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The Unification Church Movement

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Elements in New Religious Movements

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Abstract: This Element recounts the tumultuous history of the Unification Church Movement (UCM), deriving from the messianic ministry of Moon Sun Myung (1920–2012). It begins with the UCM's origins in Korea and traces its development into a global conglomerate of churches, related nonprofit organizations, and for-profit businesses. Known for its mass marriages, or "International Marriage Blessings," the UCM has been one of the most controversial new religious movements throughout the world, particularly in Japan and the West. The post-Moon UCM is a textbook case of a new religious movement transitioning from its founding to succeeding generations, a transition marked by this emergence of schismatic organizations. Utilizing both external documents and internal UCM sources, the account highlights the leading personalities, organizations, and circumstances which facilitated the UCM's rise, present challenges, and future development.

Keywords: Sun Myung Moon, Unification Church, Family Federation, True Parents, Divine Principle

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1 Introduction

The Unification Church/Movement (UCM) refers to an international constellation of churches, related nonprofit organizations, and for-profit businesses that derive from the messianic ministry of MOON Sun Myung (1920–2012). It was established in Korea as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (HSA-UWC) in 1954. Its founding vision was to unite Christian denominations, bring unity among the world's religions, and, on that basis, usher in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Followers understand Moon to be the Lord of the Second Advent, that is, Christ's second coming. He is believed to have received his commission from Jesus Christ in a series of encounters beginning in 1935. Moon and his wife, HAN Hak Ja (b. 1943), are referred to as the "True Parents of Humankind." The UCM is known for its mass marriages, or "International Marriage Blessings," involving many thousands of participants at high-profile venues such as Seoul Olympic Stadium and Madison Square Garden. As the UCM's central sacrament, the Blessing is understood to be a process through which men and women come into union with each other, engraft to the True Parents, are reconciled with God, and thereby, according to the UCM, reconstitute themselves as a new humanity.

The core beliefs of the UCM are contained in *Wolli-Kangron* (1966), its primary doctrinal and religious text, translated from Korean into two official English edition texts, *Divine Principle* (1973) and *Exposition of the Divine Principle* (1996). Both texts employ familiar theological categories (creation, fall, Christology, resurrection, predestination, Trinity, providential history, eschatology) but interpret them in ways that highlight an overriding emphasis on the family. God, as parent, is the source of both masculinity and femininity, and the texts specifically identify the Holy Spirit as the feminine aspect of the Godhead. The texts similarly propound a family-based interpretation of sin, locating the human fall in adulterous and premature sexuality communicated symbolically in Genesis. Humankind's original ancestors became false parents who perpetuated a fallen lineage and fallen history. Salvation hinges on the restoration of True Parents. Jesus came as the second Adam with the mission to find a bride, or second Eve, with whom he would establish a true family, true lineage, and true history. The crucifixion was a tragic mistake which ushered in a secondary course led by the resurrected Christ and Holy Spirit (the second Eve) who, as spiritual True Parents, offer rebirth. Upon the foundation of Christianity, the third Adam will find a prepared bride (the third Eve), establish a new lineage, and consummate human history. The texts teach that humanity at present is in the Last Days, that Christ will come again, born in the flesh on earth, and that the nation from which Christ will come is Korea.¹

¹ *Exposition of the Divine Principle* (New York: Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, 1996), vii, 9, 19, 54–61, 114–19, 171–72, 383, 385–93, 396–407.

Although founded as an association, HSA-UWC immediately took on the characteristics of a church and became known in Korea as *Tongil Kyohae*, or Unification Church (UC). The UC organized congregations, conducted regular worship services, published sacred texts, evangelized in Seoul and rural districts, developed distinctive ceremonies and rituals, collected tithes and offerings, and, during the 1950s, dispatched missionaries to England (1954), Japan (1958), and the United States (1959). The UC sent missionaries to continental Europe during the 1960s and worldwide in 1975, establishing churches or a presence in some 185 nations by the turn of the twenty-first century. During this period, the UC took on the profile of a social movement, i.e., the UCM. In 1963, Moon organized the Tongil Group, a for-profit South Korean business conglomerate or *chaebol*, associated with the UC. Its purpose was to provide revenue for the church and church-related projects. The Tongil Group disbursed funds through the Tongil Foundation, which supported HSA-UWC as well as its initiatives in education, culture, and the arts, the media, and public advocacy. The UC exported this model, in different forms, to Japan, the United States, and mission countries.

In the mid-1990s, Moon set up the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU or Family Federation) as a successor organization to the UC. Partly due to the downfall of communism, which the UCM regarded as the chief obstacle to the establishment of God's sovereignty on earth, Moon publicly declared in 1992 that he and Hak Ja Han Moon were "the True Parents of humanity . . . the Savior, the Lord of the Second Advent, the Messiah."² In 1993, he proclaimed the beginning of the Completed Testament Age. An oral tradition, consisting of Moon's sermons and speeches, previously viewed as a supplement to *Divine Principle*, began to displace or at least compete with the official texts. Moon encouraged this development and in 1998 announced that his words, collected in several volumes, were to be the authoritative Completed Testament Age canon. In 2004, the Family Federation published a new set of Moon's words titled *Cheon Seong Gyeong* or "Heavenly Scripture," nearly 2,500 pages collected from some 500 volumes of his speeches. Prior to his death in 2012, Moon assembled his "last words to humankind" in the form of "Eight Great Textbooks" which included his collected sermons, *Exposition of Divine Principle*, and other works. After Moon's death, Hak Ja Han Moon, his widow, oversaw publication of a new set of Holy Scriptures, *Cheon Seong Gyeong* (revised), *Pyeong Hwa Gyeong* (peace messages), and *Cham Bumo Gyeong* (True Parents' life course), which included her words and historical role.

² S. M. Moon, "Becoming Leaders and Building a World of Peace," *Today's World* 13, no. 9 (October–November, 1992): 4.

Moon intended the Family Federation to be a religious but nonsectarian organization that extended “the sacramental Unificationist marriage blessing to non-Unificationist couples” and concentrated on “peace initiatives.”³ He envisioned a world in which religious barriers would be overcome and regularly introduced utopian projects ranging from an international peace highway to the establishment of a religious assembly within the structure of the United Nations. At the same time, Moon was a pragmatic institution-builder. He did not allow visionary endeavors to compromise the religious tradition and network of institutions he had constructed over more than four decades of effort. Therefore, despite proclaiming an era of families, he took steps to ensure that the Family Federation remained a hierarchically based organization subject to his direction. In addition, because the UC was legally incorporated in multiple countries, the Family Federation and UC continued to coexist. In reality, the two organizations were indistinguishable and interchangeable. Nevertheless, Family Federation was the preferred designation after 1994.

Moon fit Weber’s classic description of the charismatic leader as one “endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers and qualities.”⁴ This was an organizational strength, but also a liability, as he provided a focus for UCM detractors. His Asian origins, presumed connections to the Korean government, apparent extreme wealth, alleged sexual improprieties, and even his name, afforded grist to enemies who derided followers as “Moonies” and the UCM as a cult. In the United States, efforts to deny the UCM tax-exempt status, prevent its foreign missionaries from entering the country, and forcefully extract members from the movement through kidnapping and deprogramming put the UCM on the defensive, causing it to spend millions in litigation, sparking government investigations, and generating widespread public hostility. A 1977 Gallup poll found that Sun Myung Moon “elicited one of the most negative responses ever reported by a major poll,” exceeded only by “Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro.”⁵ Moon was subsequently convicted on tax evasion charges and served thirteen months at Danbury Federal Correctional Institute, Connecticut (1984–5), actions supporters contended were driven by religious animus and selective prosecution.⁶ During the same period, the Unification Church USA gained legal recognition as a bona fide religion with tax-exemption privileges, public solicitation rights, access to missionary visas,

³ Bromley, D. and A. Blonner, “From the Unification Church to the Unification Movement and Back,” *Nova Religio* 16, no. 2 (2012): 88–89.

⁴ M. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 398.

⁵ Gallup, G. and D. Poling, *The Search for America’s Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980), 28–29.

⁶ C. Sherwood, *Inquisition: The Prosecution and Persecution of Rev. Moon* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1991).

and protection for members against deprogramming.⁷ Scholars also deconstructed the brainwashing theory of member affiliation.⁸

This Element is neither a sociological nor a theological analysis but a historical account of the UCM's origins and development. As such, it makes use of sources not previously utilized, some of which are not published. The bulk of these are UCM materials: periodicals, books, memoirs, speeches, and the like that document the UCM's tumultuous history. The account is intended to be as comprehensive as possible in highlighting the leading personalities, organizations, and circumstances that facilitated the UCM's emergence, but it does not include numerous regional and localized initiatives, many in the developing world, which did not factor into the UCM's core trajectories. Rather, the narrative focuses on the UCM's mainstream development centered primarily on Sun Myung Moon and his family.

The Element divides UCM history into four chronological sections. First is the UCM's prehistory. Section 2, "Beginnings," covers Moon's background and early life (1920–45) and his pre-UCM early ministry (1945–54). The section examines his family background, major formative influences in his early life, his Christ experience (1935), and decade-long preparation for ministry (1935–45). It also details his initial efforts to gain followings in Seoul (1945–6) and Pyongyang (1946–8), his imprisonment in a North Korean labor camp (1948–50), and his effort to restart his ministry in the South (1951–3). There are similarities between the UCM and other Korean new religious movements and messianic variants. However, Moon's interest in the sciences; education; economics; media, culture, and the arts; and politics went well beyond most of these groups. The UCM's growth into a global movement is rooted in Sun Myung Moon's biography.

Moon and four followers founded the HSA-UWC or Unification Church in 1954. Section 3 follows the church amid much opposition as it became solidified in South Korea during the 1950s. Moon's 1960 marriage to Hak Ja Han marked a transition, as HSA-UWC became a more broadly based movement during the 1960s, incorporating economic, cultural, and educational components. Prior to that, the UC had sent missionaries to Japan (1958) and the United States (1959). Despite Korea's history of enmity with Japan, HSA-UWC Japan was a success story. It outstripped Korea's membership and became the resource engine that fueled the UCM's global advance while sparking intense domestic opposition. Moon viewed the United States as the gateway to the world and

⁷ M. Mickler, "No Stranger to Litigation: Court Cases Involving the Unification Church/Family Federation in the United States," in *Reactions to the Law by Minority Religions*, eds. E. Barker and J. Richardson (London: Routledge, 2021), 80.

⁸ E. Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1984).

shifted the focus of his ministry there during the 1970s. In 1975, the UCM sent missionary teams to ninety-five nations. During the 1980s, the UCM further diversified and expanded its ability to exert influence, notably through *The Washington Times*, established in 1982.

During the 1990s, the UCM entered a new phase characterized by more open public acknowledgments of its messianic premises. Section 4 highlights HSA-UWC's transition to the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), the messianic trajectories that followed, and the final years of Sun Myung Moon's ministry, which included a consummate though largely symbolic effort to construct a Unification-styled nation, referred to as *Cheon Il Guk* ("the nation of cosmic peace and harmony"). In addition to lingering negative stereotypes, Moon's last years were marked by internal fissures, mainly among his adult children who had assumed leadership roles. His death in 2012 accentuated these. However, Hak Ja Han Moon, his widow, acted decisively to consolidate her position as FFWPU's head. She pulled FFWPU past the crisis of Moon's death, withstood internal criticism, and developed a distinct global ministry. The long-term future of the FFWPU was still uncertain, but Hak Ja Han proved herself a creative and resourceful leader in the mold of her late husband.

The UCM spawned minor schismatic groups during Moon's ministry, but this situation changed following his death. Two of his sons introduced a new dynamic, each claiming to be their father's rightful successor. Both definitively broke from the Family Federation, sought to discredit and displace their mother as leader of the UCM, opposed each other, and siphoned off FFWPU resources. Section 5 surveys early UCM splinter groups as well as the more formidable Moon family breakaway organizations. Early UCM splinter groups were an irritant but not a threat. Schismatic organizations led by the sons were a more serious problem. One refused to give up major UCM assets he controlled in Korea and the United States. The other began a gun-centered "Rod of Iron" ministry, refused to discontinue use of the trademarked HSA-UWC symbol, and went to court to have himself declared FFWPU leader. However, their conflict with FFWPU was asymmetrical: Organizations led by the brothers possessed a small percentage of FFWPU's membership.

The concluding section considers the UCM's future. It advances the thesis, put forward in an early study, that the UCM's origins "are genuinely humble, religious, and spiritual (which many doubt)" and that "the adaptability and solidarity" of the UCM is such that "we are dealing with a movement that is here to stay."⁹ The conclusion acknowledges that this depiction of the UCM's

⁹ F. Sontag, *Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1977), 12.

origins is disputed by opponents and that it has not been able to entirely shed descriptions of it as a political organization, a business masquerading as a religion, or that it originated as a 1950s sex cult. It also acknowledges that the UCM faces formidable pressures to settle down into a form unrecognizable to its founders, or to split apart. In this respect, conclusions as to the UCM's future are provisional. Whether it seeks a denominational niche within which to perpetuate, whether it maintains its world-transforming fervor, or whether it does both will be key questions during the next stage of its development.

2 Beginnings

Since the late nineteenth century, some 500 new religions have established themselves in Korea.¹⁰ They are diverse, deriving from shamanistic, Buddhist, neo-Confucian, and Christian traditions. However, many exhibit common traits including “a strong spirit of nationalism,” expectation of a messianic figure to redeem people from suffering, “plans for a physical utopia and transformation of the present world into an ideal one,” teachings divinely revealed to a founder, and syncretism, i.e., “efforts to integrate traditional patterns with the plethora of foreign influences.”¹¹ While sharing these features, the UCM is unique among Korean new religions in its global reach. As noted, this development is rooted in the biography of Sun Myung Moon.

Moon's Background and Early Life

Yong Myung Moon (later Sun Myung Moon), was born on the sixth day of the first lunar month in 1920 (February 25) at 2221 Sang-sa Ri (village), Deok-eon District, Jeong-ju Township, Pyong-an Province, some 80 miles (almost 130 km) northwest of Pyongyang, in what is now North Korea. He was the second son of thirteen children, eight of whom survived, born to MOON Kyung-yoo (1893–1954) and KIM Kyung-gye (1888–1968). His paternal great-grandfather, Jong-ul, known as Sun-ok (1841–1918), settled in Sang-sa Ri where the majority of the thirty or so households were of the Nampyeong Moon clan. The extended family was prosperous, producing thousands of bushels of rice and providing hospitality to Koreans fleeing to Manchuria after their homes or land were confiscated by the Japanese. However, they fell on hard times after Moon's great uncle, Yun-guk (1877–1959), convinced them

¹⁰ Yongbok, Y. and M. Introvigne, “Problems in Researching Korean New Religions: A Case Study of Daesoon Jinrihoe,” *Journal of CESNUR* 2, no. 5 (September–October 2018): 84.

¹¹ J. S. Judah. “Introduction to the History and Beliefs of the Unification Church,” in M. Mickler, *The Unification Church in America: A Bibliography and Research Guide* (New York: Garland, 1987), 4.