

THE TYEE

Why Is Stephen Harper So Tight with the ‘Moonie’ Church?

Michael Harris

What strange bedfellows right-wing politics and messianic religion make. And Canadian conservatism is right there under the duvet.

On Feb. 12, 2022 former prime minister Stephen Harper gave an address to the Universal Peace Federation World Summit 2022 taking place in Seoul, South Korea. The UPF is the political arm of the Unification Church, founded by Sun Myung Moon and now headed by his wife Hak Ja Han Moon.

Harper’s remarks were focused on the role of religious freedom “in our grand objective, the peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula.” Even Harper admitted that some of his remarks “may sound bizarre.” In praising the Universal Peace Federation he said: “Your embrace of religious freedom and your commitment to interfaith dialogue in the pursuit of peace have been fundamental to all your activities from the beginning. And you have always included that faith side of your work in your outreach to the people of the North.

“I can only urge you to continue to do so. In my faith, we say that when dealing with evil in the world, be ‘as gentle as a dove and as wise as a serpent.’ And, personally, I cannot think of a better perspective through which to pursue the peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula.”

Spoken like the man who had long courted people he named “theo-cons.”

As the journalist Marci McDonald has written, in 2003 Harper told assembled Conservative think tankers that the only route to power “was to focus not on the tired wish list of economic conservatives or ‘neo-cons,’ as they’d become known, but on what he called ‘theo-cons’ — those social conservatives who care passionately about hot-button issues that turn on family, crime and defence.”

Now, all these years later at the UPF summit, Harper’s early strategizing looked like prophecy fulfilled.

Giving the keynote address was Donald Trump, the champion sinner who nevertheless gained the presidency by carrying out the agenda of his nation’s Christian right theo-cons. Other featured participants included three former U.S. Republican vice-presidents — Dan Quayle, Richard Cheney and, improbably, Mike Pence, who shared the UPF platform with Trump just over a year after the Jan. 6 Capitol riot where the MAGA horde wanted to hang him.

Pence, of course, wants to be president, as does Trump's former secretary of state Mike Pompeo who also attended the UPF summit. There as well was Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the House who wrote the Republican blueprint for waging scorched earth culture wars.

For Harper, this was familiar turf. A regular at such events, two years earlier he had received a medal from the UPF.

Now officially called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, Moon's religion claims to have 10 million followers around the world. Among Moon's many megalomaniacal statements before his death in 2012 is this one: "God is living in me and I am the incarnation of himself. The whole world is in my hand and I will conquer and subjugate the world."

In a subtitled speech, former Canadian Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper extols his hosts as he delivers one of his many addresses over the years to gatherings of the Universal Peace Federation, the political arm of Unification Church founded by Sun Myung Moon. Screenshot from UPF video.

I asked Stephen Kent, a professor in the department of sociology at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and an authority on cults, what to make of the fact that Harper, still a powerful actor in the Conservative party he forged, goes far to make common cause with the Unification Church.

"It is significant for a number of reasons," Kent said. "First, he is aligning himself with an organization founded on religious revelation rather than democratic debate, signalling that solutions to pressing global problems will have religiously based, as opposed to diplomatically secular, solutions.

"Second, he is tacitly supporting governments based on religious revelation rather than secular law. He is able to ignore issues of harm related to the Unification Church that stretch back decades, while valourizing a fantasy about two Koreas uniting under the leadership of a wholly unqualified religious despot. North Koreans already struggle under the despotic lineage of another family.

"Third, Harper's attendance and speeches validate and enhance the status of Moon and his wife in the eyes of group members and the audience of conference participants. He reinforces the deceptions about the Moons when he refers to 'Reverend' Sun Myung Moon (who had no official training or ordination), and his wife, who has no formal education beyond high school."

Moon rise over America

The Unification Movement is a cluster of organizations and enterprises grown from the messianic congregation founded by Moon in 1954. Moon claimed that when he was a teenager, Christ appeared to instruct him to "complete the mission begun by the son of God." The sect he founded aims to establish a worldwide kingdom of heaven on Earth centred in the Korean peninsula. Moon preached that "homosexuals and fornicators are like dung-eating dogs" and reportedly said that the Holocaust was God's retribution for Jews betraying Jesus.

In 1982, riding high in the American public eye and his flock expanding, Moon orchestrated a mass wedding of 2,075 couples in Madison Square Garden. The same year, the Unification Movement launched the conservative Washington Times newspaper which vigorously backed the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

In 1984, Moon was convicted of tax fraud and obstruction of justice in the United States. He found a defender in the evangelical preacher Tim LaHaye, a virulently anti-gay, anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish recipient of Moon money and a co-founder of the Christian conservative political organization Moral Majority, which had proven key to getting Ronald Reagan elected president. Moon served 13 months of an 18-month sentence and paid a fine of \$15,000. In 2004, a bizarre ceremony occurred in a Senate office building that demonstrated Moon's enduring political influence. There, before dozens of members of Congress, Moon and his wife donned robes and crowns as Moon declared himself the Second Coming.

At top, Richard Nixon shakes hands with evangelist Sun Myung Moon who called Nixon an 'archangel' and organized an effort to stave off his impeachment. Below, Moon presides over one of the many mass weddings for members of his cult-like church. Photos via Wikimedia.

Today the Unification Church owns the news syndicate United Press International and remains heavily involved in business and real estate in the U.S.

Where did all that money come from? For about a decade starting in the mid-1970s, some \$800 million flowed from Japan, where Moon's disciples sold small objects door-to-door, claiming they had mystical powers. These workers often slept in grimy group houses half a dozen to a room, turning over all profits to the church. In turn, the money was invested in the U.S.

Asked if the Unification Church was a cult, Kent replied, "To the extent that the organization has used undue influence to create harmful obedience and dependency from its adherents, I and others consider it to be a cult. Many of its conversion tactics used manipulation, coercion and deception; its practices place adherents in a bifurcated world of in-group 'good' versus out-group 'satanically evil'; and followers believe that their salvation depends upon huge, demanding and often crippling expensive actions in support of leaders' goals and lavish lifestyles."

Kent says the Unification Church is not a church at all, but a "transnational conglomerate." Having extracted wealth from members, explained Kent, "Moon and his facilitators then used these resources to fund both anti-communist and anti-democratic political efforts around the globe while holding international conferences for global opinion-influencers who endorse aspects of Moon's effort to regulate the world under his formation of a planetary theocracy."

If that's the case, why do these ex-politicians come when called? One reason is they can learn how to implement "religiously influenced policies" on masses of people, said Kent. Members of this informal think tank then take back ideas to their home countries, where they can be modified and put to use.

On paper, it looks good. Peace advocacy is, after all, an admirable thing, as is emphasis on family and faith. But Kent advised caution on accepting that peace is the real goal of the UPF. "Peace advocacy is a laudable but manipulatable commodity that enhances public perceptions

and may enhance one's legacy, regardless of their efforts' viability or success. Theocrats can parrot talk of world peace, but it would come at the price of secularism," said Kent.

And what does the UPF get by having politicians attend its events?

"Many cults hold global aspirations for world-domination," Kent said, "and seek to obtain it through gathering politicians' support through election activities, and/or financial assistance.

"In turn, these politicians turn blind eyes to the manner in which these cults obtain their wealth, and they occasionally offer political support against critics," continued Kent. "Moreover, the participation of politicians, even ones who are past their primes, serves as legitimations for both members and outside observers that the movement's ideology has merit and significance."

An assassination and national tumult

The potent mixture of politics and religion that Kent describes can have dire consequences. On July 8, former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated by a man who claimed that his mother's financial donations to the Unification Church had ruined his family. The man blamed the right-wing faction of Shinzo Abe's Liberal Democratic Party for supporting Moon's religious empire. The assassin also claimed he killed Abe because he believed he had spread the Moon philosophy in Japan.

The assassination has triggered a political outcry about the ties between the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the Unification Church. Thousands signed a petition opposing a state funeral for Abe and one man set himself ablaze in protest. There is outrage at how the church made vast sums from its "spiritual sales" of goods and services, charging exorbitant amounts to grieving elderly people. There is fury at how the LDP received endorsements, donations and grassroots support from the church, whose members became a conservative voting bloc. For years, the church held so much sway in Japanese society that criticizing it was taboo. Now the outcry has forced the LDP to vow to cut connections with the Unification Church.

That will take some doing. It has been reported that 10 of the 20 members in the fourth Abe cabinet had ties to the church. Some nationalist Japanese LDP lawmakers who sympathized with Moon opposed LGBTQ2SIA+ rights while championing traditional family values.

Legal expert Hiroshi Yamaguchi, holding a book about the Unification Church, speaks on the church and its activities at a Tokyo press conference in July. A group of lawyers said the alleged assassin of former prime minister Shinzo Abe was one of many victims of the Unification Church, which has long cultivated ties with high-level Japanese politicians. Photo by Shuji Kajiyama, the Associated Press.

Despite the uproar in Japan, in August Harper made another pilgrimage to a high-profile event sponsored by the Unification Church. This time the setting was the Universal Peace Federation Summit and Leadership Conference in Seoul. At such events, high-profile speakers reportedly are paid "very generously."

Harper and other attendees were entertained by "Little Angels," a charming girls' choir in traditional Korean dress. Televangelist Paula White-Cain, Donald Trump's touted spiritual

advisor, gave a prayer for peace and thanked “Mother Moon.” (Hak Ja Han Moon presents herself as humanity’s “True Mother” who shares her husband’s dream of a global theocracy that will bring peace to all corners of the planet.) Harper, who was seated next to the U.S. delegates in the front row, joined the other participants in laying individual flowers in memory of the murdered Shinzo Abe.

Attending, too, was Gingrich, who once told a group of conservative youth, “I think one of the great problems we have in the Republican party is that we don’t encourage you to be nasty. We encourage you to be neat, obedient, loyal and faithful and all those Boy Scout words, which would be great around a campfire but are lousy in politics.” In synch with the holy vibes of the August summit, he struck a different tone, telling the audience that the UPF was a ray of hope for a better future.

Then it was Stephen Harper’s turn. He blamed President Joe Biden and the Democrats for Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. Unity and strength were important to avoid war. Had NATO admitted Ukraine, Harper argued, the invasion would not have happened.

He also warned that China must not be allowed to weaken the alliance between Japan and South Korea. Japan had once been an enemy, but was now a friend. He urged China to help North Korea give up weapons, and come back to the negotiating table with other nations. South Korea did not seek war. But though the South should always have peace in its heart, Harper said, it mustn’t drop its guard. Harper ended his speech, “God bless all of you.”

The keynote speech was a video address by Donald Trump. He thanked “Reverend” Moon for founding the Washington Times newspaper that stood for truth, faith, family and freedom. On July 26, 2022, just as Washington political pundits were deep into the Jan. 6 investigation, the paper ran a story with the headline, “Trump in 2024 is the only answer against the political elites.”

In his grossly delusional speech, Trump bragged that his meeting with Kim, the first time a U.S. president had set foot in North Korea, had achieved success. He boasted, “I stood up to China like no president in history.” And, “We have achieved peace in the Middle East.” Now under Biden, the Afghan withdrawal was a disgrace, China threatened Taiwan, Russia invaded Ukraine and North Korea has launched 37 missile tests. None of this would have happened if he was president. His sign off was much like Harper’s: “God bless everybody.”

Professor Kent pinpointed why Trump is so attractive to certain Christians. “Some evangelical supporters have seen Trump as a modern biblical figure doing God’s work in a number of areas.” He noted Trump’s anti-abortion appointees to the Supreme Court, and the move of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

In Kent’s opinion, Trump himself may even qualify as a cult leader. His MAGA followers “imagine an idyllic culture fantasized from the past in which white Christian men dominate social and political life, with religiously based values that condemn diversity in a number of personal realms and public areas.

“Like Sun Myung Moon,” he added, “Trump most assuredly is a malignant narcissist, holding himself in grandiose self-elevation and expecting unflinching loyalty from adherents. No sacrifice is too great in his honour, and disloyalty receives vengeful retaliation.”

Lessons shared and learned

A little more than a week after the February UPF summit in South Korea, an American group with some remarkably similar values convened at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Laguna Niguel, California. The welcoming message sounded an alarm about “an outright assault on freedom” during COVID. “The time to save our nation is now. Let’s get to work.”

The Council for National Policy is a powerful but little-known Christian conservative networking group in the U.S. launched in 1981 by the Moon-supporting, arch-conservative evangelical Tim LaHaye. The CNP is, in effect, the brain of the right-wing movement in the U.S. It co-ordinates rich donors and their partner organizations to achieve profound influence on elections and legislation. It also vets potential senior party candidates by putting them to the new-conservative sniff test. (Rudy Giuliani, for one, failed that test during his run for the 2008 presidential election. He was considered too moderate on abortion and same-sex rights.) This cabal is front and centre in pushing Donald Trump’s Big Lie that the 2020 election was stolen.

The remarks of speakers at these highly secretive events are not recorded, nor are the speakers paid. The first day session in California included such topics as “Can a Woke Military Address Future Threats” and “Defunding the Left.” It ended at 10 p.m. with a prayer meeting.

The next day featured an “Action Session” with the provocative title “After Roe, Then What?” and a “Supreme Court Update” with this billing: “This term of the Supreme Court could be one of the most consequential ever, and CNP members have been central to some of the landmark cases currently being decided.” Though “freedom” was a big theme of the conference, the fact that defeating Roe would steal freedom from millions of women was not referenced.

Four months later, despite 50 years of precedent and settled law, Roe v. Wade was overturned by the Trump Supreme Court. In his concurring opinion, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas made it clear that this was just the beginning. He intends to use similar arguments to challenge the constitutional right to same-sex marriage, same-sex relations and contraception. Traditional family values.

Coincidentally, Virginia Thomas, the judge’s wife, is on the board of directors of CNP Action, Inc. The founder of CNP was Tim LaHaye, the evangelical minister who back in 1984 argued that sending Sun Myung Moon to federal prison was a travesty, and whose Moral Majority was staunchly homophobic as it rallied believers to Republicanism. It appears that what CNP wants today is a variant of the goal of the Unification Church, albeit a Christian theocracy. Some extreme right members of Congress are already calling themselves Christian nationalists.

The vision statement for CNP’s California meeting heralded “A united conservative movement... that restores religious and economic freedom, a strong national defence and Judeo-Christian values under the Constitution.” And who was the CNP’s idea of a man with the Right stuff? Charles Koch, whose family was involved in the Alberta tarsands for over 50 years. The CNP

gave its Free Enterprise Award to Koch, whose lobbying priorities include cutting taxes and regulations that might diminish fossil fuel industry profits.

Koch also is the top corporate funder of members of Congress who deny the 2020 election results, a status that earned him a damning characterization by Jerry Taylor, a former vice-president at the conservative Cato Institute in Washington, D.C.

“Charles Koch has made his choice,” Taylor said. “This self-proclaimed voice of freedom and liberty has apparently decided that advancing the public policies he desires is more important than democracy. His choice is not unlike the choices that most German industrialists made in the Weimar Republic.”

Meetings of the CNP are closed to the press. Nor are members permitted to disclose the names of fellow members. But despite the secrecy, Stephen Harper knows all about the CNP. That’s because he was invited to speak to the organization 25 years ago, just after Jean Chrétien won the 1997 federal election. Harper’s speech then was a perfect blend of neo-con and theo-con. He praised the Republicans, and the U.S. system of government. “Your country and, particularly, your conservative movement, is a light and inspiration to people in this country and across the world.” Harper derided his own country as “a Northern European welfare state in the worse sense of the word.”

And which candidate did Harper publicly endorse in the recent contest to lead Canada’s Conservative party? That would be the man who won in a cakewalk, Pierre Poilievre. The former PM’s passing of the torch was keenly celebrated by Canada Proud and other right-wing populists fuelling the “Freedom Convoy” to Ottawa.

But Harper has passed along more than his approval. Look at the people Poilievre has gathered around him. The new head of the Conservative Fund is Robert Staley, Harper’s former lawyer. The people who ran his campaign, Jenni Byrne and John Baird, both worked for Harper, Byrne as chief of staff, and Baird in his cabinet. Byrne also ran Poilievre’s transition to the leadership. Harper cabinet minister Tony Clement has been named to the powerful Conservative Fund.

Poilievre has been moulded into the role he now occupies since he was a teenager. As a young Albertan, he went to Reform party meetings, and learned about politics from the ground up with other young interns by campaigning. Kory Teneycke, Harper’s former director of communications, did an internship in Washington with the Charles Koch Foundation and later organized the program for interns who worked on Parliament Hill doing research and correspondence for Reform MPs. The interns also attended mandatory lectures. Between 50 and 60 interns participated in the early years. A remarkable number went on to become politicians or political staffers themselves, including Ray Novak, Jenni Byrne, Ezra Levant and Pierre Poilievre. The apple never falls far from the tree.

Pierre Poilievre’s party is “right-wing, abrasive, anti-establishment and unapologetic,” writes Robyn Urback of the Globe and Mail. He has borrowed from Trump’s recipe while adding a dash of maple syrup. Urback believes that the way Poilievre could broaden his support is to get

the attention of immigrant and middle class communities in the 905 belt. Many inhabitants are people whose social and religious values make them what Stephen Harper would term theo-cons.

A recent Leger poll taken 10 days after Poilievre's landslide leadership victory shows that Canadians still prefer Trudeau as prime minister. But the regional data suggests Ontario is in a dead heat. Thirty-four per cent would pick a Poilievre-led government, while 32 per cent would choose the Liberals led by Trudeau. The 905 belt around Toronto will be particularly important and many ridings will be close.

Fine, but didn't we start with Stephen Harper standing in South Korea at an event organized by the church/cult/international conglomerate founded by Sun Myung Moon? Why have we arrived among the denizens of the 905? Because if Poilievre can energize voters here and in similar key battlegrounds, he will be Canada's next prime minister, leading a version of the Conservative Party that Stephen Harper may have dreamed of but, in his time, deemed unelectable.

The right wing of the Conservative Party delivered the leadership for Poilievre with an overwhelming 68 per cent of the member vote. This is a leap forward from Harper who had to balance the expectations of the theo-cons against more moderate members of his party and the broader electorate in order to win power.

The last two unsuccessful Conservative leaders tried moving the party to the centre to win, and failed. It appears the Conservative Party has made the assessment that there is now room to grow the party to the right in Canada.

In striving for this end, Stephen Harper and his protégé Poilievre no doubt will be cheered on by Harper's oft-visited Universal Peace Federation, a registered charity in Canada. The same UPF that is the political arm of the Unification Church which was founded by a self-proclaimed prophet who did time in jail for tax fraud, and whose spiritual grifting is currently sending shockwaves through Japan.

As we have also seen in Japan, the Unification Church is skilled at supporting its party of choice, which in turn supports its goals. This should sound familiar, as it is similar to the symbiotic relationship between the evangelical movement and Republicans for the past 40 years.

Many Canadians are prone to believe that the U.S. has become a strange place where right-wing Christians have too much say over which politicians get into office and vote. But consider how central theo-cons have long been to Harper's political calculus, his persistent coziness with the Unification Church network, and his benediction of Pierre Poilievre to carry on the work he started.

Canada's coming federal election may see a political new moon rising.