocked and persecuted because of the Divine Principles we teach, we are privileged to experience a small percentage of the thorny path our Leader has gone through.[9]

### *Sun Myung Moon's visits to the U.S.A.*

With the limited appeal of its message, its rival missionary groups, and only a small handful of followers, the Unification Church might well have disintegrated and vanished into oblivion. What really saved it from extinction was the coming of its founder-leader to the U.S.A., which did much to unify the rival groups that were then working in the Bay Area, and to encourage renewed vigour amongst the early UC missionizers. Moon paid three visits in all in the early years: in 1965, 1969 and 1972. Perhaps surprisingly, Moon did not engage in any public preaching or lecturing whatsoever during these first two visits, or attempt to win over Christian clergy. In fact, Moon's activities seemed almost guaranteed to demonstrate that his movement was outside the mainstream Christian tradition.

The main purpose of Moon's first visit to was to establish „Holy Ground“. Although this practice of establishing, using and maintaining holy grounds is not widely known, these sacred places are regarded as highly important to Unification members. Their locations may be unmarked, and hence unnoticed by the general public, but Unification members know where they are, and use them private prayer, vigils and the Pledge service. Their creation involves a form of geomancy: careful instructions are given on where they should be located (large rocks and trees are particularly favoured, preferably overlooking large expanses of territory), and exact ritual instructions are prescribed about how such grounds should be created.[10] Materials such as earth or pebbles must be taken from an established Holy Ground, Holy Salt (salt which has been ritually purified) must be sprinkled on the established and the new Ground, and the area of the new one must be ritually paced out in all four compass directions, in accordance with precise instructions. The practice began in Korea in 1962, when some of Moon's disciples, on his instruction, created five such grounds in the area of Seoul. Moon himself began to create Holy Grounds in 1965, and by 1 January 1966 a total of 120 Grounds had been created worldwide. Moon's first visit to the U.S.A. enabled the establishment of 55 Holy Grounds throughout the country.

Apart from being an aid to devotion, Holy Grounds bear a theological significance. The ritual is believed to reinstate God's ownership of the land, which has previously belonged to Satan. The Holy Ground is thus a „representative area“, providing hope that the entire country will be released from Satan's hold and returned to God. The ability to create such sacred space is attributed to Moon's „Holy Marriage“ in 1960, when Sun Myung Moon and Hak Ja Han achieved what Jesus was unable to accomplish: holy matrimony. Thus, it is taught that Jesus himself could not have created Holy Grounds, since he was only able to work in the spirit world.

All this is scarcely mainstream Christianity. As if this were not enough, Moon and a number of his disciples, including leaders Young Oon Kim and Bo Hi Pak, sought out the services of the acclaimed psychic, Arthur Ford. This incident receives little publicity, apart from the very occasional reference in counter-cult literature, and is no longer referred to in the UC's own

publicity material. An early magazine of the Unified Family reproduced a number of remarks made by Fletcher, Arthur Ford's spirit guide. As one might expect, these were interpreted as vindicating Moon's status and endorsing his mission, for example:

He is a prophet. He is a prophet who will bridge the gap between the east and the west and the past and the future. And it is based on revelation ...[11]

Out of your country [i.e. Korea] will come a new spiritual urge. It will be a blending of the ancient with a new revelation and it is not far off it is near... [12]

Moon's second U.S. visit, in 1969, continued to provide encouragement and inspiration to his followers, but it also helped to marginalize the movement further. On this occasion, Moon's emphasis was on the Blessing ceremony (the „mass weddings“, as the media labelled them) to members. Moon was in the U.S.A. for 39 days, during February and March, together with a number of senior Unification members, and conducted a Blessing of 13 American couples. This was the first such Blessing to be conducted outside Korea. Since six of the couples were already married to each other, their participation indicated the event's purpose was not merely to provide legal marriages for the other seven couples: it is Unification Church teaching that entry to the Kingdom of Heaven can only be secured by a marriage ceremony conducted by Sun Myung Moon and his wife. This event formed part of the „43 Couples Blessing“: on departure from the U.S.A., Moon presided over further ceremonies in Germany and Japan, where a further eight and 22 couples respectively were blessed. The Blessing ceremonies attracted media publicity, but they also served to highlight the sectarian nature of the Unification Church. Although mainstream Christian denominations have no inherent objection to marrying two or more couples at the same ceremony, dual or multiple marriages are unusual, and of course no mainstream denomination ever taught that marriage was a precondition of entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.

It was Moon's third visit to the U.S.A. that gave the decisive impetus to movement. He arrived in Washington, D.C., on 18 December 1971, initially as part of a further world tour, but was granted permission to reside in the country the following year. Moon's arrival was significant in a number of ways. His presence not only ensured that the movement was stable and truly unified: this time Moon emerged as a public speaking, being the focus of numerous rallies in U.S. cities. Perhaps surprisingly, Moon had never spoken to the public before; previously he had only taught his own followers.

Moon achieved greater success in his contacts with leading politicians than with Church leaders. In 1965 he had gained an audience with former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower. The mayor of New Orleans declared the 4th of May 1973 as „Unification Day“, and Jimmy Carter, who was then Governor of Atlanta, Georgia, proclaimed the 7th of November as a „Day of Hope and Unification“. When the Watergate scandal erupted in 1974, Moon took the unpopular step of supporting Nixon. Although Moon did not condone Nixon's actions, his „Forgive, love, unite“ speech brought him to the fore in the media once again, and Moon was shown publicly in the President's company.

Whether or not the Unification Church thought that public recognition might facilitate its ecumenical work, it continued to make overtures to mainstream Christianity, this time by

attempting to secure membership within local and national councils of churches. All such attempts, however, failed. In 1974, the Unification Church in Korea applied to join the Korean National Council of Churches. General Secretary Kim Kwan Suk described the organization as „a cult ... a new sect which has been undermining the established church“.[13] This comment was reproduced in an article in *The Washington Post* on 15 February 1974, at the time of Moon's 32 City Tour – which of course did little to aid Moon's attempts to gain recognition from mainstream Christian circles.

In 1976 the New York City Council of Churches received an application, which it promptly rejected. This time the Unification Church took legal action, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, was unsuccessful. This application prompted a study of Unificationist teachings by the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches, which firmly concluded that „The Unification Church is not a Christian Church.“ (Kelly, p.3). The grounds for rejection were several, and all theological: their doctrine of the Trinity, the person of Christ, grace and salvation, the Unificationist interpretation of scripture, Moon's own revelations, and — most especially — his claim to offer a „new, ultimate, final truth“.[14]

A subsequent attempt in the United Kingdom to the (then) British Council of Churches also failed in 1978. This, together with public controversies surrounding the UC, prompted the Council to prepare a „position paper“ entitled „The Unification Church: a paper for those who wish to know more“ and this in turn provoked a rejoinder from the Unification Church in the form of a paper with similar type-face and identical title, and which reproduced verbatim some of the opening paragraphs of the BCC paper. Predictably, this attracted the criticism that the Unification Church was deceptive in trying to pass off their own publication as that of the BCC, even though it was headed „prepared by the Unification Church of Great Britain“.

### *Recent developments*

Since doctrine looms large in Christian thought, it is understandable that its objections to Unificationism are principally on doctrinal grounds. Although the Christian counter-cult literature does not always expound Unification teachings fairly, it is almost unanimous in identifying the respects in which Unificationism diverges from mainstream Christianity: it is unbiblical; teaches erroneous doctrines of God, Christ and salvation; *Divine Principle* usurps the status of the Judaeo-Christian Bible; it teaches that Jesus did not fully accomplish his mission and that a new messiah is needed to complete it; it introduces new rituals and forms of worship; and it is spiritist.

As new religions progress, they occasionally gain acceptance into the mainstream fold, as happened with Seventh-day Adventism, and, even more strikingly, with the Worldwide Church of God. At the turn of the 21st century, however, Unificationism seems no more likely to gain recognition by mainstream Christians. Moon continues to use his own personal shaman,[15] and the movement's spiritism seems to be given even greater emphasis. Soon Ae Hong - Sun Myung Moon's late mother-in-law (known to members as Dae Mo Nim, or „revered mother“), who died in 1989 – has now become a cult figure and the focus of a sacred shrine at Chung Pyung, Korea, where a medium ( Mrs Hyo Nam Kim ) claims to be spiritually linked with her, and where members have recently been asked to undergo substantial periods of spiritual training.[16]

Meanwhile, Moon himself is said to have offered spiritual guidance, including the Blessing ceremony, to various key figures in human history, and allegedly enabled seminars to take place in the spirit world, attended by a host of religious and political leaders, among others, including Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and St Augustine, as well as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Mao Zedung, and many more.[17] Dr Sang Hun Lee, a senior member of the Unification Church, who died in 1997, is believed to have journeyed in the spirit world and to have communicated to a medium ( Mrs Young Soon Kim ( messages concerning his encounters with religious and political leaders, ranging from Jesus of Nazareth to Adolf Hitler.

On 25 December 2001 Lee is said to have presided over a ceremony in the spirit world, in which the historical leaders of Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, Hinduism and Communism proclaim a written resolution, affirming „We resolve and proclaim that Reverend Sun Myung Moon is the Savior, Messiah, Second Coming and True Parent of all humanity.“ I cannot go into all the details here: suffice it to say that the claim that Jesus and Muhammad allegedly proclaimed Moon as the saviour and messiah — to put it mildly — have only served to damage the Family Federation’s endeavours at world ecumenism, and have caused them to distance themselves further from Christianity and Islam especially.

In sum, the Unification Church has never been inside mainstream Christianity, from its very inception. Moon and his early followers associated with „fringe“ Christian groups, and imported many of their ideas into Unification thought. These doctrines did not undergo modification as the Unification Church developed, and thus gave rise to the principally doctrinal objections levelled against it by mainstream Christianity. Recent events, which have caused a resurgence of interest in shamanism and spiritism, have only served to vindicate mainstream Christian critics, and to distance the Unification Church further from the Christian churches.

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[1] Breen, 1997, p.84.

[2] Lofland, John (1966). *Doomsday Cult: a study of conversion, proselytization, and maintenance of faith*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

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[4] Dowling, Levi H. (1989). *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*. Romford, Essex: Fowler.

[5] Mickler, op.cit., p.30.

[6] Mickler, op.cit., p.48.

[7] Mickler, op.cit., p.32.

[8] Mickler also reports an attempt to arouse interest amongst Unitarians. This was unsuccessful, since Unitarianism proved too rationalistic, and representatives were uninterested in an apocalyptic message.

[9] Mickler, op.cit., p.29.

[10] Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (1985). *The Tradition*. New York: Rose of Sharon Press, pp.59-71.

[11] Unified Family (U.K.) (1972). „Excerpts from the transcriptions of sitting with the late Arthur Ford, a world-known medium“. *The Principle Digest*. No.33, Spring, p.7.

United Family, 1972, p.7.

[12] United Family, op.cit, p.8

[13] Mickler, op.cit., p.249.

[14] This is a direct quotation from *Divine Principle*, p.15.

[15] See Hong, Nansook (1998). *In the Shadow of the Moons: My life in the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's family*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, pp.70-71.

[16] Lee, Sang Hun (1998). *Life in the Spirit World and on Earth: Messages from the Spirit World*. New York: Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

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