

A Challenge for the Divine Principle in the Postmodern Era

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A 2010 map displaying the connectivity of Facebook's 1.1 billion global users.

Can the Divine Principle be attractive to others in the 21st century, or at least for the next 10 or 20 years as our Church's 2020 goal envisions? In Unificationist communities, that question has sparked the development of practical or technological methods of communication/presentation. People have created and re-crafted charts, slides, and PowerPoint presentations and people will continue to do so.



The development of these materials is certainly a worthy endeavor, but another way to ask this question is to ask how the Principle answers the questions of the era or the "spirit of the time" (Zeitgeist). Although believers claim that religious teachings reflect truth that is eternal, ideas affirm their validity by responding to the questions of the era. Leading ideas must in fact "lead" the time by demonstrating their validity to people who are desperately trying to find their way. Thus, Unificationists must understand the intellectual climate that we live in if the Principle is to become a leading idea.

During the late 20th century, the United States and other developed countries underwent a major shift rooted in the comprehensive critique of modernity. It is imperative for any intellectual to understand this shift and the intellectual horizons that frame the climate today, known as postmodernism.

What Is Postmodernism?

Postmodernism is a concept that describes a general intellectual stance or tendency towards modernity. As the term post ("after") modernism indicates, postmodernism is a departure from modernism based on a critical assessment of modernity. It is, in essence, skepticism towards basic assumptions of modernity. Postmodernism is a broad term which encompasses all social cultural spheres including architecture, art, literature, literary criticism, business, management, politics, economics, philosophy, religion, and others. It is a term that can be seen as describing the spirit of the age (Zeitgeist). Postmodernism is distinguished from being just a "trend" because of its lasting and penetrating effects on all spheres of life.

Modernity, as postmodernists see it, is a social, cultural, political wave that lasted for centuries, from the Enlightenment to the late 20th century. Despite the diverse views and ideas encompassed within modernity, modernity was based on certain assumptions that postmodernists later questioned. Postmodern thinkers have taken a variety of approaches, but the following are a few basic criticisms of modernity by Jean-François Lyotard, a French philosopher.

1. Questioning the Grand Narrative

The grand narrative or meta-narrative is a totalizing discourse that attempts to explain everything with one set of principles. For example, Marxism was presented as an all-encompassing theory of emancipation to liberate humanity. This grand theory was presented as a one-size-fits-all comprehensive theory and was claimed to be applicable to all regions, past and present, regardless of time and place. This

utopian narrative quickly captured the minds of people and swept the world, but its narrative was rudely interrupted by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Postmodernists have taken a skeptical stance towards such grand narratives as totalizing, centralized, and hierarchical. Postmodernists characterized modernity as an era when people sought an all-encompassing belief system, starting with the ideas of the Enlightenment and lasting through the late 20th century. These systems of thought have been institutionalized and legitimized, and perpetuated by power. Be it Marxism, Hegelianism, or other all-encompassing systems of thought, postmodern thinkers have been skeptical of such grand narratives.

2. Anti-foundationalism

Modern discourse can be also characterized as the attempt to “ground” ideas in a certain “foundation,” for example, universal truth, reason, language, science, and others. In order to legitimize knowledge, people attempted to “ground” their claims in some foundation that was unquestioned. Rather than question the foundation of certain ideas, people directed their efforts to building knowledge on the foundation of these unquestioned bases. The institutionalization of an unquestioned foundation thus established the “authority” of knowledge, and any attempt to question the grounds of knowledge was suppressed. Postmodernists questioned this type of discourse and the legitimacy of a “foundation” of knowledge.

Intellectual Climates in and after Postmodernism

The postmodernist critique of modernity generated a different type of discourse. People began to seek local, workable truths rather than a grandiose truth, and contextualized specific solutions rather than a one-size-fits-all universal solution.

While developing countries are still seeking to modernize, people in developed countries have been seeking an alternative discourse. The Divine Principle had appeal in the late 20th century when people still sought a grand theory. After these changes in the intellectual climate, how can Unificationists respond to the challenges of postmodernism?

The Future of the Principle for the Present

There are two ways to respond to these challenges. One is to ignore them, hold on to the Principle, and wait for the world to change. This option is not a viable one. The second option is to take these challenges seriously and examine how the Principle can solve specific issues and problems in different social and cultural contexts. This approach requires Unificationists to test each and every truth claim in the Principle and show why and how it works as applied in a specific field.

For example, in the area of conflict resolution, the confrontation between two superpowers is over. Today we face numerous regional conflicts rooted in religious, racial, and cultural differences along the axes of political and economic interests. Victory Over Communism (VOC) theory was an effective application of the Principle during the Cold War. Today, however, we need to address the new landscape of localized, regional conflicts. Unificationism must be able to answer the questions of why and how faith-based conflict resolution is an effective approach and provide specific, case-based evidence. This analysis can then be extended to the comprehensive approach that Unificationism can provide with its holistic outlook, in particular through the interreligious, intercultural, and international Marriage Blessing.

In the area of faith and spirituality, the postmodern tendency to decentralize has manifested itself in the way people depart from organized religion and pursue spirituality in various alternative forms. In this light, it is interesting to note that Rev. Moon’s philosophy can be seen as having radical, postmodern dimensions. For example, Rev. Moon has asked members to not pray in the name of an authority, such as Christ or the True Parents, but to pray in one’s own name. Once a couple receives the Blessing, that couple is asked to pray to God under their own authority as a Blessed Couple. The Blessed Couple no longer needs any meditative authority in communicating with God; the absolute authority and autonomy of the Blessed Couple imply that a couple is responsible for its own salvation. Rev. Moon has also transformed the traditional concept of the Messiah as a single person in history and extended it to include numerous Tribal Messiahs, roles that Blessed Couples are asked to take on with respect to their own families and communities. This kind of de-centralization of authority reflects a postmodern decentralization of traditional religious institutions.

In the area of marriage and family, the primacy of heterosexual monogamy, one of the core theses of Unificationism, is challenged by the claims of diverse forms of marriage, especially same-sex marriage. Unificationism must strengthen its position beyond simple religious belief and an appeal to common sense naturalism — what is “natural” for people is changing. Thus, a thorough and comprehensive analysis of sexuality is necessary, including critical analyses of perspectives rooted in the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, and others. The critical analysis of sexuality in turn demands critical

self-reflection, which includes an empirical assessment of the Blessing of Marriage in Unificationism and the analyses of its corresponding sociological and psychological implications.

The challenge of postmodernism presents the opportunity to re-examine our own framework of interpretation; this re-examination requires the continuous application and study of the Divine Principle. The comprehensiveness of a theory is not a disadvantage by itself, but in this era of particulars, the battleground is in addressing specific issues. The validation of the Principle as a grand theory that is applicable and appealing for all people may be possible only after, and by continuing, this process of examination and application.

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