

Moon Sun-myung: son of the broken-hearted God

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Unification Church leader Rev. Moon Sun-myung speaks during his "Now is God's Time" rally in New York on June 25, 2011.

On a freezing night in December 1950 during the last refugee exodus from North Korea, a heretic Christian preacher named Moon Sun-myung stepped onto an iceflow and pushed out into the Imjin River.

When he reached the far side, U.S. and South Korean soldiers erecting barriers against North Korean and Chinese troops were suspicious of his shaved head. When he told them he was a minister and had just been released from a labor camp, they gave him and his two companions U.N.-issued gloves.

Besides these, Moon had no money, no food, no possessions, no place to go and no prospects. What he did have, however, was conviction and a remarkable ability to transform those around him. The other men, a North Korean army officer he had been in jail with, and a student, had walked with him from Pyongyang because they literally thought he was the messiah.

Within three years Moon would found his own new religion, popularly called the Unification Church, and would go on to convert hundreds of thousands of educated and mostly young people in Japan, America and Europe where they became known as Moonies. By 1975, he had sent missionaries worldwide, some of them to work underground in communist and Muslim countries.

He also went on to found an empire of businesses and organizations that served to protect his religion, further his views, and employ his followers. His South Korean conglomerate which included machine tools, auto parts, and soft drinks affiliates, was among the nation's top groups. His victory-over-communism organization had representation in almost every village. But most of the worldwide church

was supported by money from Japan, where the membership was the largest and most active.



The Rev. Moon Sun-myung and his wife take part in a mass wedding ceremony at the Sun Moon University — supported by the Unification Church — in Asan, South Chungcheong Province, in October 2009. / Korea Times

Moon was probably South Korea's first billionaire. This fact, — plus the myriad front organizations, his anti-communism, peculiar mass weddings, and the immodest demand that followers call he and his wife the “True Parents” — led to hysterical media coverage in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, Moon became one of the most detested figures in the popular imagination. Japan and most Western European countries put him on the same list as known terrorists and denied him entry.

In Korea, young people today are not familiar with his name but for a while he was the best known Korean in the world. It is this notoriety that justifies his inclusion in this series, rather than any actual influence, for his church remains relatively small. (As one Korean church leader noted ironically, its main contribution to religious unity was that it managed to unify Korean Christian denominations in their opposition to Moon.)

Peasant from North Korea

Moon Sun-myung was born in a farming family in 1920 near the town of Jeongju, in the northwestern part of North Korea. He was the second son of eight surviving children. Some relatives were Presbyterian Christians, including an uncle who was the minister of the village church (where Lee Myong-nyong, one of the 33 signatories to the March 1, 1919, independence declaration, was an elder). Moon's own family converted when he was 10, after his brother and a sister had been cured of mental problems by a faith healer.

A strongly built child who frequently got into fights with older boys, Moon took to the new religion with vigor and developed a vision that was grandiose even by the standard of teenage dreams. “I (prayed) for wisdom greater than Solomon, for faith greater than the Apostle Paul, and for love greater than the love Jesus had,” he once told an American audience.

At age 15, Moon had a numinous experience, typical of charismatic leaders; that changed his life. He says that, as he was praying one night on a hillside near his house, Jesus told him that God's heart was broken because of the pain of mankind and that he, Moon, was called to heal it and become the spiritual leader of

a reconciled world. (This has been Moon's explanation for his life's direction and he appears to have puzzled about it for the rest of his life. "Even now, at 90 years of age, I wonder every day why God called me," he wrote in his autobiography.)



The Rev. Moon Sun-myung, left, toasts with North Korean leader Kim Il-sung during a luncheon at Kim's palace in Hamheung, North Korea, in 1991. / Korea Times

Thus driven, some episodes in Moon's early life, including for example his wartime escape from North Korea, take on a quality of legend for his followers.

A few weeks after crossing the DMZ, Moon arrived in Busan, where he built a shack from flattened U.S. army drums and cardboard boxes and started preaching about how Korea would one day be a great nation and how God wanted religions to be united in order to rid the world of evil.

"I thought he was crazy," said Kwak No-pil, a Christian and an old school friend. The war had made Kwak doubt his childhood faith. He doubted God even existed. "You're asking the wrong question," Moon came back at him. "If you figure out why God exists, everything falls into place, including the fact of God's existence. Pondering God's existence by itself misses the point. The question is, does the relationship exist, the relationship between God and man."

Moon claims to have developed his theology over a nine-year period of prayer and discovery. Its root is Judeo-Christian, although Moon approaches the relationship with God as a filial Confucian son. His ideas depart from the Protestantism of his youth in three significant ways: first, his interpretation of the biblical "fall of man" is that mankind disobeyed God not by eating fruit, but through premature sexual relations; second Jesus Christ did not "come to die," as Christians believe, but that he was murdered before he could marry and have a sinless family as the foundation for a sinless world; and third, that Christ will not return in person, as Christians believe, but that another man and his family will complete the messianic business.

Are you the messiah?

This teaching points to Moon as the prophesied messiah. Moon, however, did not make any such public

claim until years later in the early 1990s when he told an audience of reporters and academics that he and his wife, Han Hak-ja, were the “True Parents of mankind.” He later held ceremonies, including one in the U.S. Capitol Building and the South Korean National Assembly crowning himself a “king of peace.”

Before this, though, he remained coy on the issue. In 1965, for example, on his first visit to the United States, a young American man asked him if he was the messiah. The two men were in a group just emerged from a session with a popular psychic who had said in a trance that Moon “bore the light for our age.”

“Yes I am,” he replied. “But so are you.” Then he pointed to each person seated around the table. “And so are you, and you, and you.”

The qualifier — “and so are all of you” — sheds light on the puzzle of how a farm boy from a country whose brand at the time was as low as it gets could attract so many people from the campuses and middle-class homes of advanced nations.

For decades, this question was largely sidestepped in any serious sense. Moon’s followers were dismissed with contempt or pity, dismissed as victims of brainwashing, a bizarre notion used to justify the widespread practice of kidnapping and forced “deprogramming” of members of unpopular sects for their own good. They were for the large part decent, educated and idealistic people transformed in Moon’s glow to believe they too were doing their messianic bit and saving the world.

Prison and pulpit

Moon has been jailed several times. The first was in Seoul during the Japanese period after his friend Kwak gave his name under torture. Moon was detained as a suspected communist, tortured and released after two months without charge. In communist Pyongyang before the Korean War he was reported to police and severely tortured before release. A year later, Moon was denounced to communist authorities by several Christian ministers whose church members had started attending his services. He was tried for “disturbing society” and sentenced to a labor camp in the east coast city of Hungnam. He had served just over two years when guards let prisoners go before advancing South Korean and U.N. forces.

In South Korea in the mid-1950s he was reported to police after several professors and students from the Methodist Ehwa Womans University joined his church. He was jailed, tried and found not guilty. His last jail time was an 18-month sentence in a prison in Connecticut in the United States where he was convicted for failing to pay taxes on church funds held in accounts in his name.

Moon gets by on little sleep — his followers believe that he sleeps about two hours a night. He speaks without notes and gives lengthy sermons, some of which last all day. Moon has little regard for protocol. Aides said in 1991 they feared for their lives during his only post-war visit to North Korea, when he gave a speech in a meeting room of the Supreme People’s Assembly saying that the country’s Juche ideology was empty nonsense and that North Korea should turn to God. (Moon also gave a speech calling for national unification which was brought to the attention of then leader Kim Il-sung who asked to meet him. Kim then approved some investments by Unification businesses.)

He has also suffered personal tragedies. Moon has been married three times (although the second relationship was never legalized) and has buried four of his 16 children.

Will the Unification Church survive?

In the early days of his ministry, Moon appeared to believe that Christian churches would somehow take

him seriously and respond to his appeal to unify the denominations. They didn't.

As this reality hit home, his movement began to experience difficulties. In the early 1990s, the Japanese Unification Church labored under a debt estimated by church insiders to be around \$2 billion. At the same time, his son and heir, Moon Hyo-jin, was exposed as an addict and wife-beater.

At this point, in the mid-1990s, the church turned to increasingly other-worldly matters. Moon started holding symbolic mass weddings using the names of millions of people around the world who had unwittingly signed petitions (and drunken "holy wine" or eaten "holy candies"). These were followed with mass weddings of people in the spiritual world. At the same time, a lady named Kim Hyo-nam started channeling messages from Moon's deceased mother-in-law and became the most powerful member of the church outside of Moon's own family.

In 2009, Moon appointed his youngest son Hyung-jin as the leader of the church, a move that alienated one of his older brothers, Hyun-jin, who had been considered the heir for several years. At this point of writing, the squabble between the brothers, which involves considerable assets, remains unresolved and is sapping the energies of a once-vigorous movement.

It would be an ironic conclusion if Moon, who turns 92 next month and who began with a vision of creating an ideal sinless family and unifying the world, were in his twilight years unable to effect reconciliation between his own sons.

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