FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Sang Hun Lee on Materialism Can't Explain Love

Knut Holdhus
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The love that materialism failed to explain. Illustration: ChatGPT, October 2026.



Sang-hun Lee (1914-1997)

From materialism to Godism: How the mystery of love points beyond materialism toward a deeper understanding of life

Continued from part 1: When the Promise of Equality Turns to Control

Continued in part 3: Can Revolution Change Human Nature?

Lee Sang-heon (이상헌 - also romanized as Sang Hun Lee) questioned whether class solidarity could account for the love, conscience, and self-sacrifice that lead people to put others before themselves.

What makes a person willing to sacrifice their life for someone else? Why do people sometimes choose to do what is right even when nobody will reward them, or when doing so places their own safety at risk? And where does the love come from that enables people to care for others beyond their immediate interests?

For Lee Sang-heon (1914 - 1997), a South Korean physician and philosopher who developed Unification Thought (통일사상) [See editor's note 1 below], such questions eventually became central to his reassessment of communism. Having once believed that communism offered a path toward national independence and human liberation, he began to question whether its philosophical foundations could explain the very qualities that had motivated his own commitment.

In the second installment of its series Communism Without God, published on 15th October 2026, Segye Ilbo religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) examines Lee's reflections on the relationship between materialism and human love.

Lee's doubts emerged from a personal question. What was the source of the love for his nation and humanity that had inspired him, and of the willingness to endure hardship for the sake of his comrades? Both the independence movement [See editor's note 2 below] and the communist movement, he recognized, had appealed to people partly because they promised a better future for others. Yet the origins

of this commitment seemed difficult to explain through the materialist philosophy underpinning communism.

세계일보

Segye Ilbo, one of the top 10 comprehensive daily newspapers in South Korea



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

Materialism holds that matter, rather than spirit or a divine being, constitutes the fundamental reality of the universe. Human consciousness and ideas are understood as products of material conditions. Within the communist tradition, this perspective was closely connected to an analysis of economic structures, class relations, and the exploitation of workers.

As Jeong explains, communism did not lack a concern for human suffering. Karl Marx's criticism of capitalism was driven in part by the conviction that economic systems could alienate people from their labor and from one another. Under capitalism, labor becomes a commodity, while relationships between human beings can be reduced to transactions governed by money.

This critique identified genuine problems. Nevertheless, Lee wanted to go beyond asking how exploitation arose. He wanted to understand why people were capable of love and sacrifice in the first place.

If human beings were fundamentally material entities and the mind merely a secondary product of matter, Lee reasoned, then conscience and love would also have to be explained as products of material circumstances. But could such an explanation adequately account for moral choices that appeared to transcend personal advantage?

Consider parents who risk their lives to protect their children, strangers who rush into danger to rescue someone they have never met, or individuals who forgive those who have harmed them. These actions may involve emotional, social, or psychological factors, but they are not easily explained by the pursuit of material gain.



Young activist carrying banner with old-style communist slogan of solidarity between workers and students for leftwing causes. From demonstration at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee March 14, 2011

Nor, Lee believed, could class solidarity provide a complete answer.

Workers may unite because they share economic interests and face common conditions. Their cooperation can be understood as a collective effort to improve their position in relation to employers and capital owners. Such solidarity can be powerful and meaningful, but it does not necessarily explain love that extends beyond one's own group.

When solidarity is defined primarily by class, the distinction between those who belong to the group and those who oppose it can become morally decisive. Affection for workers may be accompanied by hostility toward capitalists, while revolutionary objectives may be used to justify the removal of perceived enemies.

This creates a fundamental contradiction for an ideology that claims to seek the liberation of all humanity. How can a movement establish a society for everyone if its understanding of solidarity encourages people to divide the world into allies and adversaries?

Lee concluded that class-based love could not encompass every human being. Universal love, in his view, had to extend beyond shared economic circumstances and political allegiance.

His concern also extended to the question of what happens after a revolution succeeds. Even if private property is abolished and relations of production are fundamentally transformed, what guarantees that people will cease to seek power over others?

Changing economic arrangements may alter incentives and redistribute resources, but it does not

automatically eliminate selfishness, the desire for domination, or the impulse to control others. A society can remove one group of exploiters only to see another emerge if the people exercising authority remain motivated by greed and resentment.



A communist state seizing and nationalizing private property from farmer family perceived to belong to the "capitalist class". Illustration: Grok xAI

This was particularly significant for Lee because his criticism did not stem from indifference to poverty or exploitation. On the contrary, he wanted to understand why an ideology committed to overcoming these injustices could nevertheless produce new forms of oppression.

The problem, as he saw it, was that changing external conditions did not fully explain the inner life of human beings. The desire to help others, the willingness to sacrifice personal interests, and the capacity to act according to conscience called for a deeper account of human nature.

Lee's search therefore moved beyond the question of how society should distribute wealth and organize production. He began asking whether love itself might be more fundamental than materialism allowed.

If love is an essential dimension of human existence rather than merely an accidental product of circumstances, then understanding humanity requires an account of its deeper origins. For Lee, this question would ultimately lead toward religion and the possibility that human love reflects a source beyond matter.

Based on an article by Jeong Seong-su (정성수) in the South Korean daily Segye Ilbo, 15th October 2026, "The Love Materialism Failed to Explain", the second installment of the series "Communism Without God".

Continued from part 1: When the Promise of Equality Turns to Control

Continued in part 3: Can Revolution Change Human Nature?

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note 1: Unification Thought is a philosophical system developed by Sang Hun Lee (이상헌 - 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.



The latest version of Unification Thought: New Essentials of Unification Thought, published in 2006

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: The Korean independence movement (독립운동, Dongnip Undong) was a broad struggle to free Korea from Japanese colonial rule, which lasted from 1910 to 1945. It encompassed peaceful protests, diplomatic efforts, cultural preservation, education, and armed resistance, involving Koreans both on the peninsula and throughout East Asia.

Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910, ending the Korean Empire. The colonial government imposed strict political control while promoting the assimilation of Koreans into Japanese society. Many Koreans resisted these policies by establishing schools, newspapers, and religious organizations that sought to preserve Korean language, culture, and national identity.

> A defining moment came on 1st March 1919, when Korean leaders issued a Declaration of Independence, inspiring peaceful demonstrations across the country. Millions participated in what became known as the March First Movement (3·1 운동). Although the protests were largely nonviolent, Japanese authorities responded with severe repression, killing and imprisoning thousands of participants. Despite its immediate failure to achieve independence, the movement attracted international attention and strengthened Korean nationalism.
>
> Following the March First Movement, Korean leaders established the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai, China. It coordinated diplomatic efforts and supported resistance activities abroad. At the same time, armed independence fighters operated in Manchuria, Siberia, and parts of China, engaging Japanese forces in a series of guerrilla campaigns. Korean independence activists also cooperated with Chinese nationalist forces and, later, with the Allied powers during the Second World War.
>
> Japan's defeat in August 1945 brought an end to colonial rule. However, Korea was divided along the 38th parallel, with Soviet forces occupying the north and American forces the south. This temporary division eventually led to the establishment of two separate states in 1948 - the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) - making the legacy of the independence movement central to the historical identity of both countries.]

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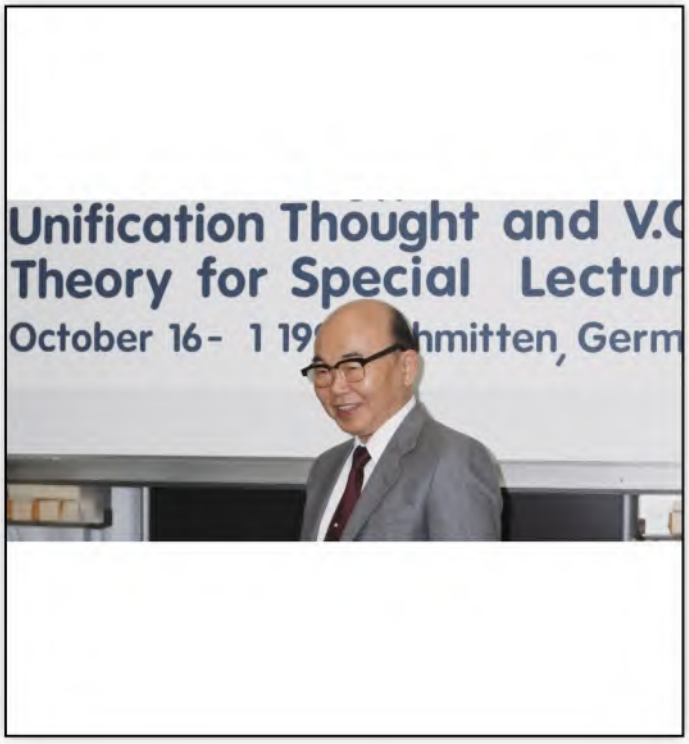
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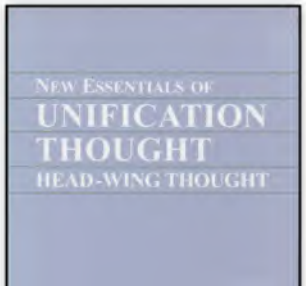
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The latest version of Unification Thought: New Essentials of Unification Thought, published in 2006.

A new series examines why an ideology that promised equality and freedom ultimately produced systems of oppression, and explores the search by Lee Sang-heon (이상헌 – also romanized as Sang Hun Lee) for a deeper foundation for human dignity.

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Communism was one of the most influential political and philosophical movements of the 20th century. It attracted millions of people with the promise of overcoming exploitation, abolishing class divisions, and creating a society in which everyone could enjoy freedom and material prosperity. For many of its adherents, communism represented not merely a political program but a path toward the liberation of humanity.

Yet the historical outcome often contradicted those aspirations. Communist regimes concentrated power in the hands of the state and ruling parties, restricted individual freedoms, and subjected entire populations to political control. In North Korea, the concentration of authority went so far that the country's leader came to occupy an almost absolute position, surrounded by an extensive cult of personality.

How could an ideology dedicated to human liberation lead to such outcomes? And what did its philosophical foundations overlook?



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): Segye Ilbo

These questions lie at the heart of Communism Without God: Lee Sang-heon's Intellectual Journey and the Path to Human Liberation, a series published by the South Korean newspaper *Segye Ilbo*. In the second installment, published on 15th October 2026, religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) explores the relationship between materialism, human nature, and the origins of love.

The logo of the Segye Ilbo, one of the top 10 comprehensive daily newspapers in South Korea.

The series draws on the lectures, writings, academic papers, and testimonies of Lee Sang-heon (1914–1997), a physician and philosopher who developed *Unification Thought* (통일사상) [See editor's note 1 below]. Lee had once embraced the communist movement, believing it offered a way to achieve both national independence and human liberation. His subsequent intellectual journey led him to question whether communism's materialist understanding of humanity could adequately explain the qualities that make human life meaningful.

For Lee, the fundamental problem was not simply that communist governments had made political and economic mistakes. He traced a deeper difficulty to the philosophical denial of God. In his view, God was not merely an object of religious devotion but the ultimate source of human existence, the foundation of love and conscience, and the basis of a human dignity that no government or political party should be permitted to violate.

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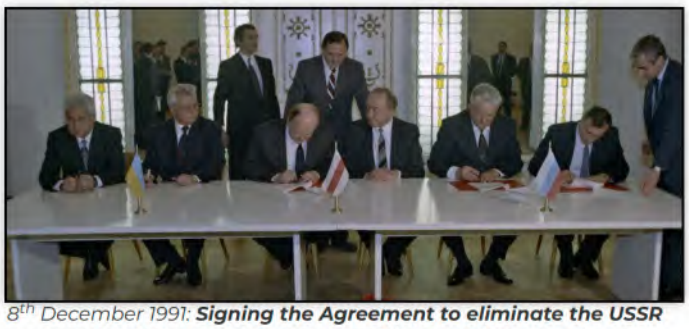
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By reducing human beings to material conditions and class relationships, Lee argued, materialism overlooked an essential dimension of human nature. An ideology might promise to liberate people from external oppression, but if it failed to understand the foundations of conscience, love, and moral responsibility, it could also fail to protect them from new forms of domination.



8th December 1991: ***Signing the Agreement to eliminate the USSR and establish the Commonwealth of Independent States.*** *Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk (second from left seated), Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus Stanislav Shushkevich (third from left seated) and Russian President Boris Yeltsin (second from right seated) during the signing ceremony to eliminate the USSR and establish the Commonwealth of Independent States. Viskuly Government House in the Belorusian National Park "Belovezhskaya Forest". Photo: RIA Novosti archive, image #848095 / U. Ivanov / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp. Cropped*

The historical collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 appeared to mark the end of an era. Nevertheless, communist or communist-derived one-party systems continue to govern countries including China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, and Cuba. Meanwhile, economic inequality and social alienation remain serious concerns even in liberal democratic societies.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to declare communism a failed experiment and move on. Inequality, poverty, and exploitation cannot be dismissed merely because communist solutions have often proved oppressive. At the same time, addressing these problems by treating entire social classes as enemies or granting excessive power to the state risks reproducing the very restrictions on freedom that human liberation was supposed to overcome.

The series seeks to examine this dilemma without limiting itself to a retrospective critique of communism. It considers how the movement emerged, why it appealed to so many people, and how its original promises became associated with coercion and repression. It also introduces *Unification Thought* (통일사상) [See editor's note 1 below] as an alternative developed by Lee, emphasizing the relationship between human freedom, dignity, responsibility, and love.

A central concept in this alternative is Godism (하나님주의) [See editor's note 2 below]: the idea that a sound social order must recognize God as the source of human existence and establish relationships grounded in love and conscience rather than power and self-interest.

From this perspective, genuine liberation requires more than changing political institutions or economic arrangements. It also requires a transformation in how people understand themselves and relate to others. A society cannot secure lasting freedom simply by replacing one ruling group with another if the underlying desires for domination and control remain unchanged.

The series thus raises a question extending beyond communism itself: What philosophical foundation can support a society that protects individual freedom while also confronting inequality and encouraging responsibility toward others?

The intellectual journey of Lee Sang-heon (이상헌 – also Romanized as

Sang Hun Lee) offers one proposed answer. By reconsidering the relationship between God, human nature, and social organization, the series invites readers to examine whether the pursuit of a more humane world requires not only institutional reform but also a deeper understanding of the origins of love and human dignity.

Based on the article of Jeong Seong-su (정성수) in Segye Ilbo, 15th October 2026, the second installment of the series "Communism Without God"

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***Text**: Knut Holdhus, editor*

***Featured image** above: Dr. Lee Sang-heon (이상헌 – also romanized as Sang Hun Lee – 1914–1997), a South Korean physician and philosopher who developed Unification Thought (통일사상) [See editor's note 1 below], here at a seminar in Schmitten, Hessen, Germany in October 1991. Photo: FFWPU, improved resolution by Grok xAI, October 2026.*

[***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.

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[***Editor's note 2***: **"Godism"** (하나님주의) is one of the central philosophical and theological ideas associated with Sun Myung Moon (문선명) and the Unification movement. 하나님 (Hananim) = "God" (the personal, loving Creator). 주의 (主義) = "-ism" or "principle/ideology". So 하나님주의 (Godism) literally means "ideology centered on God".

Sun Myung Moon presented Godism as a third ideological alternative to capitalism and communism, especially during the Cold War. It was meant to be a moral and spiritual worldview that could reconcile left and right, transcending materialistic and human-centered ideologies.
This is closely connected with his idea of Head-Wing Thought (두익사상) [See editor's note 3 below] – where Godism serves as the *core spiritual content*, and Head-Wing Thought serves as the *social-political application*.

The core principles of Godism:

- God-centered humanism – Humanity's ultimate purpose is not self-centered fulfillment but living for the sake of others, reflecting God's heart of love.
- Dual purpose of life – Each individual exists both for personal perfection (becoming one with God in love) and for the good of others (family, society, and the world).
- Family as the school of love – True love begins in the family and expands to all levels of human relationships, reflecting God's parental heart.
- Unity of science and religion – Godism seeks to harmonize spiritual truth and scientific understanding under a divine purpose.
- Overcoming ideological conflict – By centering politics and economics on God's love, Godism proposes peace through moral renewal, not domination or class struggle.]

[***Editor's note 3*: Head-wing thought** (두익사상 – 頭翼思想) is a concept coined by Sun Myung Moon. 두 (頭) = "head", 익 (翼) = "wing", 사상 (思想) = "thought" or "ideology". So 두익사상 literally means "Head-Wing Thought."

It was developed by Sun Myung Moon (Co-Founder of the Family Federation) and his followers as a philosophical framework intended to transcend and harmonize left-wing (liberal/socialist) and right-wing (conservative/capitalist) ideologies – hence the "head" guiding both "wings".]

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