

The Rev Sun Myung Moon obituary

Christopher Reed

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The Rev Sun Myung Moon, who has died at 92. Moon, a self-proclaimed messiah, founded the Unification church in 1954. Photograph: Jo Yong-Hak/Reuters

A crucial test of a new religion is whether it transfers to the next generation after its founder's demise, and with the death of the Rev Sun Myung Moon at 92 after suffering from pneumonia, the prospects for his Unification church – or "Moonies" – look poor. More significant is the future of the lesser known side of this self-proclaimed messiah: his international business empire and his secretive influence on US conservative politics.

During the late 1970s and 80s, Moon was notorious for blessing mass marriages, and his disciples for spiriting away young men and women by luring them to isolated camps where they were "brainwashed" into abandoning their families. The faithful endured 16-hour days of raising money and working for free on behalf of "Father", as Moon styled himself.

As court cases mounted worldwide, and Moon lost a libel action against the Daily Mail in Britain in the early 1980s, the church abandoned such recruitment and adherents dwindled. By the 90s his new religion was clearly failing and with an unfriendly White House, he declared the church closed, although a website and New York office remained. But his business empire continued, despite heavy losses in the 1998 Asian financial crisis.

Considering Moon's documented history of extreme rightwing theocratic politics, antisemitism, constant rumours of sexual improprieties, his US imprisonment in 1982 for tax evasion, and, for Christians, an offensively blasphemous theology, it is difficult to understand how he was tolerated, even welcomed, by US presidents, politicians, clergymen and academics in America, Japan and Britain.

The answer might be hypocrisy – and Moon's money. But where did the billions come from? The ultimate source still defies scrutiny, although he was at one time backed by two Japanese billionaires, both self-proclaimed fascists, and there were rumours of financing by the Korean CIA. As early as 1978 Moon's nefarious activities were described in a congressional report, but his preposterous career and outrageous pronouncements continued. Here was a man who could not only truly testify to America's freedom of religion, but also that there almost anything was possible under religion's name.

Moon was born Yong Myung Mun in the impoverished village of Sangsa in what is now North Korea, but was then a Japanese colony. His family was Christian, and Moon attended local schools. At 15 he claimed to have seen a vision of Jesus, and agreed to the Saviour's request to "take over my work". Moon studied engineering in Tokyo, where he graduated in 1943, returned home and married his first wife, then aged 19, but unmentioned in church histories. (Moon is variously reported as married twice, three, or four times and his children, including those allegedly out of wedlock, are put at anything from eight to 16.)

Following the Japanese surrender after the second world war, Moon lived in Seoul and attended a Christian church where the pastor preached that Korea was the new Israel and would produce a messiah, a message Moon soon exploited. He quit this church and, leaving his young family, went north where Pyongyang seethed with evangelical fervour. Moon began preaching his own neo-Israel prophecy which

allegedly included stipulations that allowed him to have sex with female congregants.

In 1948 the communists charged him with preaching a messianic message and he was sentenced to five years in a labour camp, where he endured terrible privations. US bombers destroyed the camp in 1950, killing 275, but Moon escaped, headed south and began preaching again.

In 1954 he formed the Unification church and it grew quickly. He sent his first missionary to America in 1960, the year he married his surviving wife, Hak Ja Han. She was groomed to lead the church after his oldest surviving son was enveloped in drink, drugs and wife-beating scandal in the late 1990s.

Moon moved to America in 1972 and his rightwing views soon brought entry to Republican circles. He was feted at huge rallies, met Richard Nixon and, during the Watergate scandal, fasted on the Capitol steps for three days while imploring God not to let Nixon be impeached (he wasn't).

But Moon's business practices had aroused suspicions and in 1978, after the Koreagate bribery scandal, the congressional subcommittee on international organisations issued a damning report on the Moon church, which it described as "a multinational corporation ... a paramilitary organisation ... and a tightly disciplined international political party". It added: "Among [its] goals is establishment of a worldwide government in which the separation of church and state would be abolished, and which would be governed by Moon and his followers." The committee's recommendation of further investigation of illegalities was dropped at Ronald Reagan's election as president in 1980.

Moon prospered under Reaganism. At this time he was backed by two Japanese tycoons that the US occupation had formerly imprisoned as war criminals. One was Yoshio Kodama, a yakuza (Japanese gangster) boss and organiser of fascist secret societies. Kodama made millions looting Manchuria in the war, and died in 1984 while awaiting trial in the Japanese Lockheed bribery scandal. The other was Ryoichi Sasakawa, who also made millions in the war and died in 1995. In the 1970s, when he controlled the \$14bn Japanese motor-boat racing business, Sasakawa described himself as "the world's richest fascist".

During the 80s Moon expanded his worldwide business empire. At various times he owned or controlled a car plant in China; a titanium mine, weapons factory, and Tong Il Heavy Industries in South Korea; huge land tracts in South America; a smart hotel in New York; a fishery in Alaska; a golf course in California; a computer firm in Japan; a small arms company and a university in New England; newspapers in Korea, Argentina, Japan, and the conservative Washington Times in the US capital, which he founded in 1982; a symphony orchestra and ballet company; a cable TV network; the UPI press agency; a New York publishing house; Insight magazine; and countless restaurants, jewellery businesses and other firms. His home was a 30-room mansion in New Jersey.

After Moon's release from a US prison after serving 13 months he was still welcomed by the great and good. At various times he met or received support from British prime ministers Margaret Thatcher and Edward Heath, ex-presidents Gerald Ford and George Bush Snr, Canadian ex-premier Brian Mulroney, US senators Strom Thurmond, Jesse Helms, William Fulbright and Orrin Hatch, Reagan's defence secretary Caspar Weinberger, former Nato chief general Alexander Haig, former US education secretary William Bennett, Boston University president John Silber, Christian Coalition ex-chief Ralph Reed, and rightwing Christian leader the Rev Jerry Falwell.

These connections survived Moon's increasingly embarrassing activities – his sermons dwelling on the "sexual organs", his description of American women as descended from prostitutes, family scandals, the Rabbinic court condemnation for antisemitism and a vow to "conquer and subjugate the world".

When George Bush became president in 2001 and proposed subsidising church charities, Moon renewed his interest in America and sponsored, through one of his myriad front organisations, a Republican campaign to foster the idea. Uncle Sam's embrace of the crooked cleric continued.

In March 2004 a dozen Republican and Democrat politicians attended a Moon reception for 300 in the Dirksen Senate office building, at which congressman Danny Davis, an Illinois Democrat, presented the self-proclaimed messiah with an ornate crown on a pillow. Moon donned it and delivered a long speech in which he said his teachings had helped Hitler and Stalin be "reborn as new persons".

He was reported as saying he was sent to Earth to save its people and that "emperors, kings and presidents have declared to all heaven and Earth that the Rev Moon is none other than humanity's saviour, messiah, returning Lord and true parent".

When these details appeared in Salon.com weeks later, many politicians attending claimed they did not realise what would happen, or even that Moon would be present. Some Republicans said they went only to honour Moon as owner of the Washington Times.

But, it was pointed out, the invitation had stated that the "primary programme sponsor" would be "the Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace founded by the Rev Dr and Mrs Sun Myung Moon, who will also be recognised for their lifelong work to promote inter-faith co-operation and reconciliation".

Moon's youngest son, the Rev Hyung-jin Moon, was named the church's top religious director in April 2008. Other sons and daughters were put in charge of the church's business and charitable activities in South Korea and abroad.

In 2009, Moon married 45,000 people in simultaneous ceremonies worldwide in his first large-scale mass wedding in years. Some were newlyweds and others reaffirmed their vows.

Moon is survived by Hak Ja Han and 10 children.

Sun Myung Moon, church founder and businessman, born 25 February 1920; died 2 September 2012