

Substance and Shadow - A former member looks at the Unification Church and the media

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Since I left the Unification Church, friends and colleagues have been asking about the reasons why. They also want to know if I've been given a hard time or been "pressured" by the church.

Another question which arises repeatedly goes something like that: "Why would a seemingly reasonable, intelligent person want to get involved with an outfit with as bad a reputation as that of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon?"

Here is an attempt to at least partially satisfy some of the genuine curiosity aroused by my "defection".

My first encounter with the Unification Church was on a dull, sleet-swept afternoon in Munich, West Germany, in late October 1972.

At that time I was on the loose, happy enough, but searching, I was quite disillusioned with religions, disgusted with politics, and disappointed with the inability of science to apply its vast funds of knowledge and know-how to solutions for the world's ills.

As I wandered in deep contemplation down one of the city's malls, inwardly trying to grind these problems to fine powder, I was accosted by a young, anorak-clad man who said in broken English, "Do you like to talk about God?"

Being at that particular moment in active pursuit of a saintly state of mind, I stopped to listen.

In the next few minutes of limited conversation, I was presented with two statements which had a profound effect on me.

"We believe God exists in polarity," the young man, whose name was Bohdan, said. Interesting idea for one who had always been taught that God's existence is an ineffable mystery. But we couldn't pursue it far, and I said, "What else?"

"We also believe God is sad," said Bohdan.

Once again, no Christian I'd spoken to in my 25 years had ever said anything that seemed quite so sensible. Also, this Bohdan, struggling to convey novel ideas in an unfamiliar language impressed me with his sincerity, and I felt from the outset that the direction of his thinking was sufficiently at variance

with dominant religious (and political) philosophies to land him in deep trouble - and was therefore worth looking at more closely.

I visited one of the Unification Church centers in Munich three or four times before traveling on to Holland and then London, whereby chance I ran into another member on the street and began visiting a center there.

There was no sudden conversion or overnight decision. I studied the teachings of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, without being too concerned for the time being about where they came from. I studied thoroughly from top to bottom in my own sweet time over several weeks and discussed them with friends and acquaintances along the way. I also studied the members of the center I visited with acute caution.

Two things stood out clearly:

First, the organization was essentially a religion, and a very spiritual one, and the members conducted their lives in accordance with a prayerful consciousness of high moral and spiritual standards even though they were engaged in a wide variety of worldly activities.

Second, the ideology they lived by was sufficiently comprehensive, deep, and intellectually satisfying to stand completely on its own as a stimulus for anyone seeking to broaden the scope of their life's goal and purpose.

Now, ten years later, having worked with the Unification Church in Australia, the United States, Hong Kong, and Japan, and observed it for short periods in a number of other countries, I can say with absolute certainty that these observations were accurate. That the church founded by Rev. Sun Myung Moon is an essentially religious organization and that the "Divine Principle" ideology is its permanent motive force, are two central characteristics which are the basis for understanding (I'm not talking about accepting) the Unification Church. They are facts most persistently, and often deliberately, ignored.

What about Moon himself?

I could fill a book with impressions that may be more or less useful but will have to be satisfied with a couple of quick statements. I never had the opportunity to sit down and have a person-to-person chat with him, but that is hardly as important as many seem to think.

Rev. Moon is often depicted as somewhat aloof, and isolated, holding court in his mansion when it suits him with a covey of select lieutenants (or colonels, if you like), dreaming up ways to protect himself from criticism and expand his financial empire. My own experience tells me this kind of image is the product of a large amount of extremely sloppy journalism, to put it kindly.

The fact is that though the structure of the Unification Church is intensely hierarchical, Rev. Moon communicates directly with an astonishing number of his followers, not only in groups but as individuals. His credo is not just to talk a lot and give orders but to project his personal lifestyle as an example, and he does this with enormous vigor, including members in activities he shares with his family (of thirteen children now) and vice versa.

I've talked to many members who experienced Sun Myung Moon at close quarters, some for extended periods, and am willing to take their sober recollections seriously. I'm struck by the fact that in almost all cases, contrary to what one expects in general of religious leaders and political leaders alike, these members are vastly more impressed by their direct contact with Rev. Moon than they ever were by his reputation - even if they were convinced in the first place that he is the "Messiah." Furthermore, Messiah or not, right or wrong, for good or evil, Sun Myung Moon is totally consistent with his own teachings. The members may be exaggerating to call this aspect "unique," but it's all too scarce just the same, whichever side you are on.

Just in case this is beginning to sound a little one-sided, don't be misled. I don't want to present an argument in favor of Rev. Moon or the Unification Church. However, there is no need for me to start raking over the mountain of garbage that's been spewed out about the man and his organization when I have my own experiences to relate and to come to grips with.

That brings me back to why I left the Unification Church.

Not because of its reputation, that's for sure. Not because of any allegations of shady dealing, brainwashing, and coercion, dabbling in armaments, fanaticism, exploitation, etc., etc., either. All these things have very little weight, in the long run.

No, as I said before, the Unification Church is primarily a religious movement. It will remain so or cease to exist.

For myself, after a throughgoing test, I found that I'm really not that religious. There were a number of other factors in my decision to quit, but none affected very much my opinion of the movement itself.

I informed those responsible of my intentions well in advance of taking any action. None, of course, in the church agreed with my decision, and they made that quite plain. Even so, there was not even a hint of any attempt to restrict, threaten, or harass me. I can't say I'm surprised at that either, for contrary to the popular myth, such actions would be completely against the policy of the church. They would also be against any kind of common sense, and that is something that the Unification Church - which despite its continued zeal is maturing admirably - has plenty of.

Here I should say that I know people who had bad experiences leaving the church, usually after only brief periods of involvement. In the cases I know of, irrational fears were the worst source of suffering for the individuals involved. Many also needed self-justification for parting with something they were at first very enthusiastic about but didn't really comprehend.

For myself, not being a religious type of person, I decided over a period of time that I'd be more comfortable as an independent person. My reasoning was not accepted but has been respected. I have no regrets or any resentment at having spent ten years in the church because I took my own responsibility for that the whole way through - and it was an exceedingly rich experience.

Then why does Rev. Moon and his worldwide movement have such a rotten reputation?

Another book could come out of this question, and probably will.

The impact of the Unification Church on various cultures and the similarities and differences of their responses is fascinating. The church itself was built, of course, by Sun Myung Moon and his ideology. The reputation of the church has been fashioned by the media - and the media is poorly equipped to handle ideology and evangelical religion.

It was just too easy to accept the possibility that the new movement is some kind of political tool, an instrument of the KCIA, or a monstrous pretext for garnering economic power. It makes good copy to have a bogey-man. And that is quite apart from the fact that anyone who takes religion (or politics, ethics, and morals) seriously has an array of natural enemies from the outset, some of whom are quite capable of using the press for their own purposes.

So the Unification Church and its image are two entirely different things.

In my own experience "reputable journalists" have pulled some of the most dishonest stunts imaginable in the scramble for "good stories" that increase suspicion of the church. The bulk of printed stories I've seen over the years tended to deepen public ignorance of the church rather than dissipate it.

I'm not attempting to insult my colleagues. The members of the working press do as they see fit, and mostly do well, but we tend to congratulate ourselves too readily over stories that are well-accepted. My honest opinion for the present is that the integrity of the Unification Church, and of Sun Myung Moon, compares very favorably with that of the media as a whole.

There remain many questions. For the media, the entry of the Unification Church into newspapers (and radio and television) makes the whole "Moonie" phenomenon that much more important to cope with rationally.

But there are other activities of the Moon organization that have gone largely unnoticed. Large-scale development projects are on the drawing board. Top thinkers in the fields of science, politics, industry, and commerce, as well as theology, are actually drawing positive inspiration from Rev. Moon and his increasingly capable followers. The Unification Church is not going to go away. Its influence, in my opinion, will only increase.

I'm not about to tell my betters how to do their job, but at least it's time to stop pretending that the Unification Church is someday going to reveal itself as something other than it purports to be - time to treat its members as human beings with their own valid opinions, and to stop imagining that anyone who listens to Moon is being "manipulated."

There are some great stories to be had if we only look properly.

Mr. David Hulme was an occasional contributor to the New York Tribune, and formerly an employee of The News World, working as a foreign correspondent in Japan. This article was reprinted courtesy of the English language newspaper of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan (The No. J Shimbun) where it first appeared on February 15, 1983.