

## Interpreting the Principle: The Transformative and the Objective

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The Unification Movement (UM) faces a number of challenges, most obviously denominational divisions. But another challenge is the relevance of the UM and its core teachings or beliefs to contemporary society and future generations who are expected to respond and succeed.

Such a challenge is difficult because it is not readily observable, and the way to approach or conceptualize this challenge is unclear. The issue is "hidden" presuppositions we take for granted that shape a wide array of our understandings and experiences.

For some, this article may seem merely an intellectual exercise. But the matter of presuppositions has far reaching implications for all practical exercises and activities, particularly the question of what they mean.



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### The Principle as Interpretive Framework

The Divine Principle (the Principle), the core teaching of Unificationism, provides a framework with which to interpret biblical texts, human experiences, historical narratives, and a broad range of phenomena from a theological perspective. The Principle is thus a Unificationist theoretical framework of interpretation.

But is the Principle free from interpretation? Or is human understanding necessarily interpretive and is the Principle thus subject to interpretation?

Human understanding is unavoidably interpretive and the framework of interpretation (the Principle) is subject to interpretation. I consider how one's ontological stance affects his/her interpretation of the Principle.

First, I highlight two contrasting stances in interpreting the Principle, the objective and the transformative.

I then explore how such contrasting perspectives affect one's interpretation of religious phenomena in Unificationism.

Third, I discuss how the concept of truth in the Principle informs an integral approach to the interpretation of the Principle; I argue that the objectivist stance is currently predominant among Unificationists and must be counter-balanced with the transformative interpretation.

Finally, I explore how the objectivist view became dominant in the Unification Movement from the perspective of intellectual history.

### Objectivist Interpretation of the Principle

The most common interpretation of the Principle is from the objectivist perspective. This is a perspective with which to understand the Principle as objective reality, often conceived as some reality independent of our comprehension, transcending phenomenal realities of life. Simply put, this perspective sees the truth as something existing by itself; one detaches the self from the truth and observes it from a distance.

How does this perspective affect the interpretation of religious life? The central schema in Unificationism include the Creation, Fall, and Salvation/Restoration/Redemption. This perspective interprets biblical narratives as "objectively real"; the Fall of Man, depicted in the Garden of Eden narrative, literally happened; "original sin" was physically transmitted via physical blood lineage to the descendants of Adam and Eve; in order to "remove" the "original sin," people must participate in the Marriage Blessing in Unificationism; if you attend the Blessing, "original sin" is removed, and children physically born from those "blessed couples" are "sinless." Those with an objectivist perspective interpret the entire process as physically real.

Moreover, objectivists interpret various church events as the epochal God's "providence" at work. Even if

there is no empirical evidence, objectivists interpret biblical narratives, church rituals, and key church events as having "objectively real" changes/effects on human life. What they mean by "objective reality," however, is not the same as what we normally understand the term to mean. In common sense terminology, "objective reality" is established by empirical data and observable evidence or, at least, statistically significant probable evidence.

### **Transformative Interpretation of the Principle**

There is another type of "understanding" found particularly in religion or certain sciences. It is a type of understanding that has transformative effects. For example, "understanding" Enlightenment in Buddhism is possible by having a transformative experience or existential transformation of the self; understanding Buddhist truth requires self-transformation. Using an analogy, while objectivists see truth as outside of the self, the transformative perspective sees truth as the potentiality of the self. In Unificationism, the inseparable link between the self and truth is conceptualized as the concept of being an "Individual Embodiment of Truth."

In psychology, patients' interpretations of their experiences often affect their well-being. Because one's understanding or interpretation of an experience has therapeutic or devastating effects, professionals work to guide patients; a change in perspective or interpretation of an experience directly affects the self.

If you take a transformative approach to the interpretation of the Principle, you will see biblical narratives, religious rituals, church events, and other phenomena under the light of "meaning" as it relates to the self. To see the meaning of a ritual or an experience, one needs to contextualize it in one's own life. By doing so, one finds meaning within the context of one's own life, and through engagement or dialogue with the truth, self-transformation takes place.

The realization of truth in religion happens on a hermeneutic dimension. For example, the question of redemption of the "original sin" through the Marriage Blessing is not explored as an "objective" question, but in terms of what it would "mean" in one's own life; since meanings are open-ended phenomena, one can keep discovering meaning as life contexts develop. The pertinent question of the transformative approach is: what transformative effects does the Principle have on my life? While the objective approach sees the Principle from a distance, the transformative approach sees it in terms of how it works within or upon the self.

How might these two different approaches result in different interpretations? Suppose a young couple is urged by their ardent Unificationist parents to attend the Marriage Blessing ceremony. Suppose they attend it to satisfy their parents' desires; they neither believe in nor agree with Unificationism. Objectivists see attendance itself as meaningful even if the attendees saw no value in it. As long as the couple attends the ritual, objectivists argue that a significant "change" takes place; the couple's internal dimension is irrelevant for the value of the Blessing.

From the transformative perspective, however, the degree of meaningfulness of their participation depends on how the ritual affects their marriage over the course of their lives. If there is no effect, it means nothing. The significance of their participation depends on the transformative effects on the couple, and so the couple's degree or nature of "engagement" with the ritual is critical.

### **The Integral Approach Informed by the Concept of Truth in the Principle**

What approach then does the Principle present? The Principle presents itself as a "unified truth" of "internal truth" religion pursued and "external truth" science explored (*Exposition of the Divine Principle*, pp. 6-7). Although the concept of "unity" requires further clarification, the Principle posits an integral approach.

Generally in science, one detaches the self from the object of inquiry and seeks truth as if he or she is independent. In religion, however, interpretation is often inseparable from the existential status of the inquirer. The Principle seems to present an integral model of the objective (external) and the transformative (internal).

It is ironic the objectivist interpretation of religious phenomena is predominant among Unificationists. The biggest problem is the detachment of the self from the truth. When one objectifies the truth as independent and transcendent, his or her existential status or even his or her life narrative is outside of the scope of interpretation. Each becomes an observer or bystander of the truth. In such scientific inquiries, detachment or neutrality has an advantage. In religious practices, however, detachment can have negative effects. By objectifying the Principle, one becomes an anonymous, nameless neutral observer. Even if you participate in the event, you are still "external" to the truth due to your basic attitude to the interpretation.

### **A Historical Perspective: Why Objectivist Interpretation Became Dominant in Unificationism**

Why did the objectivist interpretation become dominant in the Unification Movement (UM)? Although there may be various reasons, I present one from the perspective of intellectual history.

Although I do not have an accurate account of demographic shifts in the UM over the decades, the main body of its membership joined in the mid- to late 20th century, during the last stage of modernity. In those eras, modernist assumptions including objectivist (it is also universalistic) discourse was dominant. Both Unificationism and Marxism appeared as such thoughts and young people joined the UM during this time period.

The intellectual climate, however, shifted to a type of discourse which examines truth from the perspective of its efficacy in each specific and diverse context; some may call this intellectual context "postmodernism." It contains skepticism against the "grand narrative" (a one-size-fits-all story, applicable to all humanity), progressivism, and other modernist assumptions. In the post-modern or "post"-post-modern or post-truth era, "truth" is measured not by its universalistic objectivistic appeal but by how it in fact works in each diverse (personal, disciplinary, cultural, social) context.



In such an era, ideas/thoughts must be presented in each context and show how they, in fact, work. In the case of Marxism, some theorists took this path (beginning in the early 20th century) and explored a non-modernist interpretation of Marxism, contextualizing it into psychotherapy, social-cultural theory and other specific fields. "Truth" (some gave up on this term because of its modernist connotation) is measured not by universal appeal but by its real effects in each context.

In the UM, modernist Unificationists, who presuppose an objectivist interpretation of the

Principle, have been carrying their "old" framework of thought to this day. Unificationists sometimes lament: "Today's youth no longer seek the truth. That's why they do not respond to Divine Principle lectures or Unificationist teachings." This observation misses the point. The real issue is that the type of truth that the majority of Unificationists interpret as such lost its contemporary relevance. As German philosopher H. G. Gadamer noted, tradition is not maintained by simply holding onto the same view and repeating the same thing; it can be kept alive by renovating it to meet the needs of the era, which requires constant dialogue with the needs of the time.

The late Dr. Sang Hun Lee developed Unification Thought (UT), the only systematic philosophical exposition of the Principle. Because he presented it as a counterproposal to mainstream Marxism, he held the same modern objectivist framework to develop UT.

Can you explore one approach, be it objectivist or transformative, without presupposing the other? Although the two approaches are interrelated, each has relative autonomy and one can take a position without implying the other. For example, an objectivist interprets the Garden of Eden biblical narrative as empirical fact and objectively real. Can you explore the transformative effects of the narrative without taking it as literal fact?

The answer is: yes, one can interpret the narrative as an archetypal myth without taking a definitive stance on its objective reality. Joseph Campbell, a mythologist, took this position. You can leave the question of objectivity open and yet the narrative can remain significant and meaningful. The meaning of the Principle can be explored in terms of its transformative effects without taking a definitive, objectivist stance. Such a possibility is completely closed, however, if your framework of interpretation is solely objectivistic.

There are three main reasons why an objectivist interpretation of the Principle is still dominant: 1) old members who held such modernist assumptions comprise the main body of membership; 2) the conservative tendency of religion and speculative nature of religious teachings prevent innovation; and, 3) there was no critical reflection to examine the contemporary relevance of Unificationism.

### Concluding Thoughts

What can Unificationists do? I propose a radical critique of the question of the contemporary relevance of Unificationism, including the task of critical scrutiny of our interpretive framework. I further propose a balanced and integral approach to interpret the Principle. To counterbalance the current dominant objectivist tendencies, we need to explore the transformative dimension of the Principle: what kind of transformative effects does Unificationism have? By this standard, the measurement of truth is not its universal theoretical construct but empirical evidence in specific disciplinary or social, cultural or

individual life contexts. Unificationists can discover the relevance of the Principle by exploring its relevance and redefining its tradition.

Authentic faith will be established by elevating the objective stance to a critical one, and informing emotional gratification with a transformative experience. By enhancing both dimensions of the hermeneutic stance, we will have a genuinely integral approach. Authentic faith is possible in such a clearly articulated division, and unity will not simply be a mixture of two different approaches but a balance between two poles.

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