

Knut Holdhus
August 1, 2026



Sun Myung Moon (left) and Sang Hun Lee on a hike to the Korean mountain Mt. Seorak in 1972

세계일보

[Segye Ilbo](#)

[Segye Ilbo](#) Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

Sang Hun Lee (1914-1997), ca. 1974

He found the comprehensive explanation he sought: A life in search of truth led the thinker behind Unification Thought to Sun Myung Moon

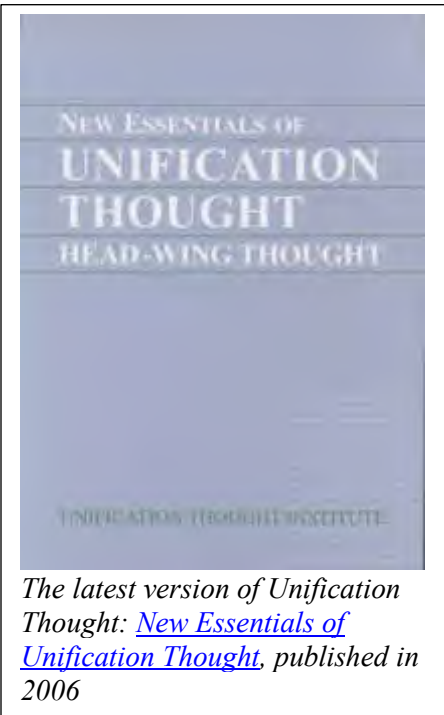
What kind of legacy does a religion leave behind? Is it found primarily in its sacred texts and doctrines, or in the lives of the people it shapes? In a reflective [column](#) published on 31st July 2026, [Segye Ilbo](#) religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) argues that the most enduring measure of a religious tradition is the character and achievements of those it inspires.

As an example, Jeong turns to Lee Sang-heon (이상헌 - 1914-1997, usually anglicized as Sang Hun Lee), a physician, philosopher, and one of the leading intellectual figures of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), in Korea generally referred to as [Unificationism](#) (통일교). Although Lee devoted much of his later life to developing what became known as [Unification Thought](#) (통일사상) [See editor's note 1 below] - a systematic presentation of the teachings of Rev. [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) - his path to religion was anything but straightforward. Before becoming a religious thinker, he was a young activist involved in Korea's struggle against Japanese colonial rule, experimented with communist ideas, and spent years wrestling with profound questions about human existence.

In his [article](#), Jeong presents Lee not simply as a religious leader but as someone driven by an intense search for answers. Rather than focusing on technical philosophical concepts, the column emphasizes the personal journey that led Lee from political activism to philosophy and ultimately to faith. It also places his work in the historical context of the ideological conflicts that shaped South Korea during the Cold War, when many intellectuals believed that competing worldviews were as important as military strength.

Sang Hun Lee (Lee Sang-heon) was not born into religious leadership. During Japan's colonial rule over Korea, he became involved in the anti-Japanese student movement, joining demonstrations that demanded Korean

independence. In the course of his political activities, he also became associated for a time with communist organizations, which attracted many young activists who saw socialism as a possible path toward liberation from colonial rule.



The latest version of Unification Thought: [New Essentials of Unification Thought](#), published in 2006

His activism came at a high personal cost. Japanese authorities arrested him several times, subjected him to harsh interrogations and torture, and expelled him from school twice - once because of his anti-Japanese activities and once because of his involvement with left-wing political groups. His early years were shaped by political upheaval, personal sacrifice, and uncertainty.

According to Jeong, Lee eventually abandoned communism, not because of changing political circumstances but because he became dissatisfied with its understanding of human nature. He began asking questions that he felt political ideology alone could not answer.

He wondered where feelings such as patriotism and love for humanity ultimately came from. If people are simply products of biological evolution, he asked, how can one explain acts of complete self-sacrifice, in which individuals willingly risk or even give up their own lives for others? Such questions led him beyond politics into a broader search for life's meaning.

His inquiry soon became even more fundamental. Why do human beings exist? Why should they live? Why should they love one another? These were no longer political questions but questions about the purpose of human life itself.

Determined to find satisfactory answers, Lee immersed himself in the study of many different religious and philosophical traditions. He explored Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and numerous works of philosophy. He also studied the teachings of the Japanese new religious movement Seichō-no-Ie [See editor's note 2 below], hoping they might provide the comprehensive explanation he sought.

Yet none of these traditions fully satisfied him. Looking back years later, Lee described this period as one of the darkest chapters of his life. He recalled feeling so overwhelmed by the apparent lack of meaning in life that he even considered suicide. Jeong presents this not merely as personal despair but as evidence of the seriousness with which Lee pursued his search for truth.

According to Lee's later recollections, everything changed in 1956, when he first met Rev. [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) and encountered the [Unification Principles](#) (통일원리), the central theological text of [Unificationism](#).

Lee believed he had finally found a framework that connected the many questions he had struggled with for years. What particularly impressed him was its explanation of history, which sought to present human history, human purpose, and [God](#)'s plan within a single coherent narrative. Rather than seeing history as a series of unrelated events, Lee felt he had discovered an interpretation that gave human life an overall direction and meaning.

To be continued. Part 2 coming soon

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note 1: Unification Thought is a philosophical system developed by Sang Hun Lee (1914-1997) from the teachings of [Sun Myung Moon](#) (1920-2012). It was designed as a comprehensive worldview that integrates religion, philosophy, science, ethics, and social theory into a single framework centered on [God](#)'s purpose for creation.

At its core, [Unification Thought](#) argues that reality reflects the nature of [God](#), understood as a being of "dual characteristics": internal character and external form, as well as masculinity and femininity in harmonious unity. Human beings, according to this view, are created to embody divine love through mature relationships, family life, creativity, and moral responsibility.

The system places strong emphasis on purpose and relationality. Everything exists through "[give-and-take action](#)", a dynamic process of interaction that produces harmony, growth, and development. Human history is interpreted as a [providential](#) process aimed at restoring the ideal world originally intended by [God](#), overcoming alienation, conflict, and selfishness caused by the human fall.



*Masaharu Taniguchi, 21st
December 1958*

[Unification Thought](#) also attempts to respond to modern ideologies. It criticizes both materialistic Marxism and purely secular humanism while also seeking to modernize traditional religious thinking. Its ethical and political applications include theories of education, art, economics, and social organization grounded in family-centered ethics and mutual cooperation. The philosophical system can be regarded as a synthesis of Eastern and Western thought, religion and science.]

[Editor's note 2: Seichō-no-Ie is a Japanese new religious movement founded in 1930 by Masaharu Taniguchi. Its name can be translated as "House of Growth" or "Home of Infinite Life." The movement emerged during a period of intense religious innovation in Japan and sought to present a universal spiritual message that could transcend the boundaries of traditional religions.

At the heart of Seichō-no-Ie's teaching is the belief that the material world is only a partial expression of a deeper spiritual reality. It holds that human beings are, in their true essence,

children of [God](#) who possess an inherently perfect spiritual nature. Suffering, illness, and misfortune are understood primarily as the result of mistaken thinking or an incomplete awareness of this spiritual reality. By cultivating gratitude, positive thinking, prayer, and harmony with [God](#), individuals can experience both spiritual and practical transformation.

The movement draws on a wide range of religious and philosophical traditions. Its teachings incorporate elements of Mahayana Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, Confucian ethics, and Western idealist philosophy. Rather than insisting that only one religion is true, Seichō-no-Ie teaches that all major religions express different aspects of the same divine truth. This inclusive approach helped attract followers who were interested in spirituality without abandoning their existing religious backgrounds.

During the mid-twentieth century, Seichō-no-Ie became one of Japan's largest and most influential new religious movements, publishing millions of copies of Taniguchi's writings and establishing branches around the world. While it has at times been associated with conservative social and political causes in Japan, in recent decades it has increasingly emphasized environmental stewardship, peace, and sustainable living as practical expressions of its spiritual principles.

For intellectuals such as Sang Hun Lee, Seichō-no-Ie was attractive because it offered a systematic attempt to explain the relationship between [God](#), humanity, and the universe. Although Lee ultimately concluded that it did not fully answer the philosophical questions that concerned him, his study of the movement formed an important stage in his broader search for a comprehensive worldview.]

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report published on 2nd August 2026 by *NewTamsa* (시민언론 뉴탐사 / NTS), a progressive, independent South Korean investigative news outlet, examines whether a local figure associated with the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) also held an organizational role in the campaign of Jeong Cheong-rae (정청래), one of the candidates for leadership of South Korea's governing Democratic Party of Korea (DPK). The **article** by NewTamsa reporters Kang Jin-gu (강진구) and Pak Dae-yong (박대용) focuses on a political event held in the southern city of Gwangju on 10th July and compares public video footage with subsequent statements by one of the attendees.



Portrait of **Jeong Cheong-rae** (Jung Chung-rae) in June 2026. Photo: [델리민주 \[더불어민주당\] / Wikimedia Commons](#). License: **CC Attr 4.0 Int**. Cropped

See also [Religion as Campaign Weapons in Leadership Race](#)

The **report** comes at a time when UPF and other organizations founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) and [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) are receiving heightened media attention because of ongoing investigations into alleged political lobbying in South Korea. NewTamsa argues that the presence of a UPF regional representative in Jeong's campaign organization raises political questions, although the article does not present evidence that Jeong himself knowingly appointed the individual or was aware of his affiliation. Much of the report revolves around conflicting accounts of what happened at the July event.

NewTamsa reports that a man publicly introduced as the head of Jeong Cheong-rae's organizational special advisers in Gwangju was, according to the outlet's investigation, also a regional official connected with UPF.

The individual is identified as Shin In-yong (신인용), a former Gwangju city council member. According to the **article**, Shin was appointed in May 2022 as chairman of the *Peace Ambassadors Association* in Gwangju's Nam District. The *Peace Ambassadors Association* is described as a local network established by UPF, an international organization founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) and [Hak Ja Han](#).

The **article** says the issue arose during a commemorative lecture held in Gwangju on 10th July to mark the first anniversary of the launch of Honam Ilbo TV. During the introductions of invited guests, Shin was reportedly announced as "Jeong Cheong-rae's Gwangju organizational special affairs director" on behalf of a political group known as *Dangwon Jugwon Sidae* ("Era of Party Members' Sovereignty"). NewTamsa notes that Shin later greeted Jeong and shook hands with him at the event.

According to the **report**, this appearance follows earlier controversies in which people allegedly linked to another religious movement, Shincheonji [\[See editor's note below\]](#), were said to have been involved in Jeong's political activities. The **article** presents Shin's UPF connection as another example that could attract public scrutiny.

NewTamsa also places the story in the context of ongoing investigations into alleged



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investigations into alleged political lobbying involving UPF. It notes that Song Gwang-seok (송광석), identified as UPF's former president in South Korea, has already been indicted without detention on charges of providing political donations to several politicians. The report further states that investigators recently questioned Song again while examining the use of large sums of cash allegedly kept by [Hak Ja Han](#). The article emphasizes that campaign organizational officials are responsible for recruiting supporters and building local political networks, making the identity of such individuals politically significant.



Song Gwang-seok, here on 7th June 2024. Screenshot from [FFWPU](#) live transmission.

The [report](#) adds that Shin was not the only person introduced as representing *Dangwon Jugwon Sidae* at the event. Two other individuals were also presented as organizational officials and, according to the article, all three greeted Jeong with handshakes.

Before publication, NewTamsa contacted Shin by telephone. According to the article, he denied serving as Jeong's organizational special affairs director. He said he had attended the event for the first time and claimed that someone from Seoul had mistakenly provided his title to the event's master of ceremonies. Shin also denied having previously met Jeong, saying there had not even been enough time for a handshake before he left.

NewTamsa argues that this explanation is inconsistent with video footage it obtained. The outlet says the recording clearly shows Shin shaking hands with Jeong after being introduced to the audience. While earlier videos had only shown the guest introductions, NewTamsa says it later secured additional footage capturing the handshake itself.

Shin did acknowledge serving as chairman of the local *Peace Ambassadors Association*. According to the article, he explained that he accepted the position because he believed promoting peace was worthwhile. He added that he was an elder in a Christian church and said he knew of UPF's connection with [Unificationism](#) (통일교) but was not personally involved with the [movement](#) itself.

The [article](#) concludes this section by noting that Jeong has previously appeared at events connected with organizations associated with the [Family Federation](#). It cites a 2021 address that he delivered to the *Hyojeong Forum*, where he praised the group's activities in his parliamentary constituency of Mapo while also speaking about his own political background and imprisonment during the democracy movement which led to the 1987-start of the current democratic system South Korea is being governed by today.

See also [Religion as Campaign Weapons in Leadership Race](#)

Text: *Knut Holdhus, editor*

Featured image above: *Democratic Party leadership race scrutinized. Illustration: ChatGPT, 2nd August 2026.*

[Editor's note: [Shincheonji](#), officially known as *Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony*, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation.

[Shincheonji](#) teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee has received divine revelation to interpret it. He teaches that

received divine revelation to interpret it. He teaches that South Korea is the location where the prophecies of the *Book of Revelation* are actively playing out in real-time, making it the epicenter of the final harvest. Shincheonji focuses on filling the literal 144,000 slots of the 12 Tribes mentioned in Revelation. Once this number of truly sealed, flawless believers is completed, they believe they will rule as kings and priests over the rest of humanity.]

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