

Sun Myung Moon's legacy

Donald Kirk
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Probably no Korean has inspired more controversy for so many very different reasons than did the Rev. Moon Sun-myung. As a religious figure and a tycoon, he moved from cult to commerce as if they were interrelated, all in accordance with the will of the God who had placed him on earth to heal and help.

For most spiritual figures, it is suffice to say that they were messengers of God, bearing news of the creation and the need to do good in the name of the Lord. The Rev. Moon, though, was no mere messenger. Rather, he was a messiah, an emissary whose life on earth embodied the spirit of the Lord. If anyone represented the Second Coming, as forecast by the Bible, it was he.

The fact that the Rev. Moon has died, at 92, should demonstrate that he too was a mere mortal after all, but his adherents say that he didn't really die. Rather, he "ascended" to heaven where no doubt he can go on preaching the gospel, his gospel, to the mere mortals down below.

After seeing the Rev. Moon at mass weddings and at the central Unification Church in Seoul, I hardly knew what to make of him. There was something colorful and amusing about the spectacle of him and his wife donning golden crowns, conveying their message of love and loyalty, but what was he saying from beneath that crown? Why were all these people, from western nations, from other Asian nations, also from Korea, taking him so literally and seriously?

I was just as puzzled when I last saw him more than two years ago at the opening of the new central Unification Church in Seoul. "The True Parents," as Moon styled himself and his wife, Hak Hak-ja, mother of 14 of his 15 children, were ensconced on twin gilt throne-like chairs. He was there, he said, to complete "the mission of Jesus," to purify the world of original sin.

On the basis of his own experience, the reverend knew that God was on his side. Six times he had been in jail, first for anti-Japanese activities before the Japanese defeat in August 1945. Then, for preaching in his native North Korea, he was jailed two more times before escaping to South Korea in 1950 several months after the outbreak of the Korean War. Next, after founding the Unification Church in Seoul in 1954, he was jailed briefly for draft evasion and cleared before migrating to the U.S., where he spent 13 months in the federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut, in the early 1980s for tax evasion.

As if those brushes with the law were not enough, in July 2008 he and his wife and 14 others had a brush with death when they escaped with only minor injuries from a helicopter that had to make an emergency landing on a mountainside near Seoul. The helicopter exploded minutes after they had gotten out of the

way — “not by luck,” said youngest son Hyung-jin, inheritor of the mantle of the Unification Church worldwide, “but because he has a mission to bring salvation for all mankind.”

When the time came for “special remarks” by the “true parents,” the patriarchal Moon talked low key, in a gravelly, familiar voice, cajoling, joking, praying. Moon’s wife led the throng in song, including a rousing rendition, in Korean, of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” — the chorus, “Glory, Glory Hallelujah” in English — that had the crowd standing, clapping hands, singing lustily along.

Sons Hyung-jin and Kook-jin, in charge of the Tongil Foundation, the center of the Korean business empire founded by his father, and their wives and siblings and in-laws sang joyfully too. It was a show that complemented the aggressive pursuit of business led by Kook-jin and the fire-eating imprecations of Hyung-jin. “Finance and ministries are totally separate,” Hyung-jin told me.

For the Rev. Moon, though, they were never really separate. Seen as rightist politically, reviled for self-glorification as a holy man, he defied type-casting. Despite his conservatism, he passionately espoused relations with North Korea while appearing anti-Communist. After meeting Kim Il-sung in 1991, he said he had a “special relationship with North Korea” — and set up the North’s only car factory, Pyeongwha Motors.

Most difficult to grasp, much less appreciate, however, was the depth of the drive and vision of the man who was born to a Christian farming family in North Korea, educated for two years in World War II Tokyo, and then returned to North Korea after the war to spread his message of God and himself.

Moon’s interests eventually spread far and wide — to tourism, hotels, fish-processing, jewelry, ranching, manufacturing components for weapons in South Korea. He even got into universities and money-losing newspaper publishing, all tinged with the “Moonie” label.

Obsessed with his own view of himself as a savior, Moon drew inspiration from Buddhism and Islam as well as Christianity and mesmerized followers with calls for tolerance. He was less successful, however, in mesmerizing his family, split between siblings in Korea and the U.S.

Now that he’s gone, how long will his legacy endure? An eternity? A year or two? The abiding memory is of mass weddings, women in white, men in black suits and white shirts, and of kids selling roses on street corners, raising the funds needed to help insure their own piece of immortality.

Columnist Donald Kirk, www.donaldkirk.com watched Rev. Moon in action several times since first encountering him at a mass wedding held in Chamshil in Seoul, in 1992.