

Moral Autonomy of the Blessed Couple/Family

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The radical nature of an idea is often exhibited by its power to transform our framework of thinking. As the word “radical” indicates (radix means “root” in Latin), a radical idea requires us to reexamine fundamental presuppositions we take for granted.



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One radical concept in Rev. Moon’s philosophy is the Blessed Couple/Family. Marriage is generally understood as a social, religious, and legal union of a husband and a wife, which generates moral and legal obligations between them and their immediate family members. Marriage in the ordinary sense does not imply a change in the relationship between married individuals and God. Even within most religious traditions, which recognize marriage as sacred, a marriage blessed by God (or gods) does not alter in any way the relationship between human beings and God. Marriage is nothing more than another happy life event.

The Blessed Marriage/Family in Rev. Moon’s later philosophy, however, is quite different. Rev. Moon asked each Blessed Couple to pray in their own name without the mediation of an external authority, such as Christ or True Parents. In the history of Christianity, to “pray in your own name” is a radical claim, which is unheard of in any Christian denomination. One way to understand this claim is to see it as an assertion of the moral autonomy of the Blessed Couple/Family. In reference to Kant and Plato, this article will articulate the idea of moral autonomy and point out the responsibility of each Blessed Couple/Family in this “post-postmodern” (i.e., after postmodernism) era.

“Pray in Your Own Name”

In Christian traditions, human beings are considered as sinful to the extent they cannot directly communicate with God. In prayer life, thus, people are told to pray in the name of Jesus as the Mediator. Anyone, be it the Pope or a layperson, needs Christ as the Mediator, a religious authority external to him or her, in communicating with God.

In the history of the Unification Church, Rev. and Mrs. Moon were understood as the True Parents. Rev. Moon asked followers to pray in the “name of the True Parents,” where they served as the Mediators between God and human beings.

During the later years of his life, Rev. Moon told Blessed Couples/Families to change their prayers and asked them to pray in their own names. Communication with God required no mediator, such as Jesus or True Parents. The Blessed Couple/Family was asked to communicate with or report to God directly.

In Unification Theology, the Blessing is considered the turning point of redemption. Once a couple receives the Blessing, that couple is theologically free from original sin. The new prayer form re-affirms this theological doctrine.

Rev. Moon also adapted the concept of the Messiah to diverse social spheres. He did not limit Messiahship just to a single person, such as Jesus; rather, Blessed Couples and Families are to become Tribal Messiahs and National Messiahs by serving and building communities. Each Blessed Couple was authorized to bestow the Blessing to others as well. The direction to pray without a mediator was, at the same time, a demand for each Blessed Couple/Family to become a Messiah.

Rev. Moon thus concomitantly asked Blessed Couples/Families to change their consciousness from a submissive mentality to one of “ownership” in their lives of faith, and stressed the importance of securing their own “conscience” as the seat of true love, God’s dwelling place. He used such phrases as “the conscience is greater than God, True Parents, and the teacher.” These threads of thoughts seem to point to the concept of autonomy, a central idea in moral philosophy.

Autonomy and Heteronomy

Immanuel Kant, an 18th century German philosopher, most clearly formulated the moral autonomy of each person. As the term autonomy (auto means “self,” and nomos means “laws” in Greek) implies, he identified each person as self-legislated: each person imposes moral laws upon himself or herself; moral principle is an integral part of the individual.

Kant contrasted autonomy to heteronomy (hetero means “other” in Greek). The latter is the state of being whose laws come from outside of him or herself. Instead of being self-legislating and self-regulating, heteronomous individuals are regulated by or subjugated to external forces, laws, and authorities. Kant argued, genuine moral discourse and actions are possible only when one is autonomous.

If a person is heteronomous, he or she cannot “own” their actions as his or hers. An autonomous individual alone can “own” his or her actions as his or hers, and thus take moral responsibility. Freedom and integrity are possible only when one can legislate oneself.

Kant’s perspective on the moral integrity of the individual resonates with such concepts of the human being as an “Individual Embodiment of Truth,” or “Embodiment of Logos” in Unification Philosophy.

Similarly, societies, organizations, or institutions can be either autonomous or heteronomous or both in different degrees. Nevertheless, moral autonomy is the basis for freedom and responsibility. Moral autonomy resonates with the ownership consciousness Rev. Moon so articulated.

Euthyphro Dilemma

Although Kant did not apply his argument regarding moral autonomy to God, it is possible to apply it to God from a Unificationist perspective. In particular, the Euthyphro Dilemma helps us explore the idea of moral autonomy as it relates to God. Although the dilemma seems irrelevant to the issue of morality, it illustrates the application of the concept of moral autonomy to God’s own nature.

The Euthyphro Dilemma is problematic concerning the relationship between moral good and God’s will/command, formulated by Plato. In one of his dialogues, Euthyphro, Socrates asks Euthyphro: “Are the pious loved by the gods because they are pious, or are they pious because they are loved by the gods?” This question can be formulated in various ways. For example, one formulation can be: Is something morally good because it is commanded by God or does God command it because it is good?

The first position identifies the good with God’s command or His will. It holds that whatever God commands or wills is considered good. His will and command define the good. This position is called God Command Ethics. There are a number of problems regarding this position. First, “God’s will” is not clear to human beings in this position. Since God’s will or command is always mediated by somebody, if his or her interpretation is believed to originate from a divine will/command, he or she can justify any action or interpretation. Thus, no moral accountability is necessary as far as an action is believed to originate from a divine will. Witch hunts, inquisitions, indulgences, racial cleansing, or terrorism become “good” as far as it is identified as God’s will or command. This position is theoretically quite fragile, although it is often used in political rhetoric.

The second position presupposes the existence of truth apart from God’s will/command. According to the second position, God established truth apart from His will and regulates His will according to the criteria of truth or principles that He established Himself. God wills or commands based upon the self-regulatory or self-legislating mechanism. In a sense, God wills or commands to the extent it is morally right and accountable. In other words, God makes Himself morally accountable by regulating His will/command according to the principles He legislated.

In my reading of the Principle, this second position is closer to Unificationism. Although Kant did not engage in this kind of a theological discussion, the moral autonomy of the individual has a theological basis in the Unificationist understanding of the nature of God. This parallel between humans and God in the mechanism of moral autonomy is a startling insight.

Moral Autonomy, Accountability, and Responsibility

The individual is certainly morally autonomous and must be morally accountable for his life and actions. As Plato placed the Idea of the Good at the top of all Ideas, moral accountability is the underlying requirement for one's actions and life above all other requirements. Each individual faces the divine court of justice for his or her actions and life at the end of life: "Did you live right?" No one is immune from the demand for moral accountability. As Rev. Moon emphasized the importance of conscience, the demand for moral accountability seems to have been inscribed in one's conscience, which he called the "dwelling place of God" (see his 1995 UTS Commencement Founder's Address: "Strengthen the Power of Your Conscience"). The Blessing can be seen as the expansion of the moral sphere to that of love and life.

The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, as defined by Rev. Moon, is possible only when the Blessed Couple/Family substantiates the sphere of love upon moral autonomy. Prayer as "reporting" to God indicates the autonomy and responsibility of the Blessed Couple/Family as a builder of the Kingdom of Heaven. Rather than asking God for help, one is tasked to take responsibility and report accomplishments to God with gratitude. The concept of autonomy in Unification Philosophy implies that the Blessed Couple/Family is tasked to be its own redeemer and savior.

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