

## Tyler Hendricks, Michael D. Hentrich and Richard Panzer Ponder the Unificationist Perspective on Christmas

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Behind all the commercial advertisements and materialistic hype, the holidays are a time of religious significance for families around the world, including those within the Unification Church. Yet with the belief that Rev. and Mrs. Sun Myung Moon came to this earth as the Messiah, fulfilling a mission that Jesus Christ left unfinished, how does a Unificationist view Christmas differently from that of a non-Unificationist, if at all? Three theologians – Dr. Tyler Hendricks, developer of ministry curriculum for the Unification Church USA, Rev. Michael Hentrich, Colorado state pastor, and Dr. Richard Panzer, president of Unification Theological Seminary, reflect on the meaning of Christmas from a Unificationist perspective.

### Dr. Tyler Hendricks on the Origins of Christmas



“Unificationism affirms the beauty and value of religious traditions no matter what tradition. I'd love to go on the Hajj to Mecca, to do *zazen*, a meditative discipline, in a Japanese monastery, to wash a statue of Krishna, to walk the pilgrimage to Lourdes or Canterbury and, yes, to put up a lovely Christmas tree. The more, the merrier.

“Interestingly, one of the major Christian traditions that started up this nation of the USA didn't celebrate Christmas at all. It smelled like popish idolatry to the Puritans and their strict Protestant legates. No images, no idols, no decorations, no smoke and mirrors. These were the original minimalists. So, how did the glorious season of miracles, Santa's reindeer and Christmas carols sneak into America?

“Well, I don't know the whole story, but I do know that New York City was an epicenter of it. ‘It's a Wonderful Life?’ Upstate New York. The bridge from which George Bailey is filming jumping crosses on the Rondout Creek in Kingston, New York. ‘Miracle on 34th Street?’ Midtown Manhattan. But Christmas traditions go back before that, to General Theological Seminary in the early 19th Century and an Episcopal minister named Clement Moore, who is attributed to having written ‘The Night Before Christmas,’ also known as ‘A Visit from St. Nicolas.’ He must have listened to Charles Dickens on his speaking tour do a reading of ‘A Christmas Carol.’ Moore's poem greatly solidified the concept of ‘Santa Claus’ as a figure traveling in a sleigh pulled by reindeer to deliver toys to children on Christmas Eve.

Prior to this poem, the idea of St. Nicolas varied considerably.

“I would imagine that the less-Puritan, more-Episcopalian east coast from Baltimore down to Charleston has Christmas roots back to the revolutionary days, but for the generalization of the holiday throughout the country, it was Clement Moore and the miracle on 34th Street. Macy's has a gift for giving.”

**Michael D. Hentrich: “Christmas Is Celebrating More than Jesus’ Birth”**



“Certainly, for many, Christmas is simply a festive holiday on which we get and give (in that order) ‘stuff’ to one another, largely as a cultural expectation. For some, it can be a time of depression and loneliness. For others, it can be a time of real joy with family and friends. Many who fall somewhere in between are making effort to find meaning and value in the celebration. For most Christians, it remains a celebration and commemoration of Jesus’ birth. And, a seminary scholar could write books describing all the many traditions and meanings of the occasion for each various segment of the Christian world. God bless them, but such scholarship is not for me.

“Rather, for me, as a once young, fervent Christian guy fresh out of college, and now as a Unificationist, Christmas has evolved in its meaning and value over the years. I used to treasure it as simply the day we commemorate Jesus’ birth, whether it was really the historical day or not. It was never just a day of gift-giving for me. And, I still love the caroling and nursing-home visits the best, as I did when I was younger. I have to confess – I always loved those kinds of things even more than celebrating with relatives.

“But now, I have come to realize that Christmas is a far bigger thing than simply celebrating and commemorating the birth of God’s long-awaited son, Jesus, which is amazing enough. In reality, the day Jesus was born marked a cosmic celebration and victory that is beyond the comprehension of humanity. The birth of Jesus was the fruit and culmination of literally millions of years of effort on God’s part to manifest a new Adam in the midst of fallen humanity. How much God went through, struggling to get fallen man to make the conditions through which He could give breath to a son not of Lucifer’s lineage.

“Achieving the landmark breakthroughs required sacrifices of so many key people in history, not to mention all the countless unsung heroes who filled the generations between them. History-making women risked their lives and sacrificed their dignity and everything else to promote God’s providential lineage and eventually give birth to a sinless son through Mary. Countless men had to defy social norms and stand strong in order to make the conditions needed to separate a lineage from Satan. None of them had any idea what they were doing at the time. They could not see themselves in the historical, providential context. So many wars were fought and so much innocent blood spilled, just to make possible the birth of this one special child. Jesus’ birth was a huge victory for the entire good spirit world. How much effort the angels had made to orchestrate a Providence with humans who did not have a clue what they were expected to do, nor why. The best ancestors of those providential figures worked equally hard to help in this task.

“And not only that, but all this was done in the context of the cosmic war between God and Lucifer and his cohorts. The war is a very real one, and has been very hot at times, especially around the years leading up to and including Jesus’ lifetime, as well as now with our True Parents. The war is raging hot. While the forces of darkness were instilling in Herod a desperation to kill the ‘newborn king’ before he could even walk, and pushing Mary and Joseph out into the night to give birth to Jesus in the most forlorn and unsanitary conditions possible, at the same time True Father, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, said that heaven was protecting the newborn Jesus and even nature was testifying to his arrival in the midnight sky. It was a cosmic event; a cosmic victory; a cosmic celebration in the midst of a cosmic war.

“For me, now, Christmas is a celebration and commemoration of God’s almost impossible victory in accomplishing the birth of one sinless son in one tiny corner of the world; but a son who could change the course of humanity forever, had he been received. Now I understand why Father said that God suffered more pain when Jesus was crucified than when Adam and Eve fell. Now I understand a little bit more, the precious value of God’s only begotten son. And, now I understand far more deeply, the priceless value of

True Parents, not only to God Himself, but to all the cosmos, and especially to me.

“Will humanity someday celebrate and commemorate the birth of our True Parents as it has the birth of Jesus? The very same immeasurable, historic and cosmic investment that God, the spirit world and humanity put into bringing about the birth of Jesus is soaked into the persons of True Parents. They are spiritually and historically the same. How can humanity in the future *not* celebrate and commemorate the birth of True Parents? Their celebration will make Christmas pale in comparison, and on a global scale. I may not live to see it in the flesh. But, without question, we will all join in celebrating it with our descendants, one day.”

### **Dr. Richard Panzer on Honoring the Life Work of True Parents**



“For me the approach of Christmas reminds me of my early teens. Even though I grew up in a Jewish agnostic home, for some reason I always felt close to Jesus. In college, I took many philosophy courses but none of my professors could help me to find answers to the questions I had. After graduation, I met members of the Unification Church whose Bible studies showed me a deeper understanding of Jesus’ life.

“I soon had the opportunity to hear sermons by Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who passed away in September at the age of 92. He spoke tearfully about Jesus’ lonely course, rejected by his own family and mocked by the religious leaders of the time. Rev. Moon testified that his own calling to ministry began with an encounter with Jesus at the tender age of 15.

“Rev. Moon dedicated his life to relieve the suffering heart of God and Jesus. He was imprisoned seven times, including nearly three years in a death camp in Hungnam, North Korea because other clergy complained to the Communist authorities about his ministry.

“Jesus’ parables compared God to a loving father. Rev. Moon elaborated on these themes, saying that since God is our parent, it is our responsibility, as mature sons and daughters, to inherit His concerns, and in so doing liberate God from His grief.

“Jesus taught that ‘the Kingdom of God is within you.’ Rev. Moon taught that the Kingdom of God would grow within ‘blessed marriages,’ unions in which husband and wife viewed each other as a personal gift from God. He said that their sexual organs were ‘holy places’ which encapsulated God’s love, life and lineage.

“The New Testament expresses skepticism about the value of the man-woman relationship for a person who wants to dedicate his/her life to God. In contrast, Rev. Moon’s ‘Completed Testament’ celebrates the committed love between husband and wife who are even said to be ‘second messiahs,’ and that without achieving this ‘four-position foundation’ of husband, wife and children centered upon God, people are omitting something centrally important to their relationship to God. He and his wife, Rev. Hak Ja Han Moon, represented their joint ministry as being ‘True Parents’ and invited others to join with them in becoming true parents as well.

“Despite his imprisonment and the opposition he received from other ministers, Rev. Moon worked for several decades to bring leaders of different denominations and faiths together. Although a staunch anti-Communist, one year before the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, he met with Secretary General Gorbachev and urged him to bring religious freedom to his country while offering to provide many kinds of assistance at this difficult time of transition in Russia. He also advocated the construction of an international peace highway that would encircle the world and devoted funds to help bring that about.

“His birthday on January 6th has a special meaning for those of us who believe that, many decades ago, he was called by Jesus to complete the work of establishing God’s Kingdom on earth. The world is still filled with inexplicable, tragic events and instances of human cruelty, but instead of cursing the darkness, as we approach the beginning of a new year, let’s honor and celebrate the births and lives of those who opened up new avenues for relating to our Heavenly Parent God, to ourselves and to each other.”