

The wake for a self-styled messiah - Funeral of sect's founder will be as grandiose as his mass weddings

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The wake of Sun Myung Moon, one of the most preposterous egomaniacs of the post-war world, is well under way this weekend. Tens of thousands of believers are heading to the mountainous headquarters of the Moonies cult in South Korea for his funeral on Saturday.

The ceremony will be on the giant scale long familiar to Moonie-watchers. Last week, work crews were laying a new road to bring mourners to the Cheongshim World Peace Centre where his body is lying in state under a domed glass screen. Memorial altars have been set up in local churches in 150 countries, it is claimed, and tens of thousands of followers are expected to make the trek to the Far East. At least 40 of the church's 1,200 members in Britain will be among them.

Yesterday the church said that 13,000 people, including 3,000 Japanese, had already visited the memorial chapel. Famous for the mass weddings in which thousands of ready-made, mixed-nationality couples from all over the world were spliced simultaneously, the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity – the term the church prefers to "Moonies" – will not fail to give its "True Father" a worthy send-off.

The electrical engineer turned dock worker turned messianic patriarch died aged 92 on 3 September, but he insisted that his passing should not be a sad occasion – hence the presence of many female mourners dressed in white. "The word 'death' is sacred," his sect's media office quoted him as saying. "It is not a synonym for sadness and suffering. The moment we enter the spirit world should be a time we enter a world of joy and victory." Those left behind, he declared, "should be shedding tears of joy instead of tears of sadness".

Nonetheless, many of the tears shed in the coming days will be sad enough, and mixed with regret will be well-founded anxiety for the church's future. Though only 5ft 9in, Moon towered over the movement he founded, and his claims to messiah status grew wilder with age.

In 2004, he told a grand audience on Washington's Capitol Hill that long-dead emperors, kings and presidents, including Hitler and Stalin, had declared "from beyond the grave... to all heaven and earth that Reverend Sun Myung Moon is none other than humanity's saviour, messiah, returning Lord and parent".

As such, his absence would pose a problem to any organisation, let alone one rent like this one by family feuding and scarred by family tragedy. His widow, Hak Ja Han, the mother of 13 of his 15 or so children,

will step into his shoes for the time being – she had been at his side on all the cult's mass weddings and other big occasions for many years – but his eldest son died of a heart attack in 2008 after succumbing to drugs and alcohol. Another son died in a car crash, one in a train crash, while a third committed suicide.

Two others, known respectively as Sean and Preston, are "locked in a legal dispute over property ownership", according to Moonies expert George Chryssides. Sean, Moon's youngest son, known in Korean as Hyung Jin Moon, has become the acceptable young face of the organisation, though while at Harvard he shaved his head, donned a monk's robe and became a Zen Buddhist. He has been the organisation's most senior leader since 2008, and last year was despatched to North Korea to offer condolences on the death of Kim Jong-il. Last week he was photographed at his father's wake clad in a gleaming white hanbok (traditional Korean dress) and gloves and holding a single lily.

Like many new religions, Sun Myung Moon's emerged from a time of national trauma. Born and raised in a rural corner of North Korea, he went on to graduate in electrical engineering at Japan's Waseda University, when Korea was still a Japanese colony. He later served time in a communist penal camp before making his way south and finding work in the port town of Pusan.

Here, in 1954, he built his first church, according to the legend, out of US army ration boxes, and constructed a congregation around an outlandish set of beliefs. He was inspired by a vision that he claimed to have seen as a teenager in which Jesus appeared to him, explained that the crucifixion had prevented him from completing his work, and gave him the task of doing so – spreading his blessings to create a world of faithful, sinless couples and families.

The success of his church was due to Moon's self-confidence and charisma, and also to the way it blended key elements of different belief systems. There was the American conquerors' Christian faith, and the competitiveness and business drive that came with it, but also vestiges of traditional Confucian and Buddhist beliefs. Jesus and the benefits of persecution came from Christianity; the stress on couples and families from Confucius; while Moon's declaration that "the Second Advent and Messiah" – in other words Moon himself – "is the perfect Man who becomes one with God in heart and with whom God can dwell" carries an echo of Buddhist ideas.

But it is the note of untrammelled egomania that shouts the loudest. Once he told Time magazine: "God is living in me and I am the incarnation of Himself. The whole world is in my hand and I will conquer and subjugate the world." In 1976 he said in a speech – recycled last week by the church – "After my death millions of people in the spirit world and here on earth will testify to my deeds, and to what I have done in history... in eternity, I know that my deeds will shine... I intend to... surpass the suffering of all the past saints, so as to not only dwell among them but rise up above them, so that together we can more quickly liberate the suffering souls of the world. Do you understand? It's all part of a heavenly strategy."

The blend of western and eastern elements did nothing to gain him friends in the Christian churches, but proved of irresistible appeal to tens of thousands of suggestible young Westerners. Members recruited by what become known as "love-bombing" were put under immense pressure to gain new converts and raise funds in their turn; and, as in many cultish sects, members lived communally. Claims by media organisations that the church brainwashes its members have been consistently rejected in the courts, though the Daily Mail won a case defending its claim that the church broke up families.

Simon Cooper, pastor of the church's London branch, told The Independent on Sunday that since 1990, members have lived in their own homes and are no longer required to go out hunting for new members. Instead, they are supported by the huge business empire created by Moon and which is the church's secular shadow; the Tongil Group, the church's business arm, is involved in construction, heavy machinery and munitions, while a subsidiary is the biggest distributor of raw fish for sushi in the US. The organisation also has its own newspaper, The Washington Times, and a football team and ballet company.

Although Moon served a year in jail in the early 1980s for tax evasion – a sentence the church has condemned as religious persecution – he managed to make friends with both the presidents Bush. But his most impressive alliances were in North Korea: although he often denounced communism, in 1991, Moon had a friendly encounter with its then leader, Kim Il Sung. His successor, Kim Jong-il, sent him extravagant presents on his birthdays; and today the North's only car plant is a joint venture between the communist state and a Moon-owned firm. There is speculation that Kim Jong-un may send a delegation to the funeral.