

Some Reflections on the Passing of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon

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Of all the leaders I have known, few have meant more to me than the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. I first met him when I was invited to participate at the annual meeting of the International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences (ICUS) in Washington Thanksgiving weekend 1976. At the time, I was a fellow at the National Humanities Institute at Yale. When word got around that I had accepted the invitation, one well-connected member of the Yale faculty took me to lunch and urged me not to attend. I asked him, "Why?" He replied, "Haven't you been reading about Rev. Moon in the newspapers?" My response was that I was a Harvard-trained historian of religion and was capable of forming my own opinion about both the man and his church. At the time, there was a great deal of hysteria about Rev. Moon and his movement in the press. There were lurid reports that many of his followers had been "brainwashed" into joining his church. In addition, he conducted mass weddings which were very different than western weddings. As a result, the default option was to regard him as a nefarious force. In retrospect, I am very glad that my wife Betty, a Smith College graduate and a PhD in Art History, and I decided to find out for ourselves what this new religious movement was all about. After all, that is what I was trained for.

Over the years, I had participated in many academic conferences. Normally, they are restricted to a single scholarly or scientific discipline. ICUS was different; it was multi-disciplinary. Sponsored by the International Cultural Foundation founded in 1968 by Rev. Moon, participants included scholars of high reputation from every continent in every scholarly and scientific discipline and there was absolutely no political or religious slant, save that Rev. Moon was our host and at his banquet, he quite legitimately spoke of his religious beliefs and hopes. At ICUS, I came to know two Nobel Laureates, Sir John Eccles, (neurophysiology) and Eugene Wigner of Princeton (nuclear physics). I also recall the participation of two other Nobel Laureates at least one ICUS meeting, Friedrich Hayek (economics) and Brian Josephson who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics at age 33. That conference and those that followed were by far among the best scholarly conferences I have ever attended.

It was immediately obvious to me that Rev. Moon was a religious leader of extraordinary charisma. I recall that at a number of the ICUS conferences, I was invited to join a small number of senior scholars and scientists including some Nobel Laureates at a private dinner hosted by Rev. Moon. No matter how great their reputations, his charisma was the strongest personal and psychic force in the gathering.

Thirty-five years have passed since that first ICUS. Many of the young men and women who were new converts to the church then have married, raised families and are now senior leaders of the American church. One of the developments that surprised me was that Rev. Moon encouraged a number of his brightest young disciples to work for their PhDs or other advanced degrees. They earned their degrees at Harvard, Vanderbilt, Claremont School of Theology, the University of Chicago, Yale Divinity School and elsewhere. Initially, I thought that their conversions might be reversible and that Rev. Moon would hesitate to send his disciples to institutions in which critical methods of scholarship were applied to the study of religion, but such was not the case. Encouraging his disciples to pursue advance study at elite institutions was consistent with establishing and maintaining ICUS.

Although I was not a believer, a fact that he clearly understood, a lasting bond developed between us. As a result of the publication of my book, *After Auschwitz* (2nd edition, Johns Hopkins University Press), I had become known in scholarly circles as the Jewish death-of-God theologian. In reality, I was a Holocaust theologian whose fundamental question was God and the Holocaust. It was an improbable relationship but he trusted me and I trusted him.

I was invited to participate in a number of very interesting, high-level projects. In 1982 I was invited to become a founding member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the Washington Times, a new daily newspaper in the nation's capital founded by Rev. Moon. (I later became board chairman.) With the 1981 demise of the Washington Star, the liberal Washington Post had become the capital's only daily newspaper. Rev. Moon was convinced that Washington needed a conservative daily at a time when America's global position was being challenged by the Soviet Union. There had been much talk in conservative circles about the need for such a newspaper, but until Rev. Moon decided to commit resources, nobody was willing to take the risk.

The new paper was met with both skepticism and hostility. Some influential people predicted that the paper would be little more than a cult house organ. It was nothing of the sort. It has been and remains a conservative daily newspaper. From time to time, there was controversy, a not infrequent journalistic phenomenon. Nevertheless, the Washington Times has become one of the nation's leading conservative newspapers. Never a profit-maker, in 2002 the Columbia Journalism Review, September/October 2002, estimated that Rev. Moon and his organizations had spent \$2 billion to keep the paper afloat. Moreover, since Washington is arguably the best place for a young journalist to become familiar with national politics and its players, the paper attracted some of the best young journalists, including David Brooks, who went on to be a regular New York Times columnist and NPR commentator, Larry Kudlow, John Podhoretz, and the late Tony Snow, President George W. Bush's Press Secretary from May 2006 to September 2007.

I visited Rev. Moon when he was in the Federal Correctional Institution at Danbury, Connecticut. Like others who visited him there, I was struck by his quiet dignity and his good humor. He was charged with three counts of willfully filing false Federal income tax returns (for the years 1973, 1974, and 1975). The prosecution charged that Rev. Moon failed to pay taxes on \$112,000 in earned interest in a Chase Manhattan bank account and not reporting receipt of \$50,000 of corporate stock. The church claimed that Rev. Moon was holding both the money and the stock on behalf of the church and that the money was not his.

I have always believed that the government's case was both flawed and politically motivated. The prosecutors told Rev. Moon that if he returned his green card, effectively thwarting his American mission, charges would be dropped. He refused. Moreover, he was in Korea when the indictment was handed down. Since there was no extradition treaty between the United States and South Korea, his lawyers urged him not to return to the United States thereby avoiding arrest and likely sentencing. Again, he refused. Clearly, he saw the United States as his most important country of mission and he was not willing to let the government keep him out. When I think of the Wall Street bankers and other financial executives whose fraudulent underwriting and predatory lending practices brought about the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression and were subject to no prosecution for wrongdoing, I see something very wrong in the prosecution of a man who was willing to contribute hundreds of millions of dollars to the creation of American institutions, including \$110 million to the University of Bridgeport.

Historically, we know that charismatic leaders do not easily distinguish between personal and institutional property. A few years before Rev. Moon's indictment, there was a case involving Barry Gurary, the only grandson of the sixth Lubabitcher (Chabad) Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak. Gurary claimed that he was his grandfather's heir and sought to sell some extremely valuable books from his grandfather's library as his own personal property. One illuminated Passover Haggadah dating back to 1757 eventually sold for \$150,000. His uncle, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Chabad Rebbe, challenged Gurary's ownership and his personal sale of books from the library, claiming that the sixth Chabad rebbi's entire library was communal not personal property, a claim not unlike that made by Rev. Moon. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson had better luck than Rev. Moon. After a bitter fight, the court sustained his claim the library was indeed the property of the Chabad community.

In 1992 the Professors World Peace Academy (PWPA), an organization founded by Rev. Moon entered into an agreement with a financially troubled University of Bridgeport that in effect enabled it to survive. In exchange for the right to nominate sixty percent of the members of the Board of Trustees, PWPA contributed \$50.5 million to the university. The trustees had tried diligently to seek other funding sources but to no avail. They were faced with the choice of coming to an agreement with the PWPA or see the institution go bankrupt and fail altogether. In addition, the university was the object of a two and a half year faculty strike, the longest in American academic history. At least one Connecticut newspaper counseled the trustees to let the university fail.

Fortunately, the trustees decided to accept PWPA's offer. I was one of the new trustees nominated by PWPA. A few of the new trustees were members of the Unification Church; most were distinguished academics. I was a member of the board from 1992 to 1994, flying in from Tallahassee, Florida three or four times a year for meetings and other board business. In 1994 I accepted the post of chairman of the board, but not for long. After the October 1994 meeting of the board, Neil Salonen, UB's current president, took Betty and me to dinner when we were in Bridgeport and told me that Dr Edwin Eigel, Jr., UB's president, would be retiring and that there was sentiment for me to succeed him starting in January 1995. I was completely surprised but indicated a willingness to accept. However, it was agreed that I would become interim president until the faculty approved my appointment. Without such approval, I would not have accepted the appointment. I obviously enjoyed the trust and confidence of Rev. Moon, the university's most important benefactor, but that alone would not have been sufficient. The last thing I wanted would have been to preside over an unwilling faculty, especially after the long faculty strike. In March 1995, the faculty voted to approve my appointment. I immediately retired from Florida State University (FSU) where I had served for twenty-five years and where I retain ties of memory, loyalty and affection. Shortly after my retirement, FSU awarded me emeritus status as the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of Religion Emeritus. I was 71 years old when I became president, an age at

which most men and women are looking forward to their retirement. I was about to begin the most challenging and complex position I ever held.

Although I had spent most of my adult life as an academic, I am an ordained rabbi, having graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in 1952. Almost immediately upon assuming the UB position, a local rabbi organized an attempt to have me expelled from the Rabbinical Assembly (RA), the worldwide organization of conservative rabbis. Without the slightest evidence, he claimed that I had converted to the Unification Church. A senior executive at the Rabbinical Assembly met with Betty and me and then quietly dismissed the local rabbi's complaint. As of this writing, I have been a member of the Rabbinical Assembly for sixty years.

When that same rabbi learned that I had joined Congregation Beth El in Fairfield, Connecticut, he demanded that our rabbi deny membership to us. Happily, our rabbi refused and Betty and I have been loyal members of Beth El ever since. The angry rabbi also picketed the ceremony when Rev. Moon received an honorary doctorate on September 7, 1995.

While I can understand the willingness of some rabbis and other Jewish religious leaders to enter into inter-faith dialogue with Muslim leaders and institutions - I have on occasion done so myself - I cannot understand why many of those same religious leaders regard it as wrong to enter into dialogue with the Unification Church and its leaders. Admittedly, the Unification Church is smaller by far than the Muslim Ummah, but acts of terrorism such as those practiced by Islamic extremists are unthinkable among disciples of Rev. Moon.

Bill Finch, a local politician currently Mayor of Bridgeport, was another antagonist of the agreement between PWPA and the university. I met Finch in 1995 at my first meeting as a member of the board of the Greater Bridgeport Regional Business Council. After the meeting, he came up to me, introduced himself and said, "I have nothing but contempt for you for taking the position of UB president." He then walked away. Fourteen years later, as Mayor, he was quoted in the Connecticut Post as saying that he considered the university "a criminal enterprise." However, things had changed. None of the dire predictions about the university made by the rabbi and the politician had come to pass and the Connecticut Post rebuked the Mayor for his inflammatory remarks in a lead editorial, "Mayor's Disdain of UB Undeserved" (July 19, 2009). The editorial read in part:

Finch is entitled to his personal opinion...but as mayor he should be more temperate in his remarks.

The University of Bridgeport, in the eyes of most people, is an asset to the city. Tainting it with references to organized crime is beyond distasteful....

The University of Bridgeport is growing and Mayor Finch, regardless of his personal belief, should be pleased and wishing for the University nothing but the best.

Of all the positions, I have ever held, I have the greatest satisfaction at having served the University of Bridgeport. In the seventeen years since I assumed office, I have either presided over or participated in the graduation of thousands of UB alumni. Overwhelmingly, they have not been members of the Unification Church. They have earned bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degrees in a wide range of disciplines. At 88, I continue to teach one course a semester for graduate and undergraduate honors students.

I have often been struck by the fact that people who disapproved of PWPA's support of UB were far more likely to tell me what they thought than they were to ask me what I knew about the institution. At the time there was concern in the Jewish community that many of their young people might be lost to the new religious movements. In reality, such apprehensions were misplaced. While a very small number did join the new movements, the overwhelming majority found their spiritual home within Judaism.

Perhaps the question I was most frequently asked was, "Has Rev. Moon bought the university?" In reality, no private person can buy a publicly-chartered institution of higher education. In Connecticut, such institutions are regulated and receive accreditation from the the Board of Governors of the Connecticut Department of Higher Education and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Moreover, both stipulated that their approval of the PWPA was conditional on the university remaining a non-sectarian institution in accordance with its charter. Had that provision been violated, the university would have lost its accreditation, in effect, closing the institution. I can testify that UB has remained a non-sectarian institution in every aspect of its activities.

There is much more that I could write about Rev. Moon, but I would like to conclude with a brief word about the theology of the Unification Church and Rev. Moon's religious self-understanding. The latter is, I believe, ultimately based upon the claim that, as a young man, he had a vision of Jesus, who reportedly told him to complete Jesus' unfinished work. Although Rev. Moon's experience was powerfully real to

him, it is a claim non-believers, including this writer, find difficult to accept. But, claims of divine revelation, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, invariably seem strange to outsiders. Nevertheless, they provide the motivating power on the basis of which each religious tradition is energized. Moreover, Rev. Moon and his followers have provided a theology elaborating their understanding of the classic themes of biblical theology, Creation, the Fall, and Restoration, and ultimately based on his revelatory experience. As an historian of religion, I do not have to believe that theology to recognize that it is a very serious enterprise.

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