THE MILLENARIAN DIMENSION OF UNIFICATION THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

The South-Korea based Unification movement is a global religious organisation energetically involved in a considerable number of peace promotion and inter-faith campaigns. The movement strives to bring to fruition the millenarian vision of its founder and self-styled ‘Lord of the Second Advent’, Mun Sŏn-myŏng. This study sheds light on the millenarian dimension of Unification thought that serves as the doctrinal backbone of the movement’s varied activities with its worldwide peace agenda at its centre.

Key words: millenarianism, Unification Church, new religious movement, Korean religion

1 INTRODUCTION

Korea’s recent history has witnessed a veritable blossoming of new religious movements (sinjonggyo),¹ some of which have expanded overseas in the past decades with a steadily rising global community. Of those internationally active religious organisations, the Unification movement (UM; t’ongil undong) has emerged as the most well-known in its world-renewing mission. Winning worldwide notoriety in the 1970s, particularly owing to fervent proselytism and (unsubstantiated) allegations of mind-control and brainwashing (Barker 1984), the UM has ever since been held in disdain by the Christian mainstream, by large sections of the media, and as a consequence thereof, to some degree by the general public. Founded by the Korean preacher Mun Sŏn-myŏng (1920–2012) in war-torn South Korea in the mid-1950s, within half a century the UM had developed into a world-spanning

¹ In lieu of sinjonggyo, Korean scholars predominantly tend to use the somewhat derogative term sinhŭng chŏnggyo or ‘newly emerged religion’.
network of hundreds of affiliated organisations, centred on a religious master-plan that represents the motivational incentive and ideological bracket of the overall venture. It is, in fact, the millenarian dimension of Unification thought which acts as the doctrinal justification and propulsion for the movement’s many activities. These activities are united in the UM’s pursuit for world peace. In Unificationist terms, ‘peace-building’ entails rendering the world ripe for the settlement of the ‘Kingdom of Heaven on earth’ (chisang ch’ŏnguk). This utopian land of ultimate bliss under the reign of God is fully materialised and awaits humanity when a sufficient number of faithful follows Mun’s sacred course, which then concludes the UM’s millenarian goal.

Unification thought is inextricably linked with its creator, major subject and leading advocate Mun Sŏn-myŏng. Section 2 of this essay will, therefore, present the major stages of his life and the genesis of his movement. The third section will amplify the millenarianism of the UM, and, in a first step, the concept of millenarianism will be elucidated. Subsequently, the main tenets of the group’s millenarian portfolio will be outlined and connected to the UM’s Korea-centric rationale of the coming salvational transformation; then, set against the millenarian backdrop, the UM’s ‘agenda for peace’ will be discussed. The concluding section will highlight the key issues of the discussion.

2 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: MUN SŏN-MYŎNG AND THE UNIFICATION MOVEMENT

Mun Sŏn-myŏng was born Mun Yong-myŏng on 25 February 1920 in the village of Sangsa, in Tŏgŏn township of Chŏngju county in North P’yŏngan province, in today’s North Korea. Among 13 children, of whom five died prematurely, he was the second son to Mun Kyŏng-yu (1893–1954) and Kim Kyŏng-gye (1888–1968). At about ten years of age, Mun was sent to the local village school (kŭlbang) where he was instructed in traditional Confucian learning before en-