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How society handled Moon Sun-myung

Michael Breen
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It's hard to feel sorry for a billionaire, harder if he's regarded by thousands around the world as the messiah.

But spare a thought for Rev. Moon Sun-myung who in public, outside of his adoring inner circle, never had a single good review. He was vilified and ridiculed most of his adult life. The criticism and hounding of his followers contemptuously known as "Moonies" have been unrelenting. Why? Not because his beliefs and claims are any more ridiculous than other religious notions, but because they were new.

Ironically, his core message that God suffers has never even got through the noise, let alone made an impact.

It was only in his twilight years he was 92 that governments and media let him be, which explains why he dropped from the news and why most people under 30, even in Korea and Japan, where his following is largest, have not heard of him. When he was taken on Aug. 14 to St. Mary's Catholic Hospital in Gangnam, Seoul, critically ill with pneumonia and reported by doctors to have a 50-50 chance, most dailies did not consider the news worth the front page.

That's a far cry from the 1970s and '80s when sensational media coverage in America, Europe and elsewhere made Moon the most infamous Korean in the world.

Everyone, it seemed, had a reason to dislike him. The political left hated him for saying communism was the anti-Christ; Christians said he was anti-Christ; to most, he was a conman who used religion to get rich, a brainwasher of young people, a nut-case who claimed to chat with the dead, a man who broke up families, who had a factory that made weapons, who wanted to control the White House, and maybe take

over the world. The presenter of one weekly religion program on normally sober BBC once did a report on Moon dressed in a flak jacket and sporting an M16.

Satisfied with this media interpretation, society failed to ask the right questions about what Moon stood for and whether he was really that dangerous. As a result, even democracies put him on the black list with known terrorists. He was banned for decades from Japan and most European countries.

If his story presents an unflattering example of how most societies are incapable of handling heretics in a dignified and democratic manner, it is also a modern example of the ancient phenomenon of how religion is born.

For Moon's real offense is to be a modern-day Jesus, to have something new to say about God and to assume that doing so makes him spiritually superior to the rest of us. There is no shyness in these claims. Moon believes he has reversed the "fall of man," the process by which evil entered the world in the belief systems of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and that his family members are sinless and inherently better than the rest of us.

Given this, why could he not simply be ignored?

His story began in Pyongyang between the end of World War II in 1945 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. His central teaching at that time, delivered in long emotional sermons, was that Jesus Christ should have lived a full and exemplary life but had been turned over to colonial authorities by the religious establishment for execution. Contrary to normal Christian doctrine, this murder went against the will of God, he said. He also taught, heretically, that the same Jesus would not return as promised, but that his mission would be completed by another man.

These ideas and Moon's charisma electrified a small number of Christians. After a few key members left their churches to join Moon, thinking he was the prophesied messiah, Protestant ministers reported him to the communist authorities.

Moon was arrested and severely tortured by Korean police schooled in Japanese torture techniques. He was released and a year later arrested again and tried for "disturbing society." He was sentenced to a labor camp in the east coast city of Heungnam and had served two years and 8 months when guards let prisoners go before advancing South Korean and U.N. forces.

In all, Moon has been jailed six times. In South Korea in the mid-1950s he was reported to police after several professors and students from the Methodist Ewha Womans University joined his church. He was jailed, tried and found not guilty. In the 1980s, he served 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 was born in a village in North Pyeongan Province in North Korea in 1920. He claims to have developed his theology over a nine-year period of prayer and discovery that began with an encounter with Jesus at age 15. Its root is Judeo-Christian, although Moon approaches the relationship with God as a filial Confucian son.

His interpretation of the biblical "fall of man" is that mankind disobeyed God not by eating fruit, but through premature sexual relations. The notion that selfish misuse of love lies at the heart of human sin drives strict views about sex in the Unification Church.

While his teaching points to Moon as the prophesied messiah, he did not make any such public claim

outside of the Unification Church until 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.”

Once asked if he was the messiah, Moon said, “Yes I am.” 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 Korea could attract so many people from the campuses and middle-class homes of advanced nations.

They are for the large part decent, educated and idealistic people transformed in Moon’s glow to believe they too are doing their messianic bit and saving the world.

How they will fare without him remains an open question.

The writer is a Korea Times columnist and author of “Sun Myung Moon: The Early Years 1920-53.”