

## Messianic Succession

Warren Lewis  
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When I applied for a job at Unification Theological Seminary in 1975, Unificationist John Sonneborn was assigned to introduce me to *Divine Principle*, a summary of the teachings of Sun Myung Moon. My future employers wanted me, at least, to have an acquaintance with the confessional point of view of my students to whom I would be teaching Church History.

When we got to the part about the migration of messiahship from person to person, from Jesus, the Messiah (Christ) of the First Advent, to -- as Unificationists believe -- Rev. Moon, “Lord of the

Second Advent,” I brightened. “Oh!” I said, “That is similar to the idea of Peter John Olivi” (ca. 1248-1298), on whose *Apocalypse* commentary I have been working. “He believed that St. Francis was the second advent of Christ, in spirit.”

Dr. Sonneborn was astonished and delighted to discover that someone else in Christian history had conceived of “the second coming” as fulfilled by someone other than the person of the historical Jesus. I got the job.

During my course in Church History, we would touch on other “fulfillments” of messianic expectation: Abraham Abulafia (13th century) and Sabbatai Zevi (17th century), Jewish messiahs; various Muslim Mahdis; and, especially Mother Ann Lee, the 18th century “Coming of Christ in the Female Line” and foundress of the Shakers.



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### Peter John Olivi (ca. 1248-1298)

Everyone has heard of Francis of Assisi, but who was Peter John Olivi? Why did he think St. Francis was the “Lord of the Second Advent?” How could it have come about that a devout Christian could believe that some person other than the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth could have been the Second Coming of Christ?

Olivi was born about 20 years after Francis (1181/82-1226) had died, and became a member of the religious order that St. Francis had founded in 1209. Awestruck by Francis’s holiness and miracles, Olivi devoutly followed Francis

as Francis had followed Christ.

The spiritual power generated by Francis’s life of “evangelical perfection” revolutionized 13th century European Christendom. Even now, no other saint since the first century has been more influential -- both among Catholics and Protestants and among non-believers.

Olivi grew up pondering not only St. Francis but also the thought of Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202). Olivi, reading of the *Book of Revelation*, applied Joachim’s principle of *concordia*: the threefold parallel of persons and events in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Church History, all within the framework of secular history. Like Joachim, Olivi saw in history three great eras: the Age of the Father, the Age of the Son, and the Age of the Holy Spirit.

A few weeks before he died, Olivi finished his final and greatest work, the *Lectura super Apocalypsim (LSA)*, commentary on the biblical *Book of Revelation*. The *LSA* is a summary of Olivi’s eschatology, his view of the “Last Things” as he had been developing his understanding over his 20 year teaching career. Other than the Bible, no book contributed more powerfully and directly than the *LSA* to the seismic events that we call “the Reformation.” More than 200 years before Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the church-house door, Olivi had foreseen the Pope as heretic, the theological Fall of Rome, the end of top-down religious hierarchy, and the emergence of free and democratic, joy-filled “Praise Churches.” Olivi had also predicted the Jewish Holocaust and the ultimate unification of Jews and Christians.

### St. Francis, the “Second Coming of Christ, in Spirit”

According to Olivi, Francis of Assisi was the “second coming of Christ in spirit.” Francis was for Olivi the pivot point: Christ having come again in Francis, the evangelical life and saving death of Christ were

thereby recapitulated. The perfection of the gospel -- especially apostolic poverty -- was restored and perfectly sealed through the wounds (“glorious stigmata”) impressed on Francis by Christ.

According to Olivi’s Franciscatology, if Francis’s life had thus *concorded* perfectly with the life of Christ, then Francis himself, too, would have to rise again: Olivi followed his logic systematically through to the prediction that the Francis-Christ would be resurrected. “Christ in Francis” will cause the “sun of the world” to rise up to that eschatological morning in which Christ himself in his first advent rose up. The “rising of the sun” introduces the Age of the Holy Spirit. The death and resurrection and continuing life of Francis would be duplicated, like Christ in his apostles, through Francis’s “*returning resurrection*” in the Spiritual Church. The spirit of Francis would be the universal pontiff of the Spiritual Church and the *novus dux* (new world leader) of the Third World Age of the Holy Spirit.

The implications for the church and the world of this second advent of Christ in Francis were, according to Olivi, manifold. Olivi worked out a remarkable Christology of Francis, a Franciscology that recapitulated a number of ancient Christologies yet without disrupting the balanced Christocentrism of orthodox Christian Trinitarian Christology. Olivi articulated an “adoptionist” Christology of Francis in reflection upon Francis’s reception of the stigmata; an “angel Christology” of Francis in terms of three specific angels mentioned in *Revelation*; a Christology of Pentecost, in that the risen Francis, like the risen Christ, would send the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit to his disciples; and the resurrection-and-coming-again Christology of Francis, already mentioned.

Moreover, the Francis-Christ would accomplish an astonishingly new thing: God’s ancient people, the Jews, would turn to Christ, and would through their own missionary activity achieve unification with Christians. The resulting Spiritual Church, comprising faithful Jews and gentile Christians, would result in a further new thing: the New Bride of the Messiah, the Apocalyptic church of praise and joy, of contemplation, and of “peace that surpasses understanding.”

### **The Resurrection of Jesus and Sun Myung Moon**

Rev. Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012) taught his followers that Jesus’ “second coming” would be more a spiritual event than a physical return of the man Jesus, flying from heaven to earth “on the clouds.” According to Unification theology, messiahship is dynamic rather than essentialist, more an “office” or a “title” than an effect of substantial incarnation of a person of Godhead in a human body and soul. In church-historical language, the Unificationist doctrine of messiahship is closer to Jewish-Christian ideas of adoptionism: the idea that Jesus *became* the messiah when the Holy Spirit descended on him at his baptism.

Original Unificationist Christology owes as much to some styles of Buddhist thought as it does to the history of Christian doctrine. Rev. Moon’s concept of messiahship resembles Rev. Moon’s concept of Buddhahood. The office of messiahship is a state of consciousness that passes along from one enlightened teacher to another. Many Bodhisattvas (Buddhas-in-the-making) may exist at any one time. In Mahayana Buddhism, Buddhas are not born, they become.



*Peter John Olivi (ca. 1248-1298)*

Unificationists do not think of Rev. Moon as the reincarnation of Jesus but, rather, as the one to whom furtherance of the mission of Jesus came in the course of providential time. Realization of messiahship depends on the merits of the person who in this or that time achieves messianic status and becomes deserving of the title. Accordingly, most Unificationists confess their belief that Rev. Moon was “the Lord of the Second Advent,” the second coming of Christ in spirit. To cite the phenomenologists of religion, again, one may say that Moon, nearly 800 years after Francis, did what Olivi believed Francis, nearly 1,300 years after Jesus, had done.

If Olivi were the first to conceive the possibility that some human other than Jesus could be the “second” coming of Christ, Rev. Moon taught that he was completing the unfinished work of Jesus by perfecting “physical salvation” on the

foundation of the “spiritual salvation” that Jesus had accomplished. By “physical salvation,” Moon meant blessed families and moral children, ethical politics and equitable economics, and the other issues of ordinary life which, when they are resolved, will be a further answer to Jesus’ prayer: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

## Questions for Unificationists

What, then, of Sun Myung Moon's own returning resurrection? According to Unificationist faith, Rev. Moon successfully completed his providential, messianic course on earth, and is, therefore, residing gloriously in the Spirit World. How ought his devotees on earth think about the "ascended" Rev. Moon? In what manner might one expect Moon's returning resurrection to take place?

Ought one to think in "spiritual" terms of a theological intensification of his memory? Ought Unificationists to pursue a theological-philosophical track paralleling the Ancient Church's development of an ever-higher "high" Christology of Moon until something like the Creed of Nicaea might evolve, howbeit in Unificationist terms: "We believe in Sun Myung Moon, the only-begotten True Father of True Father...."

Might Unificationists take a more positivistic approach and affirm the essential truth of the person and nature of Rev. Moon through the ostensible evidence of this-worldly blessing and success of his ministry? Ought that proof to stand or fall in terms of the success or failure of the True Children, one or some of Rev. and Mrs. Moon's natural children, to make manifest ongoingly the messianic validity of their father and mother? Might this proof arise through a spiritual dynasty of some subset of blessed marriages, couples paired by Moon himself? Might it be through an ecclesiastical dynasty of the organized Unification Church?

Or might the "ascended" Moon verify his heavenly messianic rule over "the House of Jacob for 10,000 years" (Unificationist hymn) by means of a spiritual dynasty -- or, more precisely, a spiritualist dynasty -- of select individuals whose inner experiences in dreams, visions, and other mystical events would qualify the elect individuals to special leadership of the Unification Movement? Moon's own shamanic communion with the "spirit world" was at the core of his religious experience, and underlies the *Divine Principle*. The early years of the Movement in Korea were a time rich in passionate religious experience of many kinds, including spiritualistic manifestations. Life at the Barrytown seminary during its best years was infused by a considerable range of various devout practices. Unificationist spiritualism is a unique blend of East and West, just as one would expect it to be.

Might the final validation of Moon's messiahship and returning resurrection lie in the lap of Hak Ja Han, Mrs. Sun Myung Moon? That gracious lady currently reigns supremely over the Unification Church in Korea, and is believed by the devout to be not only True Mother but also the "incarnation of the Holy Spirit."

If her work and ministry were to provide the ultimate proof of the spiritual power of Unificationism, she would have succeeded in achieving a theological performance the equal of her husband's work: Mrs. Moon as the earthly manifestation of the Holy Spirit would have become the equivalent of Rev. Moon's status as the Lord of the Second Advent. More than that, she would have accomplished a new thing in the history of Christian experience: By lending her distinct human personhood to the definition of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, she would have achieved a finite definition of incarnate godhead in human form as distinct as that of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the First Advent, and of Sun Myung Moon, the Lord of the Second Advent.

## Questions for Everyone

Are there not implicit here some new approaches to old problems in theology? Christians wedded to the iconic idea of the return of Christ "on the clouds" can be prompted by Olivi's and Moon's constructs of the "Lord of the Second Advent" to confront the issue of Christianity's seemingly everlasting wait for the "return" of Christ. The Church, conceived of symbolically as "the Bride of Christ," has already endured considerable embarrassment, left standing at the altar for going on 2,000 years, stood-up by a dilatory Bridegroom late for his own wedding. Equally embarrassing are all the "best men" who periodically rush to the front of the church to shout, "He's coming! He's coming!" only once again to disappoint everyone when this or that moment of eschatological "rapture" passes quietly by, and we are *all* "left behind."

Perhaps, instead of speaking of the "Second Advent," Christians (including Unificationists) should speak of the "next" advent of the Messiah.

Unificationists have built into their system the concept of a "returning resurrection," by which they mean a spiritual event entailing a transaction between the spirit world and us here on our phenomenal plane: The spiritual energies of those who have gone before continue to work-it-forward through those of us still on earth.

Many questions nonetheless remain: Will Rev. Moon enjoy a Buddha-like "next advent" in his own, second advent of returning resurrection? How many "next" advents shall there be? Will Jesus eventually enjoy a "final" advent in triumph over Gog and Magog (as Olivi believed)? Will he bring all his Saints

and Buddhas, Prophets and Messiahs, Angelic Popes and True Children, Moons and Mahdis and Messiahs with him when he comes with finality? How far in the future do we imagine the cosmic eschaton to be? Is it to be “soon” (as John on Patmos thought) or “billions and billions” of light years away (as Carl Sagan loved to say)? Certainly farther away than Olivi’s timetable which, at the latest, would bring us to 2034 -- or, will it happen in 2034!

The important question for us, now, is not “How long?” or “When?” but seems to be, “Who’s next?”

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*Dr. Warren Lewis was the first professor of Church History at Unification Theological Seminary (1975-81). Recently, as a Visiting Scholar at Harvard Divinity School (his alma mater), he finished a major work in Medieval Studies: a critical edition of the Latin text of Peter John Olivi’s Lectura super Apocalypsim and its English translation. He is now finishing a monograph, “Olivi’s Revelation: Introduction to the Lectura super Apocalypsim by Peter John Olivi.”*