

Authoritarianism and the Unity of Denominations / Religions

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Denominational splits are one of the most challenging issues in the Unification movement. As Unificationism presents itself as the “new truth” to resolve religious/denominational divides, the claimant carries the burden of demonstrating its truth with evidence. Even if Unificationists cannot solve this reality immediately, they should at least be able to articulate the Unificationist approach to religious/denominational unity.

Underlying these splits is the idea of authoritarianism, found in religious fundamentalism in other religions as well. This position enhances division and is contrary to Unificationism as exemplified by Reverend Moon. Within the broad spectrum of Unificationism, there are various interpretations including authoritarian.

I will explain what authoritarianism is in the current context of denominational splits, why and how it can be a problem, and how religious authority can be established in a non-authoritarian way. I contrast Rev. Moon’s approach to an authoritarian one.

Since authoritarianism is a complex and broad subject in social science and found in all types of institutions and organizations, be they religious or not, I focus only on the question of the process of establishing religious authority.



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Authoritarianism results in an authoritarian personality and creates such a culture. Although Rev. Moon’s critics characterized him as an authoritarian, he seemed to be trying to eradicate such tendencies from the Unification Movement. I highlight his non-authoritarian approach to religious/denominational unity.

Authoritarian Discourse: “Which Authority?”

I had a dispute with a devoted Unificationist on the denominational splits within the Unification Movement. He told me the issue of denominational unity has been clearly solved by the Blessing, which is the Unificationist way of unity. I replied, “How can the Blessing be the solution to denominational splits when everyone adheres to the same Blessing?” He asserted the Blessing is the way for the unity of denominations in Unificationism and that current splits were irrelevant. He continued that the question is one of accepting the absolute authority of True Mother, and if one does not do so, he or she falls under the dominion of Satan and so demonizing them is legitimate.

I realize such a view is not uncommon among Unificationists. Such a view interprets the problem of denominational splits as a question of obedience to an authority; some may even use phrases as a test of faith or loyalty. I find such arguments to be dogmatic, and similar to those used by fundamental Christians as the basis for rejecting Unificationism and labeling it as heresy. Nevertheless, there remain disputes over the question of the legitimacy of authority between denominations in the Unification Movement. Efforts are being made to establish religious authority in reference to the authority of Rev. Moon. The more basic question, however, is how Rev. Moon established his religious authority. In order to answer this question, I step back to clarify more basic questions about claims and credibility.

Claims and Credibility

Consider Rev. Moon’s claim of having a spiritual encounter with Jesus when he was 16 years old (*As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen*, p. 50). Because we cannot access the minds of others, the claim itself cannot establish its own credibility. The credibility of an experience or event, as a turning point in one’s life, is retrospectively established by the series of actions one takes in his or her personal and social life; measurable outcomes are what make a claim credible and meaningful to others. Thus, Rev. Moon’s claim

of being the successor to Jesus's mission through his mystical vision is not validated by the claim itself, but by a series of measurable actions. That experience also becomes meaningful to others only when the inspiration is manifested through positive impact on individuals and societies.

In other words, the event became the turning point in Rev. Moon's life because he made it the guiding principle for the rest of his life. If he had done nothing, the experience would have remained a personal episode for him; the event would never have become something significant for others.

We find self-proclaimed Christ-like "Saviors" who claim to have had mystical experiences in numerous places in the world. We also observe schizophrenic individuals who report such mystical experiences. While these individuals may have had such experiences, the meaning of a claim is measured by its positive outcome and impact on others.



Rev. Moon's Way of Establishing Authority

Suppose we assess Rev. Moon's claim by applying a general assessment tool: knowledge, skill, attitude/value, action, and impact. In the field of knowledge, he presented his theistic philosophy by answering a number of difficult questions. He opened his views to scholarly scrutiny by establishing a series of platforms to discuss its plausibility (the "God: The Contemporary Discussion" conferences, New ERA ecumenical conferences, etc.). He also applied his perspective to diverse spheres including politics, extending its reach to political activities (though the reconstruction and articulation of his political philosophy is long overdue). In terms of skills, he demonstrated his skills in dealing with people, strategic thinking and management. In attitude/value, numerous individuals witnessed who he was in personal encounters with him. Many members testified to their own personal experiences with him as evidence of who he was. There are numerous episodes and measurable evidence to lend credibility to Rev. Moon's claim.

The key point is how Rev. Moon approached the question of establishing his religious authority: by building evidence through active engagement, open invitation to scrutiny, dialogue, and collaboration.

For example, when Rev. Moon began tuna fishing he earned respect through action and results. When he first started, he lost tuna after tuna. Nevertheless, he developed his skills, discovered new methods, and became an accomplished tuna fisherman in the end. Through trial and error, he established his authority based on action and results, earning the trust of others based on evidence.

Rev. Moon described his experiences in a North Korean concentration camp (1948-50), which included acts of great compassion toward fellow prisoners. How does this story become credible? Credibility comes not from an appeal to some authority, but the evidence witnessed by others through members' personal experiences with him.

Authoritarianism in the context of religious/denominational unity is a short-cut characterized by threats under the label of "faith." It will never unite diverse faith groups/traditions. The Unificationist approach demonstrated by Rev. Moon is the opposite: it paves the way so that non-believers and others can come to recognize his genuine devotion to his religious ideals.

Responsibility and Personality

Religious authority relies on people's acceptance/belief. If people stop believing someone, his/her authority is lost. Authoritarianism places the burden of "belief" on believers by the use of threats or force, often by appealing to negative consequences and the God-Satan/Devil rhetoric.

Rev. Moon's approach, on the other hand, places the burden of proof upon himself to demonstrate evidence. While authoritarianism yields an "authoritarian personality" (coined by Eric Fromm; developed

by Theodor Adorno), Rev. Moon's path allowed him to grow and become who he was. In other words, he became who he was by taking it upon himself to build undeniable evidence. Although some opponents of Rev. Moon characterized him as authoritarian, both his personality and approach to religious authority show otherwise.

Authoritarianism carries with it the danger of hypocrisy. Many religions, including Unificationism, hold as core values compassion, forgiveness and kindness. When such teachings are placed under the reins of authoritarianism, these virtues are only applied to those within the narrow circle of people who accept the authority of the group (as sharply demarcated by the God-Satan rhetoric). As we see through the history of religious conflict, such believers can be cruel to those who reject their religious authority. This double-standard brings out a hypocritical self-deception where one believes the self to be a practitioner of compassion, but is in reality extremely cruel. Authoritarianism is incompatible with the idea of compassion for all.

When authoritarianism becomes a dominant discourse, authoritarian culture is generated. Responsibility is heavily given to the authoritative figure and others become "blind" (irresponsible) carriers of the "order." In this culture, a virtue such as "loyalty" dominates and the virtue of mutuality is not cultivated. In other words, believers "value" what they take to be the central authority, but not the people who in fact sustain the authority (when people stop accepting the authority, "religious" authority vanishes). Because it is not sustained by strong virtues of mutuality among believers, the organization becomes unstable once an issue arises in the sphere of the central authority. Authoritarian culture is, in fact, a culture of irresponsibility, and no genuine community can be built.

In authoritarian culture, the value of the individual is limited to its instrumental utility (Immanuel Kant criticized it as unethical) for central goals. The culture of love is, however, built on seeing one another and the individual as irreplaceable beings (Kant phrased it as the "end in itself") with a sense of dignity and respect. Each and every individual is the ultimate moral agent God entrusted. The culture of heart is possible only when such ethical character and community is built, which demands a departure from authoritarianism.

The non-authoritarian Unificationism Rev. Moon tried to build is the culture of responsibility. Praying in one's own name and the primacy of listening to one's own conscience are examples of how he envisioned each member to become a morally and religiously responsible individual (moral autonomy). Through his efforts, he asked each member to embody his life philosophy of building a path for unity by paving it. As he demonstrated in his life, each individual can build his or her caring personality by walking such a thorny path.

The Next Step

Where and how can genuine Unificationism be built? By giving up authoritarian discourse and shifting the focus to the self. It is ultimately each individual's choice for what kind of personality you want to build, what kind of culture you want to create and belong to. If God does not dwell in each person in the most intimate way, "true love" is an empty slogan. A path for true love is, in fact, a thorny path for unity.

If Rev. Moon's method for unity is non-authoritarian, then we must answer the question of authoritarianism in the Unification Movement. I describe in broad strokes a non-authoritarian dimension of Unificationism, and the task of fully assessing and clarifying Rev. Moon's approach remains. Now may be the time to depart from highly speculative claims and arrive at a fair and honest assessment of the Unification Movement in all respects. From the question of religious/denominational unity to approaches to family unity, Unificationists can open new horizons of Unificationism by taking on the burden of proof as their responsibility.

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Painting at top: *Detail from "Autumn Millet and Sparrows" by Ito Jakuchu (1759).*