FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Sang Hun Lee on Revolution Can't Change Human Nature

Knut Holdhus
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Dr. Lee Sang-heon (also romanized as Sang Hun Lee - 1914 - 1997), a South Korean physician and philosopher who developed Unification Thought [See editor's note 1 below], here at a seminar in Schmitten, Hessen, Germany in October 1991



Typical communist propaganda poster: Revolution against the Billionaires

A former communist on why lasting human liberation may require more than revolution: a deeper understanding of conscience, responsibility, and love

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

Continued from part 2: The Love Materialism Failed to Explain

The former communist argued that lasting human liberation requires more than transforming social structures: it also demands an understanding of conscience, moral responsibility, and the origins of love.

Can a society achieve genuine human liberation simply by changing its economic system? Or must any lasting solution to exploitation and inequality also address the motives, desires, and moral choices of the people who make up that society?

These questions became increasingly important to Lee Sang-heon (이상헌 - 1914 - 1997), a physician and philosopher who once regarded communism as the path to national independence and human liberation. His subsequent intellectual journey led him to question whether an ideology grounded in

materialism could adequately explain human nature or provide a reliable foundation for a society free from oppression.

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

In the 15th October 2026 installment of its series Communism Without God, South Korean newspaper Segye Ilbo examines how Lee's doubts about materialism eventually directed his attention toward religion and the possibility that love and conscience originate in God.

For Lee, the limitations of communism were not confined to its political record. They concerned a more fundamental problem: even if a society successfully transformed its institutions, would it necessarily transform the people operating them?

A system might eliminate private ownership or reorganize relations between workers and employers, but such measures would not automatically eradicate the desire for power, personal advantage, or domination. If these impulses remained, new forms of exploitation could emerge under a different political arrangement.

In this sense, Lee's criticism went beyond the familiar argument that communist governments had failed to deliver their economic promises. He questioned whether materialism itself offered an adequate understanding of the human beings who were supposed to benefit from the revolution.

The limits of changing external conditions

Lee's professional experience as a physician contributed to his reflections. He understood that the physical condition of the body could influence mental life and that human beings were deeply affected by their material circumstances. Yet he also recognized the difficulty of explaining every aspect of human thought, emotion, and moral responsibility solely through bodily processes.

A doctor's determination to save a patient, compassion for someone enduring suffering, or the decision to defend what is right despite personal danger cannot be fully understood simply by calculating material costs and benefits.



Putting others' welfare before her own: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, here at a pro-life meeting on July 13, 1986 in Bonn, Germany

Such examples raised a question that economic analysis alone could not settle: Why are people sometimes willing to put another person's welfare before their own?

Lee observed that human beings possess a desire to preserve their lives, but they can also transcend immediate self-interest. They may find happiness in giving rather than receiving, discover meaning through caring for others, or willingly accept personal hardship for the sake of someone they love.

These actions suggest that human motivation cannot be reduced easily to survival or economic advantage. Nor can it be fully explained by membership in a particular social class.

For Lee, this was not an argument against addressing material suffering. Poverty, exploitation, and social inequality remained important problems. Rather, he questioned whether changing material circumstances alone could produce the moral transformation required for lasting human liberation.

If the people administering a supposedly equal society continued to seek privilege and control, equality could become an official principle without being realized in practice. The replacement of one ruling group by another would not necessarily bring freedom.

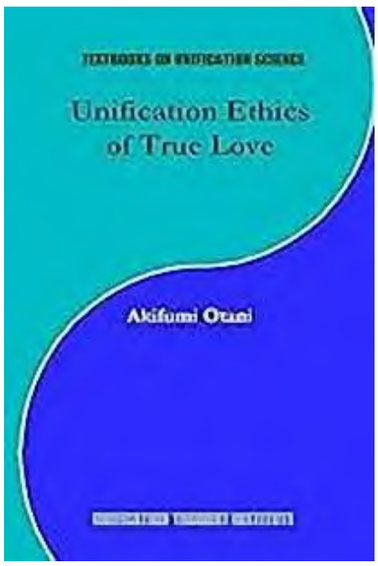
Consequently, Lee believed that a comprehensive approach to social reform needed to consider both external structures and the inner disposition of human beings.

From human nature to the question of God

This line of inquiry led Lee toward a religious interpretation of human nature.

If love and conscience were fundamental aspects of humanity, he reasoned, their origins deserved serious consideration. Perhaps human beings could not be understood adequately as material entities alone.

Lee explored the possibility that human beings were created in the image of God and that the capacity to love reflected this origin. From this perspective, the willingness to sacrifice for another person was not an inexplicable exception to the logic of self-interest. It was an expression of something fundamental to human nature.



"Unification Ethics of True Love" by Akifumi Otani, developed based on Dr. Lee Sang-heon's Unification Thought

This interpretation also offered a different understanding of universal love. If every human being shared an origin in God, then the basis for respecting others would not depend exclusively on class, nationality, political allegiance, or shared economic interests.

Love could therefore extend beyond the boundaries that divide people into opposing groups. It could include strangers, those with whom one disagreed, and even those regarded as enemies.

Such an understanding challenged the tendency to define human relationships primarily through conflict between social classes. It suggested that a society committed to human dignity needed a moral foundation that recognized the worth of people regardless of their position in the economic or political order.

Lee's turn toward religion thus emerged from his determination to pursue human liberation more consistently, rather than from a simple rejection of his former convictions. He sought to preserve the concern for exploitation and suffering that had initially attracted him to communism while moving beyond what he regarded as its inadequate account of humanity.

An alternative to materialism

Lee developed Unification Thought (통일사상) [See editor's note below] as an alternative philosophical framework. At its center was the conviction that God must be understood as the source of human existence and that love, conscience, and responsibility are essential to understanding human life.


With Soviet regime casualties ranging between 6 and 20 million, Stalin's rule underscores how heavily the moral character of leadership impacts human history

The broader implication was that social reform and personal transformation should not be treated as unrelated objectives. Institutions matter because they shape people's lives, but the moral qualities of those exercising power also matter because institutions cannot guarantee justice by themselves.

The question, then, is not simply how to construct a society in which resources are distributed more fairly. It is also how to foster relationships in which people recognize one another's dignity and act with responsibility toward others.

Lee's perspective offers a religious answer to a longstanding philosophical problem: whether a materialist account of human beings can adequately explain moral obligations that appear to transcend personal interests. His conclusion was that love was not merely an incidental emotion produced by material conditions, but a force rooted in the very foundation of human existence.

Whether one accepts this conclusion or not, the questions he raised remain relevant to debates about political ideology, social justice, and human freedom. Economic and institutional reforms can address important sources of suffering, but they do not automatically resolve questions about conscience, moral responsibility, or the misuse of power.

For Lee, the search for genuine human liberation therefore required a more comprehensive understanding of what human beings are and what makes their lives meaningful. His answer began with the proposition that love has a source beyond material interests and that recognizing this source is essential to building a society founded on freedom, dignity, and responsibility.

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

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

Continued from part 2: The Love Materialism Failed to Explain

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su



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

[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.

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.]

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Dr. Sang-hun Lee (이상헌 –1914-1997). Photo: FFWPU

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.



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

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.

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

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.

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.

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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 14th March 2011. Photo: marctasman / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 2.0 Gen. Cropped

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.

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.



A communist state seizing and nationalizing private property from

farmer family perceived to belong to the "capitalist class". Illustration: Grok xAI, October 2026.

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.

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.

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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*

***Featured image** above: The love that materialism failed to explain. Illustration: ChatGPT, October 2026.*

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[***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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