

Reverend Moon's¹ Influence on Religion in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Frank Kaufmann², Director, Professors World Peace Academy-USA

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Abstract

Reverend Sun Myung Moon is a religious figure primarily, who simultaneously attained mastery in numerous fields of enterprise.³ His work purely in the field of religion included, 1. a personal path of religious practice and devotion, 2. refinement of a unique, complete religious teaching, 3. the formation, growth, education, and establishment of an international community of believers, and 4. the establishment of related religious organizations and institutions (tied to his person, his couple, and his teachings), 5. massive investment in religious and interfaith scholarship, and 6. unreserved interfaith activism. This paper touches superficially on some significant elements of this work with hope to spark interest, and trigger deeper research into these areas by readers and scholars.

¹ On usage

This paper uses the terms Reverend Moon, Reverend Sun Myung Moon, and Sun Myung Moon when referring to him and his work. Use of these terms presumes shared purpose, and perhaps shared burdens from wife, Han, Hak Ja. Since Reverend Moon's passing in 2012, Unification believers refer to 1. the work of Sun Myung Moon, 2. the work of Reverend and Mrs. Moon together, and 3. the work of Han, Hak Ja all as "the work of True Parents," without distinction.

For example, before 2012 a Unification believer might write: "Reverend Moon spoke at the Assembly of the World's Religions." After 2012 Unification believers write "True Parents spoke at the Assembly of the World's Religions."

This paper uses pre-2012 conventions and usage trusting concerned readers will find all requisite respect and honor for the shared sacrifice, concern, investment, and dedication of Han, Hak Ja in the work described.

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³ "Q [Newsweek]. *You are a millionaire businessman, you live in a \$625,000 house, you have yachts at your disposal and so on. Why do you have this financial empire?*

A. [Reverend Moon] *God has been very good to me. But I am not a millionaire businessman. I am a religious leader,*"

Interview, *Newsweek International*, June 14, 1976

Religious Roots

Reverend Moon, as stated in the abstract, was a religious leader despite remarkable achievements in a great many challenging fields such as media, science, commerce, and much else. Independently of this fact, Reverend Moon exerted an outsized impact on religion in our time.

These two considerations are not bound by necessity. It is possible that people not remotely interested in religion can have a major impact on religion, think of Stalin, or the founder of MTV, for example. Conversely, there are plenty of people whose primary identity as religious leaders sadly have no impact on religion. Imagine a lazy pastor appointed by her denomination to a large suburban congregation who ends up having little or no religious impact on anyone.

This inquiry examines the coincidence that 1. Reverend Moon is a religious leader, and 2. Reverend Moon had a major impact on religion in our time.

A proper inquiry into the fact that Reverend Moon is a religious leader primarily (despite remarkable achievements in many non-religious arenas and professions), requires interest in the facts of Reverend Moon's own religious life. What are the origins of his faith? What does he believe? What does he teach?

External answers to these are widely known. Reverend Moon speaks of his early religious experiences in his autobiography, *As a Peace Loving Citizen*. Here is a part of his testimony that is familiar to many:

It was the night before Easter in the year I turned sixteen. I was on Mount Myodu praying all night and begging God in tears for answers. Why had He created a world so filled with sorrow and despair? Why was the all-knowing and all-powerful God leaving the world in such pain? What should I do for my tragic homeland? I wept in tears as I asked these questions repeatedly.

Early Easter morning, after I had spent the entire night in prayer, Jesus appeared before me. He appeared in an instant, like a gust of wind, and said to me, "God is in great sorrow because of the pain of humankind. You must take on a special mission on earth having to do with Heaven's work."⁴

Here Reverend Moon describes his own concerns, his behavior that arose from these concerns, and finally an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. His claim to have been visited by Jesus is not

⁴ *As a Peace Loving Citizen*, p 59
<https://www.tparents.org/Moon-Books/PLGC-SunMyungMoon-091101.pdf>

unusual. The *magnitude* of his “calling” from Jesus however, is likely quite large compared to that of normal believers. The basic building blocks of the narrative however, are quite common. Many describe similar experiences at the root of their lives of faith: Praying intensely for answers while in existential anguish, and receiving in response a personal visitation from the risen Lord Jesus. This is not unusual.

This passionate quest, and this personal spiritual experience of Reverend Moon, put this teen lad on a nine year quest of life and spiritual activities, which also are widely known, especially to people strongly interested in Reverend Moon’s life.

A few pages later in his autobiography, he writes of yet another powerful spiritual experience, this time one that came after having lived through nine years of intense prayer, study, and spiritual quest and devotion. On page 76 of his autobiography he writes:

Nine years after my encounter with Jesus, my eyes had finally been opened to the true love of God.⁵

These types of personal accounts are helpful as windows into the nature of Reverend Moon’s personal spirituality. These are the bases that eventually resulted in him rendering complete and systematic teachings, and through these teachings founding and maintaining a growing community of believers in the Unification family.

Elements worthy of note when seeking to grasp the essential nature of Reverend Moon’s spirituality include these:

1. As a boy Reverend Moon brought a particular, personal obsession to his spiritual quest, namely an overwhelming and unquenchable despair and pain over the fact of human suffering.
2. His upbringing was such that prayer in a Christain style was the vehicle through which he sought to resolve this passion.
3. He traces his calling as communication from God mediated through the risen Lord Jesus of Nazareth,
4. This “divine intervention” into his life (mediated through Lord Jesus), in turn returned him to personal investment and labors (9 years of passionate, spiritual (and practical) research)
5. The combination of his call (request from God through Jesus) *and* his response and exercise of his own devotion and dedication, brought him to the point where he was able

⁵ *As a Peace Loving Citizen* p. 78
<https://www.tparents.org/Moon-Books/PLGC-SunMyungMoon-091101.pdf>

to systematize and organize teachings about which he was sure was the truth confirmed by God⁶, and to the point where he was confident in his personal spiritual authority, also confirmed by God.⁷

From this we can see that Reverend Moon's personal religious behavior is cyclical: His own nature attracted God. God's call draws out his response. His response further attracts God. This cycle continues with ever greater intensity, producing ever greater intimacy. This revolving circle could be seen metaphorically like a mainspring that informs the essence and animates the expansion of Unification life in those whom God awakens.

Religious Elements of the Unification Mission

How then has this man, with this sort of religious identity, history, and make-up influenced religion in our time? This has happened in at least four ways. A brief look at these four areas is the subject matter of this introductory paper. The ways are these:

1. The creation of a **complete theology** accounting for all of reality
2. The founding, supporting and growing of a **religious community**
 - a. 10s or 100s of thousands of people who follow a sacrificial, religious and spiritual regimen in penance, self examination, and daily striving aimed at personal improvement, marital fidelity, virtuous child-rearing, and wholesome and responsible relationship with earth's environment and resources
 - b. Believers serve peace and humanitarian causes locally and internationally
3. Creation of **Multi-Religious Theological Institutions**
4. Creation of **activist interfaith organizations** dedicated to solve the persistent and intransigent evil of religious conflict and discord

⁶ Beginning on May 11, 1954, Reverend Moon, wrote the *Wolli Wonbon*, the original text of the *Divine Principle*. *Chambumo Gyeong*, p. 2

<https://www.tparents.org/Moon-Books/ChambumoGyeong/ChambumoGyeong-03.pdf>, p.

⁷ On July 20, 1953, he sent Gang Hyeon-sil to Daegu as the first missionary. This was the first time *the Divine Principle* was taught publicly.

<https://www.tparents.org/Moon-Books/ChambumoGyeong/ChambumoGyeong-03.pdf>

I. Emergence, Education, Organization, and Care of the Unification Faith Community

This work by Reverend Moon includes,

1. Penning and refining the *Divine Principle* as the guiding scripture for his community,
2. Designing the sacrament of “Blessing” as the means by which God enters into eternal participation, and commits to intimacy and protective care over families moved to receive this Blessing.
3. Creating and implementing an ecclesiology and management of the international Unification community based on applying *Divine Principle* tenets.
4. Creating education and participation programs and institutions to help Unification families maintain and grow their spiritual lives, and their marriages and families.
5. Founding and growing missions and local Unification worshipping and serving communities

Inquiry into the impact of Unification “Blessed Families” on society, culture, politics, and earth’s environment is a scholarly work yet to be taken up in earnest. As these families grow, and as their children grow and raise families of their own applying Unification culture and traditions, their impact on schools, universities, media, and communities in which they settle will increasingly become the subject of academic inquiry.

Additionally, the impact of the theological system also represents a fertile arena for analysis and investigation. In 1981, preeminent, religion scholars already identified *Divine Principle* and Unification teachings as an important object of theological inquiry.

In the introduction to *Ten Theologians Respond to the Unification Church*, Herb Richardson wrote:

The purpose of the Unification Church [is] to unify Christianity as a basis and example for establishing unity among the religions of the world. The image of this unity, we propose, is that of one family of religions. Within this family, the differences among religions are not destroyed. Rather, within this family, religions learn to respect and cooperate with one another in a natural way.⁸

The significance of establishing an active and growing religious community in every nation on earth, based on teachings that are multi-religious doctrinally is new in history. It will continue to impact world affairs, and attract serious, scholarly investigation.

⁸ *Ten Theologians Respond to the Unification Church*, edited by Herbert Richardson, Rose of Sharon Press, New York, NY, 1981

II. Creation of Multi-Religious Theological Institutions

The first and most important point to note in this section on Multi-Religious Theological Institutions is that these are not work the community does because it is a good idea. It happens because it is the inevitable, natural expression of doing what a Unificationist does. It is nothing more than living according to the teachings of the *Divine Principle*. (This same fact also holds true for the next section on activist, interfaith organizations.)

Reverend Moon entered the United States December 18, 1971.⁹ Much of what is attributed to Reverend Moon's ecumenical and interfaith investment (delineated below) cites work from that year forward. But this habit of chronologists is misleading, and can yield an inaccurate grasp of Unification, interreligious efforts.

Though the historical record prior to 1971 is less accessible, it remains the case that ecumenism and interfaith were commitments, actively pursued by Reverend Moon from the earliest moments of his ministry. The *Divine Principle* and the teachings of Reverend Moon are ecumenical and interfaith in their dna and identity.¹⁰ As such, if a Unification community comes to exist at all, then given the *Principle*, it must by its very nature found itself as a multifaith (ecumenical) organization, and not a sectarian or denominational body. This is why the institution founded by Reverend Moon through which he carried out the central most elements of this life's work was an ecumenical organization, The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity.¹¹ He later expanded this natural, multi-religious expression of his faith beyond seeking mere Christian unity, to become the Family Federation for World Peace,¹² making his core work a mission dedicated now to unity among all religions on earth, and even to include non-believers.

The earliest efforts of this fledgling group of volunteers that were organized as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity was the serious and substantial investment in interfaith and ecumenical work that began already as early as 1965.¹³

⁹ *Way of the World*, January, 1972

¹⁰ *Exposition of the Divine Principle*, "The Unification of Religions through Returning Resurrection" pp. 130-133

¹¹ May 1, 1954, <http://familyfed.org/news-story/twih/63-years-since-founding-hsa-uwc-36764/>

¹² January 5, 1994

¹³ A ceremony marking the foundation of the Inter-Denominational Christian Association was held on November 7, 1966, at A-seo-won, in Jung district of Seoul. This was the result of the Christianity-based interdenominational activities that had been held since 1965.

<https://history.familyfed.org/november-1/#estIDCA>

This work, begun in post-war Korea, continued identically as Reverend Moon expanded his mission internationally.

Reverend and Mrs. Moon came to the United States with their family in 1971. By 1974, just a short time later, Reverend Moon acquired St. Joseph's Normal Institute, a novitiate and high school in Barrytown, New York, run by the Christian Brothers, a Roman Catholic lay order. In less than two years from the time of this purchase, Reverend Moon dedicated this property to founding the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS), hiring faculty with a makeup unprecedented in the history of theological, higher education. Founding this school became the springboard of world ecumenical theology and activity that fundamentally changed the landscape of religious scholarship in our time.

Organizations and events arose steadily and abundantly from the fertile soil of UTS's first faculty. The founding faculty included professors from Methodist, Reformed, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Jewish faiths. Within two years of its founding, ecumenical conferences were being hosted on campus that attracted scholars and religious leaders from a broad range of denominational backgrounds.¹⁴

The roster of distinguished scholars who visited UTS in the late 1970s and early 1980s for programs included: Harvey Cox of Harvard University, Lonnie Kleiver of Southern Methodist University, Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein, Martin Rumscheidt, President of the Karl Barth Society, Father John Meehen, President of Maryknoll Seminary, religious educator James Michael Lee, biblical scholar Simon De Vries of the Methodist Theological School, psychologist Albert Ellis, folklorist Morton Smith from Columbia University, Augustine scholar Ernest Fortin from Boston College, Theodor Gaster from Barnard College, church historian Robert Handy from Union Theological Seminary, National Review editor William Rusher, Buddhist scholar David Kalupahana from the University of Hawaii, Islamic scholar and martyr Isma'il al-Faruqi from Temple University, the Hassidic singing rabbi Schlomo Carlebach, and many more.

Building on these early conferences, interfaith initiatives were organized at UTS, including the Global Congress of the World's Religions (1977) and the Youth Seminar on the World's Religions (1982). The most important of these was the New Ecumenical Research Association (New ERA), begun in 1979 and guided by then UTS librarian John Maniatis. New ERA developed as an interfaith community of theologians, guided by an interfaith board. Its conferences brought together hundreds of religious scholars for wide-ranging discussions and to study Unification theology.¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://www.uts.edu/about-uts/history>

¹⁵ <https://www.uts.edu/about-uts/history>

New ERA scholars created dozens of volumes of serious theological inquiry. Perhaps most notable is what came to be dubbed “The God Series” (formally, The Series on God the Contemporary Discussion), producing 10 pathbreaking volumes, with contributions by tens of world-established thinkers and writers, between 1982 - 1989.¹⁶

The record of this remarkable torrent of strong scholarship is known. What often is missed however, is the context in which the “God Conferences,” and the “God Series” transpired. This work began during the declining and decaying theological and intellectual environment stemming from fascination with, and the ascendancy of the “Death of God,” a theological movement and weave of trends that had overtaken the Western theological academy, and by extension Western Culture.¹⁷

The best known of these proponents was Thomas J. J. Altizer, then a professor of religion at Emory University in Atlanta. The controversy reflected many of the broader cultural and political changes in American society often associated with that decade. "We must realize that the death of God is an historical event, that God has died in our cosmos, in our history, in our [existence]," Altizer claimed. His frequently provocative manner of speaking, which masked a more complex discussion taking place among academic theologians,¹⁸

The depth and power of this disruptive and degenerative challenge to constructive, faith-supporting theological efforts, lay not just in its catchy insinuation of Neitzche, but far more powerfully in its powerful challenge to the possibility of referential language. That Reverend Moon could mount an effective challenge to this dark, intellectual direction is one of the little known wonders of his life’s contribution.

This unknown and obviously not acknowledged impact on intellectual life and the humanities (especially in the Western academy) closely matches his very famous labors that challenged materialist and militant atheist philosophies. A story well known in many accounts, including the inspiring Kaplan testimony about the 1985 conference on the Fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁹

¹⁶ https://www.irfwp.org/library/full_list.shtml

¹⁷ <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/god-dead-controversy>

¹⁸ "God Is Dead" Controversy

Original entry by Patrick Gray, Rhodes College, Memphis, Tennessee, 04/01/2003

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<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/god-dead-controversy>

¹⁹ http://reverendsunmyungmoon.org/testimony_Morton_Kaplan.html

In 2002, Hernan Lopez-Garay, wrote an incisive essay entitled, *Rescuing Intellectuals from Extinction*. In it he wrote:

Intellectuals -- a cultural invention of the West -- are not anymore characters in good standing. Their influence in determining society's course has declined; politicians and businessmen have become the dominant characters....

In light of this historical context, Reverend Moon's determination to rescue intellectuals from oblivion and prevent their further extinction is puzzling. Very few people in this post-modern world would be willing to rescue intellectuals from their political decline and give their activities not only strong spiritual and economic support but also the real opportunity of playing a transcendental role in their communities and the world stage. Yet this is what I have seen [Reverend Moon] doing... Why does he take the time and effort?²⁰

Testimonies as eloquent and incisive as this abound. Sadly, they are not widely known, even among Unification members.

Who when hearing the name Reverend Moon immediately and naturally associates the name with the renewal of Western and global intellectual life?

The range and scope of Reverend Moon's impact on the theological academy in its own right thanks to his unconditional support for religion scholars, and for God-affirming, religious-harmony-driven theological environments and work product is not widely known. But eventually this fact naturally will become a major point of inquiry among scholars serious to understand influences on Christian and world-religious theology in our era.

III. Creating Activist, Interfaith Organizations

The third and final area in which I continue this light touch on Reverend Moon's impact on religion in our time, introduces the historically unprecedented torrent of investment into interfaith reconciliation, harmony, and cooperation.

As mentioned above, the first and most important matter to note vis a vis Reverend Moon's extreme investment in interfaith, is that this was not an "also" in his work for good. It was not a tactical or strategic recognition or calculation as a requisite for realizing his goal of peace. As

²⁰ *The Hope of all ages, a Unified World of Peace*, Interreligious and International Foundation for World Peace, Tarrytown, NY, 2002

mentioned earlier, interfaith is intrinsic to Unification teachings and theology. Reverend Moon's immeasurable work in the area of interfaith is theological, it is natural, normal. Not doing it would be akin to a firefighter refusing to be present in areas of high temperature. Work to harmonize religions is the second restorative work of God. Reverend Moon did *not* "support interfaith activity," or "found interfaith organizations." He carried out the Will of God.

The second half of the *Divine Principle* is a 148 page section dedicated to principles of restoration. These are the inexorable and inviolable rules by which things are repaired, reestablished, and brought fully back into a renewed and originally functioning condition and order. These rules and guidelines, according to Reverend Moon and Unification belief are God's own rules, arising out of love, and instituted the moment God's original plans for creation were foiled by the misuse of free will (that was requisite for the fullness of love).

Part of these principles needed to repair broken things, includes an ongoing process called "returning resurrection."²¹ The *Divine Principle* section on "returning resurrection" explains the key dynamics and energies that contribute to religious violence and conflict, and further explains the means by which these tragic realities can be dissolved and replaced by loving harmony in the world family of religions. Reverend Moon's interfaith work combines two restoration processes delineated in the *Divine Principle*,

1. The two-part "foundation to receive the Messiah," ("foundation of faith," and "foundation of substance")²²
2. The process of "returning resurrection."

According to the *Divine Principle* and all Unification teachings, implementing these restoration principles is "the Will of God." It is something Reverend Moon faithfully sought to carry out. For him it is like breathing. His obedience to "the Will of God" on this particular matter of investing in interfaith harmony began instantly as Reverend Moon started his mission. Furthermore, it continued carefully, systematically, and without interruption throughout all the days of his life until he breathed his last.

Interfaith work began with the penning of *Wolli Wonbon* (within months of his release from Heungnam Prison), in which Reverend Moon explains exactly how interfaith is rooted in the Divine Will.²³ Within two years of beginning this ministry as a war refugee, Reverend Moon, based on these teachings founded a Christian Ecumenical organization as the main institution

²¹ *Exposition of the Divine Principle*, pp 130 - 133

²² *Exposition of the Divine Principle*, pp 150 - 153

²³ <https://history.familyfed.org/chronology/#1950s>

through which he would carry out his mission, *The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (HSA-UWC)*.²⁴

From these earliest moments close to seventy years ago, Reverend Moon maintained a level of passionate dedication, investment, and personal involvement in the mission of interfaith reconciliation, harmony, and cooperation that was unrivaled in his time, and unprecedented in history.

Mrs. Moon explained in her 2002 speech “A Model of Absolute Faith,”

My husband and I have founded numerous organizations ... to bring about dialogue and harmony among different religions during the past 40 years, we have invested more than ten times the budget of our own Unification Church. We support this interdenominational and interreligious movement because we know it is the Will of God.²⁵

Investment of this magnitude produced events, organizations, publications, outcomes, and global influence close to encyclopedic in scope. To enumerate them even merely by name fills 10s of pages (unfortunately beyond the scope of this brief paper).

While it is important to note the volume of these results, and perhaps more importantly the tangible record of known outcomes and positive influence for peace over world affairs through this work, it is the interest of this writer however, to argue that the single most important thing to note about Reverend Moon’s lifelong support for interfaith is not the volume of activity or achievements, but rather that it is required by the premises of his theology. Reverend Moon’s interfaith commitment and activity is guided by the principles delineated in his teachings, and is pursued and expanded systematically according to the dictates and norms inherent in his theology.

The reason Reverend Moon’s interfaith work reached such immense levels of influence and far ranging engagement among the world’s most powerful leaders and thinkers was not because he spent a lot, nor was it because an ever growing number of people came to be drawn to Reverend Moon’s (or “True Parents’s”) charisma.

The growth and influence of Reverend Moon’s interfaith efforts, and the fond love found among his fellow travelers in this work is because the work flowed from his teaching and life that God is the founder and main agent of interfaith work. Additionally, together with this bond and

²⁴ May 1, 1954 <https://history.familyfed.org/chronology/#1950s>

²⁵ “A Model of Absolute Faith,” given at the 2002 World Culture and Sports Festival and General Assembly of the Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace, February 15, 2002, Seoul.

rootedness in God, the work reliably implements rigorous application of clear, easily accessible teachings and principles. This made Reverend Moon's interfaith work not one that "he led," but rather a work that people and leaders of all religions *shared*. Its bond to God and to a transparent and openly available teaching, allowed people of all religions and of good will to join ranks and work toward these shared desires and values with energy, and without compromise.

Conclusion and Summary

In this brief introductory account, I offered thoughts on four areas through which Reverend Moon influenced the world of religion in our time.

1. His teaching (and embodying his teaching)
2. The establishment of a faith community built on this teaching
3. His investment in the theological and religious academy
4. His investment in interfaith activism, and improved relations among religions and believers

The work of this paper is cursory and introductory, but sufficient to argue the primary points I wish to offer. I argue that in order to understand Reverend Moon and his impact on religion it is important to investigate humbly and rigorously

1. What he is like as a religious person
2. The ways in which his work faithfully manifests his religious teaching, understanding, and commitments