

## Catching up with Professor Darrol Bryant, *the Traveling Guru*

April 13, 2013



*Darrol Bryant at Gangotri, the headwaters of the Ganga Ma*

<http://www.youtube.com/user/TheTravelingGuru>

[http://travelingguru.org/Traveling\\_Guru\\_Darrol\\_Bryant.html](http://travelingguru.org/Traveling_Guru_Darrol_Bryant.html)

Religious Studies Professor, Dr. Darrol Bryant is forging new ground in education. He proposes an imaginative, post-modern approach to learning about people of different cultures and religions. He calls it “living encounter” and he’s prepared to take his students half way across the world to experience a transformative journey of personal discovery.

“While it’s important to study and know about the different traditions of the people on this planet, there’s nothing as powerful or as significant as learning their cultural, religious and spiritual traditions by visiting their Temples, their Mandirs, their Gurdwaras and the people within them .”

### **Dr. Darrol Bryant: A Theologian’s Perspective on the Unification Church Interview by Bret Moss**

This public interview with Dr. Bryant took place on February 23, 1995 as one of the ongoing series of UTS Coffee House Talks.

Bret: Dr. Darrol Bryant teaches religion and culture at Renison College, the University of Waterloo, in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He is originally from North Dakota, where he grew up in a small town right next to the Canadian border. He studied philosophy and political science at Concordia College, a Lutheran college in Moorehead, Minnesota, and received his doctorate in theology at Harvard Divinity School.

Dr. Bryant first came to UTS in 1977 and has been organizing conferences on Unification Theology for scholars and interfaith dialogue for religious leaders ever since. He co-founded the New Ecumenical Research Association (New ERA) with Dr. Quebedeux and has authored, co-authored or edited many books on the Unification Movement. His strong interest in millennial movements and eschatological or end-time themes has provided him with a high affinity for getting to know and earnestly supporting the work of the Unification Movement and our True Parents.

Currently he serves as the Secretary General for the Inter-Religious Federation for World Peace founded by True Parents in 1991.

Bret: I understand you took a one-year sabbatical last year to visit Kenya, India, Sri Lanka and other countries. Could you share your experiences in these countries and your main objectives for the trip?

Dr. Bryant: I ended up in India, Sri Lanka and Kenya. That is related to work begun here in February 1977 when I made my first visit to Unification Theological Seminary (UTS). I had a friend on the faculty here, a teacher of mine, and knew nothing about the Unification Church, except what I read in the public media. It was all negative. It is hard for you to realize what media coverage was like in the 1970s in relation to cults in America. What was here in the papers made its way into papers all over the world. I saw the same information in newspapers in Singapore 20 years later. Just the names were different.

My visit here was the beginning of a long and wonderful journey, an interfaith journey. In 1985 we had our first interfaith event, called “The Assembly of the World Religions.”

In 1986 I told my wife, "Let's go to India." The first reaction was that I was crazy. We had a 4-year old daughter who had her mouth on everything. We could just imagine all manner of things she would have put her mouth on in India. But we went anyway and had a wonderful year.

This last year was a continuation of that journey. These trips have a single purpose that has been at the center of my life: a quest for interreligious harmony and cooperation. My children joke about it. In India people ask us what we are doing. I say we spend time in the different religious communities. I have just finished an hour-long video of our trip.

In the North of India I started with a Christian Ashram high in the Himalayas. From there you can see 21 snow covered peaks. The sister in charge of the ashram has incorporated elements of Hindu spiritual life including Buddhist meditation and practices and elements from other faiths as well.

During our visit in India, we spent time with Hindus, Sikhs, and others. Then we did the same in Sri Lanka and Africa. In Kenya a very special thing happened. As well as spending time in the different religious communities, we also spent time with the animals. The animals are God's creatures, too. In that marvelous country to spend time with the animals is a wonderful thing.

### *A Different Kind of Messiah*

Bret: Since you were last here at UTS, True Parents have declared a new era for the seminary known as "Book II," which was inaugurated with the installation of our new president, Dr. Theodore Shimmyo and his new administration. Perhaps the best way to characterize the transformation which is taking place here is the recent worldwide declaration by True Parents that they are the Lord of the Second Advent, the Messiah and True Parents of all mankind. I know that you have found yourself standing on the front line of this providential activity, especially at the World Culture and Sports Festival. Tell us your experience with scholars when they first hear this message – for example in 1992 at the World Culture and Sports Festival in Seoul, Korea.

Dr. Bryant: First, from the time I came to UTS in 1977, questions about Rev. and Mrs. Moon and their messiahship have been in the air. In one sense, it is not a new question for me. We have had to explore that from the beginning.

One thing I came to see is that in the Unification Movement there is a special sense for the word Messiah. It is not quite what it has come to mean in the longer Christian tradition. You know how pervasive this word is in your movement. Spouses are messiahs to each other. You are all tribal messiahs. The world is running over with messiahs! (laughter) At first it was a shock, but eventually a relief for me. So when I first heard Rev. and Mrs. Moon says they were the Messiah, that flew in the face of Christian identification of messiahship with Jesus. Ach! What is one going to do about this?

Lloyd Eby, a former seminarian, when he first joined Unification Church, thought of Rev. Moon as the Messiah, but now Rev. Moon is his boss.

From the beginning this has been a problem. I kept notes of a visit to East Garden. Rev. Moon invited members of the faculty here around Christmas time. Then (UTS) President David Kim asked me to continue these first meetings, and I was thus included as a member of the faculty. I wrote in my diary: "What would it be like to meet the messiah? It was not at all what I had anticipated." I went to 3 or 4 of these meetings (at East Garden) before Rev. Moon went to jail. That brought an end to this practice.

What was humorous about my first visit was that we ended up playing Yoot. Mom would never believe that that is what you do when you meet the Messiah! (laughter) I have always been impressed about the nuanced way Rev. Moon talked about his own life and mission.

### *A Challenging Pronouncement in Seoul*

I think the events in Seoul in 1992 were very difficult. Rev. Moon had said something similar to this in 1990 in San Francisco. There was a headline in the San Francisco Chronicle about Rev. Moon's messiahship. The Hyatt Regency was our hotel. To give you an idea of the range of response, the next day around the hotel there was the headline "Rev. Moon Declares He Is the Messiah." The hotel responded: "Only the best stay at the Hyatt!"

That headline did not create the kind of internal problem that the 1992 announcement did. There were many unhappy people. Some saw it as an attack on their faith as Christians. Some were upset with how starkly it was stated. There were some tense moments. When Rev. Moon spoke at the Assembly of the World's Religions, he had said it at the World Culture and Sports Festival. Not all of our people were present, but that (pronouncement) reverberated through our conference. What did we think about this?

I happened to be the master of ceremonies the evening Rev. Moon spoke. Others also spoke: Dr. Gregorios, the President of IRFWP did as well. His was the most important statement. “Most of us don’t share your conviction about what you say about your messianic role,” he said. In his speech he had first appreciated all that Rev. Moon had done; then made this observation.

The meeting continued. I wondered to myself: “What is this going to mean, in many different ways? Does this mean the end of the IRFWP?” If Rev. Moon’s agenda was to have all religious leaders get up and say “Yes” to this affirmation, he did not get that. What will be the response of the Unification Movement? I don’t know the answer to that, but I do know that it has not meant that the IRFWP has ceased to function.

But Rev. Moon always surprises me and other people. In the IRFWP we have always insisted to allow people to maintain their own religious tradition and to bring that into a harmonious relationship with people of other faiths. I understand that is part of Rev. Moon’s vision, too. How that relates to his understanding of his messianic role, I am not clear. Maybe someone else can give me an answer to that question.

#### *Opportunity to Develop Interfaith Cooperation*

Bret: On a personal note, in your own life of faith how do you relate to True Parents’ proclamation and how does it affect your personal theology?

Dr. Bryant: How much do I want to tell you? It is complicated and not easily said. My experience with the Unification Movement, its teaching, people and the work it supports is profound. It has affected every aspect of my life personally and professionally. I am finishing a book based on lectures I gave in India. I was asked to give lectures at the University of Madras on God’s one developing purpose of the ages. I wanted to relate that to the question of many faiths. I am just now preparing this for publication.

It is clear to me I would not have been able to write what is in that little book if I had not encountered Rev. and Mrs. Moon. This (their influence on me) is at a number of different levels. It is partly the opportunity they have given me and others to work in interfaith harmony and cooperation. I now know people in virtually every religious community on the face of the earth.

The other aspect is that theoretically as I read *The Divine Principle*, there is an affirmation of the integrity of all of God’s revelations, all the religions given to mankind. They have different positions, different relationships to the central providential unfolding of things. *The Divine Principle* never says these religions are not of God. It does say that some of them get fulfilled in other religions. But there is a very strong affirmation about all the different religious traditions. So, at a theoretical as well as a practical level I have been affected.

#### *Being a Father*

Dr. Bryant: On a personal level – and this may sound very strange to you – I remember in the late 1970s coming to Barrytown and feeling strongly I would like to talk with Rev. Moon. What I wanted to talk to him about was being a father. That will not make you happy if I say it. Part of the reason I wanted to talk to him about that is that he has had more than one marriage. So had I. At that point I was struggling about my own children. I had come to a resolution about that. I felt that Rev. Moon helped me resolve this problem. I did not speak to him, but talked to others here. This was very much present to my life at this point. That was a deeply personal impact that Rev. Moon and Mrs. Moon had on my life.

These are big questions. We could go on a long time.

#### *Interfaith Transformation vs. Ongoing Conflict*

Bret: How do you envision the future of the interfaith movement and what role can the IRFWP play in bringing the world’s religious communities together?

Dr. Bryant: This is another big question. Can you ask smaller questions? (laughter) I try to think how to respond neither too briefly nor too extensively.

Let me share the conflict I feel around this question: what can IRFWP play in the relations among religions? At some moments I feel absolutely persuaded that there can be – as there has been in our experience – cooperation and depth of encounter and understanding among all the religions. I usually don’t talk about ecstatic experiences, but one of the ecstatic events of my life was that week long first Assembly of the Worlds Religions. There were 500 people from all over the world and from all the religious traditions. Could we get along? Could we eat together? Would we throw things at each other?

It was absolutely wonderful from beginning to end. We started every day with prayer. I have a conviction and the experience that when people meet from the depths of their own traditions, they meet in God.

When they meet in God, they discover themselves as brothers and sisters in a profound and important way.

### *When People Meet in God*

On the other side, this is kind of Polyanna. Look how religions beat on each other. What do you say about this kind of wonderful meeting? We read daily in the paper from one or another part of the world how one religion doesn't get along with others. One recent example of such controversy is what the Pope said in his book about the Buddhist tradition and others. There has been a lot of anger over that book. I don't understand how he could say such things. This kind of thing is going on all over the world.

So, what can we expect in the future? Will it continue to be this endless fighting we have seen throughout history? Or are we entering a new era in which there is a dramatic transformation in the relations between the religions? That is where my own millennial sensibility comes in. If we feel, "Yes, maybe we are coming into that time when God's spirit is written in our hearts. Then we can meet each other in it in a new, positive and enriching way."

That is my hope and what I work for. I see constantly in the work we have done over the past 15 years when we started the real interfaith work. Before that time, we had done simply Christian – Unification Movement work. I have seen people of different religions meet and be transformed in profound ways. Are there strategies to make that happen more quickly across the globe? I don't know the answer, but I sometimes think, there are things changing in the world.

I remember in the mid 1980s, Rev. Kwak told me I should work to have the God Conference in Moscow.

I said, "Great, we will aim for the second millennium."

He said, "No, sooner than that."

I said, "It is very complicated to hold something religious in the U.S.S.R."

Well, things change! I hope something like that is happening in the religious world as well.

### *Too Vital for Scholars*

Bret: What was your experience with Unification Theology conferences, and what do you feel is the current interest in or need for Unification Theology among scholars and religious leaders?

Dr. Bryant: Another big question! I was at the American Academy of Religion in November 1994. The AAR is a circus of thousands of scholars of religion from North America and the world. There are more than 5000 religion scholars. It is a zoo, kind of awful. There is so much going on, you can't relate to it; it is huge. What interested me is the section on New Religious Movements. Nearly 15 to 20 years ago it was a big fight to get the topic of new religions on the agenda. It finally got on and has grown to a large section. Literally hundreds of people come to those meetings. That surprised me, because I expected there to be less interest now than before. That is largely how the Unification Movement gets classified in scholarly circles.

I understand there is a group of Unification scholars that has started meeting together. They will meet tomorrow and will try to get something going on this front.

I spoke with Dr. Shimmyo earlier. He said there is a need for a new Unification Theology. I encouraged him to make that part of his task and that of the Seminary. There is a need for this.

Part of the problem is: you, and to some extent I, am part of a movement that is still unfolding. New things are always emerging. For certain scholarly things to occur, things have to be dead. Scholars like things that don't move around too much. They feel more comfortable dealing with texts. Words don't jump off the page. The Unification Movement is not at that stage. I'd say don't worry so much about the scholarly community. Rather such organizations as the New Ecumenical Research Association, and other Unification organizations, all these that we pioneered 15 years ago, are increasing commonplace in the academy. This year I was at the founding of the society for Hindu-Christian studies. At the Assembly we have done that (interfaith studies) for at least a decade. We have already made significant impact on the larger scholarly community through the work of the Unification Movement's various organizations from New ERA through IRFWP. We make an impact, and I think this is because at our conferences the language of God, of faith, of belief, the fact that people hold things and hold them deeply, and practice things and practice them deeply are all permitted. You can speak about God.

This is what I liked about this seminary in my first meeting in 1977. There was much misgiving among my colleagues for my coming here. They were worried about my coming back a programmed zombie.

Unificationist had the reputation of having magical powers and of being able to look into your eye. Then suddenly you are out selling flowers for Rev. Moon.

When I came home, Susan, my wife, asked me how my visit was. I said, “I have just had the best theological conversation I have had in a decade because God was in the middle of it. It was not a dry academic discussion in which God was not present and could not be spoken about.”

It was not that I agreed or disagreed with everything. I just felt that here something vital was happening. God’s presence in history was a vital concern for Unificationists. These questions remain lively. Even though I may not agree about specific things, I find that wrestling about these issues and questions is enormously stimulating and important.

#### *Jesus Commissioned Rev. Moon – That is Important*

Bret: Knowing Christian culture as you do, what do you feel is the biggest obstacle for Christians in receiving True Parents?

Dr. Bryant: This is an important point. It has come to be neglected within the Unification Movement itself. For me it was always a very important fact that Rev. Moon received his commission from Jesus. That was important to me. I always felt I had to take this quite seriously. I had to think about that. Was it fiction? Disney world? I believe that Jesus is present to human beings on this earth and does give them tasks. What seems to have happened in the development of Unification thinking is: because of how negative the response of the Christian church in Korea and then around the world was, the question of Rev. Moon’s relationship with Jesus has not gotten articulated and developed in the way it should have been. At a certain point in time it has been: The Christian church had its response and failed, so to hell with them. We won’t worry about it and get on with other things. Consequently that relationship between Rev. Moon and Jesus occasionally comes out but never got developed in the way it should.

I told a systematic theologian from Berkeley: “Someday – I said this would happen after I reached 55 – I will write a Christian interpretation of Unification teaching. (Dr. Bryant explained privately after the interview that he believed theologians should not write theology before age 55. If they write younger than that, he said, they then spend the rest of their life defending what they wrote.) Is there a way Christians can affirm Unification teaching? I think they can, but Christians have been focused on the wrong thing.

Christians have three articles of faith: God, Redeemer and Holy Spirit. The name HSA-UWC suggests Unification teaching is under the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. But it often gets identified with the second article of Christian faith. It is true that in part Unification belief goes there. I think there is a way of understanding the Unification Movement that will allow me to say “Yes” to this movement within the terms of classical Christian teaching. That is still on my agenda. I am not 55 yet, so I don’t have to feel guilty about not having fulfilled that ambition as yet. I said to some people that after I was 55 I would write this interpretation.

#### *Questions and Answers*

Bret: We have a few minutes for questions.

Ted O’Grady: You brought up something close to my thinking, that is, our skirting the issue of Christianity in the Unification Movement. Could you take that one step further and deal with Judaism. There is a problem between Judaism and Christianity historically. Could you comment on that? The deprogramming movement is heavily influenced by Freud’s materialism. How can we address Judaism and Christianity as a whole or as a lineage?

Dr. Bryant: You all like to ask big questions.

One of the great moments in the history of Christianity was in the Second Century. It concerned Marcion’s suggestion that the Christian scriptures were only the writings of Luke and Paul. That other stuff is not Christian, he said. It is Jewish; so let’s get rid of it. The God in those other scriptures is not the same God we know in Jesus.

The Christian church said “No” to Marcion and embraced the whole of Jewish scripture as theirs. And then – this is the great irony and tragedy – pretended Christianity had no connection with Judaism for the next 1800 years. It went so far as to turn on the very faith that was there in Abraham down to the present. It is an awful thing.

Unificationism and Christianity both have to address this issue. Christianity has not done a good job of this at all. Unification insight could focus on where it is that our unity as Jews, Christians and Unificationists lies. It lies not in you and me, but in God. It is the same God who is the Creator of the universe, the Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Jesus and of Rev. Moon, and of the whole of

humanity. He is our divine source, the divine touchstone of our life, our beginning and our end. It is in that God that our unity lies. But we don't speak that language.

We speak as if we are just different. At one level we are different, but at the most decisive level we are one. We are one in God, and it is only there that our unity can lie. I can't speak about unification because Christianity's own relation to Judaism is so sad. It brings pain to the heart of God. To me that must be one of the most painful things for God to endure: to see the animosity between his Jewish, Christian and Unification children.

### *Ecumenism Integral to Unificationism*

Dr. Mickler: We have just completed our initial self study for accreditation at the Seminary. One thing it has forced us to do is reflect on our mission as a seminary. As someone who has been associated with this institution from the early days, though with a little more distance in the last decade, what should be our mission as we move into the 21st century? What direction in theological education? You teach in the religious studies department in a university. We have always modeled ourself after Christian seminaries in this country. Where could we go profitably as we move forwards as an institution here at Barrytown?

Dr. Bryant: When I first came to the seminary, it was like every other seminary I'd been to. It was a little Christian seminary. The curriculum was the same. What inspired me about this seminary was its conviction that it could carry out its training and theological education in this interreligious context.

I know there are people who have felt for many years and have hoped that as the seminary developed, IRF and IRFWP would return to the seminary. This is where we were born. It is sad to me that there has been this separation over these last years.

To say that what could make this an exciting seminary in the future is to unfold your theological education in the context of the world's religions – this does not say you should not teach Unification theology, etc. Rev. Moon has some sense that this is something that is just there, that we must trot it out and give it to the new class that comes in. This class, this faculty, theologians in the Unification Church have to be creating, making, realizing. I think you could have fruitful and lively disagreements about the status of the world's religions.

Mrs. Young Oon Kim wrote wonderful books on the world's religions. She focuses on them waiting for the appearance of the Messiah or some such figure. That is a fulfillment theory of the world's religions. All the world's religions will achieve their fulfillment in the Unification Movement. I think there are other perspectives in the Unification Movement.

I have always thought the seminary should have the presence of people from other world's religious traditions. Once there was some talk about wouldn't it be wonderful to establish here a center for the spiritual disciplines. We would have a Buddhist here teaching us about Buddhist meditation, and a Moslem teaching us about Islamic spiritual practice. Having Unificationism bringing those together is an exciting prospect. That does not mean you have to diminish the unification component.

What is happening in seminaries? There is some movement in that direction, but there has to be a much more substantial movement in that direction. Your task as Unificationists, one thing that makes me very hopeful and continue to be attached to Unification efforts in relation to interfaith, is that you are the only movement on this earth that has, as part of its faith, to bring together the religions of the world. That gives it a kind of staying power. Christians don't have that as part of their self-understanding. They always reluctantly say, "I guess we have to do something like this. I don't know why, but I guess we should." But Unificationists have built into their faith that they must unify religion, as well as culture, races, etc.

I would like that to be taken up very seriously as part of your seminary mission, education and direction. I think that would be dynamite and make this an exciting place to be. It may already be exciting, but that would make it even more exciting. I think you as a movement have an opportunity to explore the riches of other faiths as I think no other movement can because of your conviction of what unification is.

Bret: I think that has to bring this evening to a close. We are all deeply indebted to you for your generosity this evening.

Dr. Bryant: You just have to remember one thing: You can't wait another six years. I think it has been six years since I have been at the seminary. That is too long.

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