

Christian Faith and Korean Culture¹⁾

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1. Introduction: The Korean Religious Context

From the outset I must say that I am not in a good position to deal with this topic. I am neither a professional theologian (albeit I have always been interested in theology), nor an anthropologist, nor an expert in religious studies. I am a professional philosopher usually occupying myself with philosophical texts. Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Levinas are my favorite philosophers, and I have been dealing with them recently in my lectures and writings. Nevertheless, as an active member of the Korean Church and as a philosopher who believes in the triune God, I cannot escape from pondering the relation between Korean culture and Christian faith. To start with, I would like to share from some facts about the religious situation in Korea.

First of all, Koreans are now living in a religiously plural

1) This paper was read at a workshop of the 6th International Symposium of Christian Philosophy held at Hoeven, the Netherlands, between August 21 and 25, 2000.

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society. In the past, Buddhism and Confucianism were, in turn, the state religions. Beginning in the 20th century, Christianity has become dominant. The dominance of Christianity has had the effect of causing people to become aware of their religion. Before Christianity, a common Korean was a Buddhist, a Confucian, a Taoist, and a Shamanist, all in one person. Religious identification depended on the occasion or situation the person found himself in. Religiosity was rather homogeneous and yet it's identity and practice was syncretistic. But now with the advent of Christianity, one is urged to make choices. Religious choice, in turn, results in religious pluralism. In today's context, Korean Christians appear ill-trained to live in a religiously plural culture. One of the urgent tasks for Korean Christians is to learn to understand people of other religions and to live with them in peace.³⁾

Second, after the collapse of state religion at the beginning of the 20th century, faith has become purely a private matter, separated from all other public spheres like politics and science. This means that the public influence of religious faith is less than it could and should be. Public space has become secular, while religious faith remains private and almost powerless to influence public affairs.

Third, since the 1960's there has been much talk of the need for indigenization, but I think the Korean church is already indigenized in terms of Korean religious tradition. Christian faith in Korea has become an instrument for material blessing and psychological comfort. It is my belief that these three aspects of Korea's religious

3) For a detailed analysis of the religious situation in Korea see KIM, Kyoung Jae, *Christianity and the Encounter of Asian Religion* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1994).

situation must be taken into consideration in my story of the Korean Church with regard to the relation between Christianity and culture.

2. The Impact of the Christian Gospel on Korean Culture

The growth of the Korean Church, both Catholic and Protestant, is phenomenal. According to a recent report, there are more than 4 million Catholics, and approximately 10 million Protestants, respectively 8% and 20% of the whole population of South Korea. The beginning of Korean Church however, was not easy. It cost many lives. The first Christians in Korea were Roman Catholics. A young Confucian scholar named YI, Seung-Hun (1756-1801) returned from Beijing in 1784, where he had accompanied his father on a diplomatic mission, and announced to his friends that he had been baptized a Catholic by a French priest in the Chinese capital. At that point there were no Catholic missionaries in Korea, so YI, Seung-Hun began preaching his new faith and studied Christian books he brought from Beijing. He quickly converted a few other Confucian scholars, and even ministered the Mass without knowing that laymen were forbidden to do that by Rome. Then troubles began. The mother of YUN, Chi-Chung (1759-1791), one of the first converts to Catholicism, died and YUN, did not perform the Confucian mourning rituals and memorial service for his mother, because these were forbidden as idolatrous by the Roman church. He and his fellow Catholics were immediately attacked as followers

of an immoral religion. YUN was sentenced to death by the Confucian government for his violation of Confucian moral principles, becoming the first Christian martyr in Korea. After him, thousands more were martyred. Out of them, 103 were singled out, and later canonized as saints.

In passing, I would like to make two remarks. First, the martyrdom of the Catholics was due mainly to a cultural clash sparked by their refusal to follow Confucian mourning and memorial rituals. These first Christians, by refusing traditional culture, preferred death to life, because they found "the Way and the Life" in Jesus Christ. This was really not contrary to the teaching of Confucius who said: "If I hear the Way (*Tao*), dying in that evening will be good as well." To the first Korean Christians, "the Way" was not an abstract principle, but a person to whom they can pray and in whom they can put their trust. Secondly, it is ironic that Korean Catholics are now allowed to participate in ancestor worship, for which thousands died and 103 out of whom were canonized. The cultural accommodation of the Catholics has accelerated and the tension with the Korean cultural environment has been minimized. After the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1984, the number of the Catholics has increased from two million to four million. To Korean Catholics, faith and culture, these are two distinct entities, and therefore must be kept intact and separated from each other. This perspective makes the given culture and customs easily acceptable. Recently, this was confirmed symbolically by Cardinal Stephan Kim's visit to the tomb of the one of the influential Confucian leaders of the first half of the twentieth century, KIM, Chang-Sook. During his visit, he bowed to the tomb

six times, following Confucian precepts. This action was an exception to common practice and therefore a great surprise to many.

When American Protestant missionaries came to Korea in 1884, 100 years after the introduction of the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Christians were confronted with the same cultural clash. It was, however, less extreme, because state authority and Confucian dominance had begun to collapse. The refusal to worship ancestors was no longer identified as an attack on the state and social order. The martyrdom of many Protestant Christians was no longer due to the refusal of ancestor worship, but due to the rejection of the Shinto rituals during the era of Japanese occupation (1910-1945). During the Korean War (1950-1953), many Christians were killed by the communists because of their unwillingness to give up their faith. Faith gradually became a private matter and the question of the ancestor worship was confined to being a matter of family and clan.

Despite many obstacles, the Korean Protestant church has gradually grown and has contributed to the development of Korean culture and society. Allow me to mention a few contributions which are common knowledge to all Koreans. First, modern education and medical systems were introduced by American missionaries. Missionaries and Korean co-workers founded schools and hospitals. Second, the equal right of women to education was proclaimed and schools for girls, who were, up to then, excluded from education, were founded for the first time in history. Third, old customs and habits, such as, drinking, smoking, drugs, early marriage, and superstitions, were called to reform. Among "the superstitions" to

be avoided, were shamanistic practices, *Feng Shui*(geomancy), and bowing down to statues of Buddha. The stigmatization of old religious habits and customs as idolatrous gave rise, naturally, to the conflict between traditional culture and Christianity. Fourth, systematic actions for public enlightenment by means of the publication of newspapers and journals was carried out by Christians. Fifth, *Hongul*, the Korean alphabet, instead of Chinese characters, the letters used by the Confucian literati, was used in the translation of the Bible, newspapers and journals for the first time. *Hongul* made the Bible and Christian literature much more easily accessible to everyone. This is quite contrary to Buddhism which has its main texts written in old Chinese characters, almost inaccessible still to common people. Christians not only made use of *Hongul*, but they also contributed to the wide use of *Hongul* by everyone by using it in publications, teaching and even doing research on grammar and making dictionaries. The first *Hongul* grammar book was written by John Ross, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary, working in China, near the border of North Korea. The first dictionary was made by French missionaries and this work was followed by Horace G. Underwood and J. S. Gale.⁴⁾

Surely, Christians were the "modernizers" of Korean culture and society. Modernization begins by a critique of the established order, world views and lifestyle, and proceeds by providing alternatives. In this sense, I believe Christians are, in all ages and in all places, "modernizers" in the radical sense of the word, viz., "agents for renewal." In Korean reality, however, modernization

4) All these matters are discussed in detail by a Korean historian YI, Mahn-Yol, *The Cultural History of Christian Movement in Korea* (in Korean) (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society, 1987).

meant westernization. For the first Protestant Christians in Korea, the Gospel was the good news, not only for the individual who accepts that news, but also for the whole nation. Korean reformers at the end of the 19th century such as YUN, Tchi-Ho (1865-1945) and SEO, Chae-Pil (1866-1951), were both converts to Christianity. They were also educated in America, and joined forces in 1896 to establish the *Independent*, Korea's first modern newspaper. They argued that Christianity, modernization and national independence went hand in hand. Modernization, as used here, is almost the same as westernization, viz., the change of a whole system of society and culture into something like America. This is indicated by several petition letters of YI, Soo-Jeong, who was baptized in 1883 in Japan, and who translated portions of the New Testament into Korean. In these letters, YI urged American Churches to send missionaries to Korea, for he argued that America is the best land to teach Korea Western civilization as well as Christianity. The coming of Horace G. Underwood, the first Presbyterian missionary, to Seoul in 1885 was the immediate response of the North Presbyterian Church of America to YI's petition.⁵⁾ Indeed, all intellectuals at that time, out of their common Confucian tradition, showed their heartfelt concern for revitalizing their dying country by means of the Christian faith as an alternative to fossilized Confucianism. Christianity, in the form of Protestantism, has always been one of the most important sources of nationalism in Korea. YUN, Tchi-Ho is another example.⁶⁾ After becoming a Christian

5) For a detailed information see YI, Mahn-Yol, *A Study on the History of the Reception of Christianity in Korea* (in Korean) (Seoul: Dooresidae, 1998), pp. 95-109. Underwood came into Seoul with YI's *translation of the Gospel according to Mark*.

and living and studying in America, found that the Chosun (Yi dynasty) government and the depraved public officials were responsible for the miseries of the whole nation. The Chosun government system seemed to be ruled by sheer egoism. In his eyes, Chosun represented the most depraved despotism in history. He describes the Chosun dynasty as "the government by the thieves, for the thieves, of the thieves."⁷⁾ Therefore, morality must be recovered for the "salvation" of Korea, and morality must be rooted in religion. In YUN's opinion, Confucianism could not be a candidate. Christianity, a religion in which teaching can be really be put into practice, alone can provide the basis for a new morality. He wrote,

Confucianists assert that they are good and virtuous by nature, while Christians believe they are wicked. Confucianists destroy their character by the deceit that they are self-righteous. Christians gradually improve their character by means of humility and dependence on divine power. I want to die as a king, born a beggar, rather than as a beggar, born

6) YUN, Tchi-Ho accompanied the Royal Delegate to Japan in 1883. He stayed there and studied "New Learning" and English for two years. He returned to Seoul with the first American envoy to Seoul, L. H. Foot, as his interpreter. When R. S. MacClay, Methodist missionary to Japan, visited Seoul in June 1884 in order to get permission for the mission from the King, Foot engaged in that matter and YUN, Tchi-Ho was their interpreter. YUN wrote in his diary (July 4, 1884 entry): "Our King permitted that American commercial vessels may navigate near the Korean sea; Americans may found hospitals and schools and install electric facilities." YUN was no Christian at that time. He fled to Shanghai, in 1885, after the failure of the Revolution attempted by the Party of the Enlightenment. He studied in Shanghai, and found Christian faith. He was sent to the Vanderbilt University (Nashville, Tennessee) and studied theology for three years and continued to study for two years in Emory University (Atlanta, Georgia) until he came back to Shanghai in 1893 and to Seoul in 1895. For more detailed information see RYU, Dong-Sik, *The Vein of Korean Theology*, (in Korean) (Seoul: Dasan Geulbang, 2000), pp. 50-51.

7) See *Ibid.*, p.56.

a king.⁸⁾

According to YUN, the root of all evils in Korean society lies in egoism and ego-centrism. This evil can only be cured by self-denial before the Cross; by one's recognition of oneself as a sinner and regaining life by being born again in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Gospel was the only way for Korean people to be saved. So YUN wrote in his Diary (December 14, 1889) as follows:

I have a mission to finish. The success and failure of my life will depend on how faithful I am to my mission. My mission is this: to evangelize my people and to educate the young people.⁹⁾

3. The Motif of Faith: the Case of YUN, Tchi-Ho

YUN's case prevents us from interpreting the conversion of the Confucian intellectuals to Christianity merely as an instrument for the social reform and the regeneration of Korea as an *Independent* nation-state. They truly experienced the truth, life and real salvation in and through Jesus Christ. The inner reform and salvation of the soul in Jesus Christ is prior to all programmes for social reform and social salvation. YUN's early document, "A Synopsis of What I Was and What I Am", handed to W. B. Bonnel,

8) Quoted from RYU, *ibid.*, p. 57. This quotation is from YUN's Diary entry of August 15, 1984.

9) See RYU, *ibid.*, p. 59.

an American Methodist missionary, at Shanghai in 1887, eloquently tells us his personal motives for becoming a Christian.

I had not heard of God before I came to Shanghai, for I was born in a heathen land and brought up in a heathen society. I was taught in heathen literature. I continued in sin, even after having been informed of the Divine Religion, because sensual gratification was preferred to a sober and godly life. I reasoned that human life being short, one must be allowed to enjoy as much leisure as he is able. I thought that "a whole man does not need a physician", i.e., I was content with my own righteousness, as if there were any in me. The more I thought I was righteous, the more debased I became. From the early part of 1886 to the close of the same year I found myself walking in a different path from that which I had pursued. For I became conscious of my wickedness and of the necessity of preparing a pure soul for the future world, which I never before believed in. I discovered the utter impossibility of having a truly sinless life by human means alone. Recently, I read over the four principal Confucian books, and found many good proverbs. But since no one is bound to obey them, and since they - the maxims - cannot satisfy the demands of the soul, I failed to find what I sought for. I attempted to shake off many evil practices, and in some measure succeeded in doing away with some of the leading sins which I loved, like money. This effort was helped by the Bible, other religious books and religious lectures. The obstacles to my conversion were: the fear of persecution and mockery; the liability of making adversaries of former friends; and the frequent attacks of doubt and other temptations. I desire to be baptized, for the hope that I may spend my time and talents, whether they be five or one, on improving my knowledge and faith in the religion, so that I may, God willing, live a useful life for myself and for my brethren. That I may, when night comes, have no need of seeking for salvation at the gate of death, as

many do. I may thereby be acknowledged as a different man from which I was, and lessen the number of temptations into which one is liable to be led when he stands midway, undecided which way to go. I believe that God is love, Christ is the Savior. If the prophecies concerning this physical world have been so literally fulfilled, those concerning the future world must be as true.

YUN, T.H., March 23, 1987.¹⁰⁾

YUN's experience shows us what happened to a Korean when he was confronted with the Gospel. YUN belonged to the upper class, and was educated in the Confucian tradition which transmitted a thorough knowledge of Confucian texts including the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Great Learning* and the *Book of Means*. These four books contain the typical worldview of Confucianism:

- 1) That "Heaven" is the ruling principle of everything that exists.
- 2) That human beings are good and virtuous by nature and can reach perfection by means of personal discipline.
- 3) That morality consists in following the natural virtues: benevolence, righteousness, civility, and wisdom.
- 4) That concrete moral duties are determined by hierarchical and mutual interpersonal relationships between parents and children, husband and wife, king and subjects.
- 5) And that the goal of history and of time is the return to the Old Age.

Within this worldview YUN had no problems. When first being

10) This synopsis is published originally in *The Gospel in All Land* (June, 1887), a journal for oversea mission in America. I quote this text from RHIE, Deok-Joo & CHO, Yee-Jei, *Creed and Confessions of Korean Church* (in Korean), (Seoul: Han Deul, 1997), pp.27-28.

confronting with the Gospel, YUN felt himself righteous, "a whole man" who was not in need of a doctor and he "reasoned that human life is short, one must be allowed to enjoy as much pleasure as he is able". This is his "aesthetic stage". He, gradually, however, found that the more he asserted he was righteous, the more debased he became. This is an "ethical stage." The Gospel was not an answer for him. It rather questioned him; it brought him into crisis; he became conscious of his wickedness; he fell in despair. He felt himself to be impure, and that he must prepare a "pure soul for the future world", and he discovered "the utter impossibility of having a truly sinless life by any human means." YUN tried to find his answer in Confucianism, with which he already was familiar. But he found that the "four principal Confucian books" contained "many good proverbs", but could not "satisfy the demands of the soul". Attempts to improve his evil practice succeeded in some measure and this effort was aided by reading the Bible and Christian literature. This induced him to be baptized with hope that he could be a better man who lives "a useful life for myself and for my brethren". So he confessed that he believed that God is love and Christ is the Savior. This is the third stage of his adventure, which could be called "religious" according to Kierkegaard.

In the case of YUN, we can apply the Kuhnian term "paradigm shift". Christian faith brought in YUN's and other Korean Christians' life a real "paradigm shift". Up to that time they lived within the Confucian paradigm. Within this paradigm one was good and virtuous and self-sufficient if one observed the duties of filial piety and avoided things such as stealing, lying, killing etc.. Being confronted with the gospel, however, one confronts "sin", which is

an "anomaly" in Kuhn's term. At first, one tries to find the solution for that "anomaly" within the Confucian texts. These are "good proverbs, but can't provide for the "demand of the soul" for purity and sinlessness. This demand is answered only by accepting a different paradigm, viz., believing in Jesus Christ as the Savior. Accepting Jesus Christ as the Savior and Lord accompanies the change of worldview; the view of oneself, neighbour, the environment, God, and the goal of life. Discontinuity takes place between the old and new paradigms. One looks at the world now with different eyes and a different mind. YUN describes his baptism on April 3, 1887 by W. B. Bonnel as follows.

At 10 a.m. I was baptized. The sky was blue, the weather warm, a breeze drove the clouds. It was the best weather we had in days. From now on I firmly made up my mind to believe the Lord and to serve his Holy Teaching. Today is the biggest day in my whole life.¹¹⁾

His words are almost apathetic, cool, seemingly nature-friendly, yet undoubtedly his unswerving attitude of faith is palpable in this passage. Quite unlike the famous *Memorial* of Blaise Pascal. I believe this is a typical response of a Confucian scholar who has been disciplined for long a time to control emotions and bodily comportment. His description is short, telling rather sky, wind, and cloud, but joy streams in his mind softly like warm April weather. Undoubtedly, the paradigm is shifted. YUN found new life and a new goal.

Nevertheless, the conversion of YUN has a circular structure and

11) See RYU, *op.cit.*, p. 54 (From YUN's Diary on April 3, 1887).

the Confucian understanding of subjectivity still plays a crucial role in asking, reflecting, pondering, and finding the solution in baptism. I believe that Confucian training provided YUN with the pre-understanding of how to seek, how to accept and how to work as a Christian. Allow me to expand on this. By circular structure, I mean that one identifies the "problem" (sin) and the freedom from it. It would be more accurate to call this "wickedness" in YUN's terms, since the word "sin" does not occur in his text. This problem is then solved by hearing the gospel. Before hearing the gospel there is no problem. Everyone believes that he is whole and healthy. It is the gospel which brings man the "sickness unto death." In turn, liberation from this "sickness" also comes from the gospel. Therefore I call this a circular structure. In this circularity the cultural elements engage as a basis, as a tool, as a language, and as a horizon in and with which the subjective act of believing and the gospel mediate each other.

YUN's orientation was predominantly ethical and self-reflective. He looked to books to solve the problem of how he could bring resolution to his life, allowing him to live in a way that was useful for himself and for his brethren. This orientation is determined by his Confucian training. Confucius advises everyone of us to reflect on three things everyday: whether or not I do things to other people which I do not want to be done to myself; whether or not I act toward friends without trust; and whether or not I teach other people without really mastering myself. In a sense, Confucius is the first thinker in the East-Asian culture to pay attention to "the reflective self". His main concern was how I do things to other people. His criterion is always "what I want". Of course, "I" is a

reflective self who can act as if what I know is what is really good for me. It is noteworthy that YUN, Tchi-Ho found in himself a discrepancy between what he thinks and knows of himself (the "righteous one") and what he does (the "debased"). We can hear the echo of St. Paul in the Seventh chapter of the Letter to the Romans. YUN thought only the denial of I, not the I-claim, on the Cross could save himself and the nation, because he saw in egoism or the I-claim the root of all the evil in society. YUN learned the reflective attitude from Confucianism, but criticizes the very concept of "reflective self" experiencing the discrepancy between the subject of knowing and the subject of doing.

His method of trying to find the solution by means of reading books was also typical of Confucian literati. In Confucianism there is a deep reverence for letters/texts/books. When I was young I sometimes heard my father say: "Don't sit on books; that's debasing books. Anyone who debases books is like one who debases his father." The reverence for books is a cultural tradition which can explain why Korean Christians love the Bible so much. The first Korean Bible translations were begun by Scottish Presbyterian missionaries and their Korean co-workers in Manchuria around 1882/3 and transported to the Korean peninsula before American missionaries arrived in 1884 and 1885. When the first Presbyterian missionary, Horace G. Underwood entered Korea, he brought the New Testament portion translated into Korean by YI, Soo-Jeoung in Japan. So-called "colporteurs" and "Bible-women" later distributed Bibles throughout Korea. It is said that the first American missionaries shouted: "We came to sow the seeds, but we are busy harvesting!" The eagerness for the Bible is

witnessed by the fact that the revival meeting always went hand in hand with a Bible study meeting. Two recent phenomena of Korean Christians love for Bible can be seen in the practice of the Quiet Time and the "Class for Bible Reading from *Genesis to Revelation* within One Week",¹²⁾

4. The Great Awakening of 1903-1907 and the Practice of Faith

YUN, Tchi-Ho is merely an example of the Koreans whose faith in Christ is motivated both by the personal quest for salvation and the salvation of the lost nation. After the annexation of Korea to Japan in 1910, YUN and others, chose the education of the youth as a basis for the independence movement from Japan, while some radical Christians preferred the military resistance movement in order to bring down the Japanese power occupying the Korean peninsula. This latter preference faced the objections of the American missionaries who prohibited Korean Christians engaging in politics, on the basis of the "separation of Politics and Religion",¹³⁾

A significant event with regards to our theme is the revival movement between 1903 and 1907 which took place throughout

12) The negative aspects of love for books can also be pointed out. Literalism and biblicism on the one hand and the neglect of doing what one reads, on the other.

13) I am not going to discuss this in detail. MIN, Kyoung-Bae made a thorough study of the radicals in his *History of Nationalistic Movement and Faith Movement in Korean Christianity during the Japanese Occupation* (in Korean) (Seoul: Society of Christian Literature in Korea, 1991), pp. 143-199.

Korea. This revival movement began in Wonsan where Southern Methodist missionary R. A. Hardie worked. During a prayer and Bible study meeting in August, 1903, Hardie and his fellow-missionaries were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they and their Korean co-workers felt the depth of their hidden sins and began to publicly confess their sins and experienced God's forgiving and renewing grace. This "fire" of the Holy Spirit always accompanied by great repentance, spread to Pyongyang, Seoul and other places by means of meetings for confession and repentance. During the day, Korean Christians learned and studied the Bible, including their favorite books of *Daniel* and the *Revelation*. In the evening, they participated in enthusiastic, very emotional revival meetings lead by individuals such as KIL, Seon-Ju (1869-1935). The revival movement and the associated "Bible study meetings" became typical of the Korean Church, even up to the 1970's and 1980's. Revivalism became a characteristic of the Korean Church and produced many revivalists like KIM, Ik-Du (1874-1950) and YI, Yong-Do (1901-1933). Paul Yonggi Cho, the leader of the Yoido Full Gospel Church is one of the heirs of this line in the Korean Church.

According to RHIE, Deok-Joo, a Korean Church historian, the 1903-1907 revival movement is significant in four ways.

First, Korean Christians experienced "the essential Christian faith" which moved from repentance through regeneration to sanctification. Prior to this experience, Christianity was the "religion of the Westerners", but now Koreans experienced what the Westerners had already experienced, and in this way Koreans could come to the recognition that Christianity was different from

indigenous religions like Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism and began to feel that they belonged to the same tradition of faith as the Westerners. Koreans began to know what it really is to be a Christian.

Second, Korean Christian ethics were established by this time of great repentance. The revival movement began with repentance and ended in the renewal of ethics. Adultery, murder, stealing, lying, hate, mockery, were confessed publicly and the public confessions lead to "restitution" or "reparation" of what one did wrong to others. Besides the sins what we are found universally among any people group, "sins" were included what were not sins in Confucian society. For example, keeping concubines, having slaves, smoking and drinking. Christian ethics provided Koreans with not only the knowledge of what it really is to be "ethical," but also to prepare for the modern civil society in which the rights and duties of the individuals are crucial.

Third, the revival movement brought Koreans and Western missionaries into one community. They overcame distrust, learned to respect each other and became one in Christ, their common Lord. Also remarkable was the overcoming of denominationalism, which came with American missionaries, and is still influencing the Korean church.

Fourth, the indigenous, typically Korean practice of faith was formed by and during the Revival Movement. Western missionaries played a crucial role at the beginning, but this role was gradually taken over by the Koreans. In this way, spontaneous indigenization took place and traditional religious and cultural practices were introduced into Korean Christianity without it being intentional.

Among these practices are the "early morning prayer meeting". Another is the loud "audible prayer" during almost every church service, which was first described as chaos by the missionaries, but later on regarded as "wonderful harmony". A third practice is the so-called "day offering" - the offering of a day, for instance, for evangelism by visiting every house in a village, and the "rice offering" - placing a handful of rice in a pot at every meal in order to support the evangelists. These practices emerged in every local church at the beginning of this spontaneous and unorganized evangelization and self-reliance movement.¹⁴⁾

Without doubt, KIL, Seon-Ju, one the first seven Presbyterian pastors ordained in 1907 and a central figure during the revival movement of 1907, contributed much to the Korean practice of faith in the soil of Korean culture. He originally came from a Confucian family, meaning that he had learned classic Chinese, had read the texts of Confucianism and had prepared for the state examination. After several incidents, he entered Korean Taoism. He underwent many Taoist exercises of mind control as well as the exercises to enhance the power of body to the highest level by reading Taoist texts and exercising Taoist techniques of breathing and body movement. His practice included early morning prayer everyday, an annual non-stop hundred day long prayer on the mountain, and a diet consisting of eating only raw rice and pine-tree needles and drinking water. He is said to have experienced very strong power and the descent and abiding of the divine spirit in him. When he

14) See RHIE, Deok-Joo, *A Study on the Formation of the Indigenous Church in Korea, 1903-1907* (in Korean) (Seoul: Research Institute for the History of Korean Church, 2000), pp. 164-167. For more detailed discussion see p. 91ff.

prayed, he sometimes heard the sound of a flute and was surprised by the roar of a gun. He was happy in thinking that he had found the "Way"(the *Tao*, 道). After ten years of exercise which he began when he was 19 years old, he became a famous Taoist and could show his extraordinary powers to the people of Pyongyang. He found some peace of mind and enjoyed health, but doubted for sometime whether or not what he found was the true *Tao*. From his former Taoist friend, KIM, Jong-Sub(1862-1940), he heard about the gospel for the first time. KIM handed the Chinese Bible to KIL, but KIL was not impressed by his first reading. Later on, KIM brought KIL among others a Korean translation of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.¹⁵⁾ KIL asked himself whether this Christianity was the "true *Tao*", the true Way. Everyday he prayed to "the God, the Three Spirits"(三靈神君), the God of Korean Taoists, to let him know whether this *Tao* of Jesus was true or false *Tao*, but he received no response. He fell into depression. One day, KIM, Jong-Sub, his friend, visited him and asked whether he had found an answer. KIM advised him to pray to "God the Father" instead of the "God, the Three Spirits." KIL asked: "How can our human being call God "Father"? KIM responded: "Call Him, then, *Sangti* (the Highest King, 上帝) and pray to Him!" KIL prayed to *Sangti*, the Christian God with a petition to let him know what true prayer was. At 1 o'clock in the early morning after three days of praying, KIL asked God to let him know whether Jesus was the true Savior and suddenly he heard the sound of the flute and after this the roar of a gun and then the voice calling him three times, "KIL, Seon-Ju,

15) *Pilgrim's Progress* was translated by American Presbyterian missionary J. S. Gale in 1895. Since then and during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), it was almost the second Bible to Korean Christians.

KIL Seon-Ju, KIL Seon-Ju!" He fell down on the ground and prayed: "God the Father who loves me, forgive my sin and save me!" KIL cried loudly for a long time and, feeling his body almost as on fire, tried to pray without resting.¹⁶⁾

KIL's conversion shows us continuity in his religious experience. When he prayed to *Sangti*(Christian God), he heard the same sound of the flute followed by the roar of a gun as he had earlier prayed to "God, the Three Spirits". KIL continued his practice of prayer after his conversion to the Christian faith. He is said to be really "a man of prayer". He prayed three times a day: early in the morning, at noon and at mid-night. After early morning prayer and reading the Bible he exercised by doing Taoist gymnastics. Several elements of KIL's experience continue on in Korean Church practice today. One element, the practice of early morning, pre-dawn, prayer became the tradition of the Korean Church. Almost without exception, Korean churches have an "early morning prayer service", beginning at 5 o'clock in the morning. This is frequently called "building the early morning altar". Myongsung Presbyterian Church in Seoul is famous for its early morning prayer meetings with more than about five thousand adult members participating every morning. Not only early morning prayer, but also the practice of prayer on a mountain has become a strong tradition in Korea. This is the second element of KIL's experience to have broad impact in churches today. Many Koreans before and after KIL preferred to pray on a mountain both regularly and on the occasion of making important decisions. All the men who were known as a "men of prayer" in the Korean church prayed

16) RHIE, Deok-Joo, *The Conversion Stories of the Korean Christians (in Korean)* (Seoul: Jeonmangsa, 1990), pp. 336-347.

on a mountain. To Koreans, a mountain is said to have been a "meeting place between God and man," "a place to experience God's creation and the religious reformation of man" and a "meeting place of men as the members of the divine community." In a word, mountain has been a "sanctuary" to Korean people.¹⁷⁾ The favorite *Kidwons* (prayer houses) have been and still are built on mountains. A third element in KIL's experience that is still practiced today is the claim to directly hear the voice of God during prayer. There are many examples of this type of experience in greater and less well known men and women in the Korean church. One of the expressions of "faithful" Korean Christians is: "God said this or that to me during my prayer." What one thinks that God said to him or to her becomes a conviction so strong that it cannot be reversed or thought otherwise.

In summary, it is impossible to deny that KIL, Seon-Ju helped familiarize Koreans with the Christian faith by introducing the traditional religious practice of prayer. In traditional practice, prayer is either a means to petition some high being for blessing or a means of being empowered. It is difficult to say that these aspects of prayer are unbiblical, even though it is possible to say that this is short of what the full range of prayer is in the biblical sense.

In KIL's case the paradigm shift is not so dramatic. Simply to say, KIL believed in the true God the same as he practiced Taoism. The object of his faith changed from "God, the Three Spirits", to "God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit". He found Christian faith as the true *Tao*, true *Hodos* (John 14:6), the true Way. Just before his conversion, he fell in despair by thinking that Taoism

17) See John Lee, "Towards Understanding Koreans' Faith in Mountain", in: *Christian Thought*, June/July, 1967, pp. 146-155

was a "rotten rope" which could not help him to climb to the top of the cliff. For him, Jesus Christ was the "strong rope" in which he could trust. His change was not from a rope to a stick; it was a change from a "rotten rope" to "strong rope." Here also is the continuity between the old and new faith. This can also be illustrated by means of the change of books which he read as the canon for his life. KIL didn't read Taoist texts any longer; he read the Bible instead, but he read it eagerly and frequently the same as he read the Taoist texts before his conversion. A well known story states that after signing the Declaration of Independence as one of the 33 national representatives he was sent to prison for two years. While imprisoned, he read the book of *Revelation* 800 times. Gadamer's "fusion of horizon" model seems to describe KIL's case. Strong confrontation with the new religion and the harsh rejection of the old one did not happen. It is more accurate to say that KIL's Taoist faith gave way to the Christian faith because it proved more true, useful, and trustworthy than the former faith. Christian faith made his Taoist faith almost obsolete. When we climb up to the top we don't need the ladder any longer, the ladder becomes obsolete; but in order to climb we are still in need of a ladder. Taoism was that kind of ladder to KIL. However, the old practice of faith still remains. I believe that KIL learned much from the missionaries on how to believe and how to live as a Christian. Nevertheless, he transplanted his old religious practices into his new faith.

In this way, Christianity, foreign to East-Asian culture, becomes indigenous gradually and spontaneously. Koreans began to believe in God as Koreans had practiced long before Christianity came into this peninsula. The object and content of faith is changed now, but

the way and the practice of faith is almost the same with some modification. Koreans go to church as they in the past went to the Shaman's shrine or the Buddhist temple in order to pray for material blessing, empowerment, and for recovery from sickness. Jesus' saying: "It is written 'My house will be called a house of prayer'" (Matthew 21:13) is understood and preached from this tradition. Church is "a house of prayer". The Pastor, whose work-place is the church, has replaced the shaman, priest and Buddhist monk who prays for "the recovery from sickness" or for the "success in the school/university entrance examination". This image of the church and pastor is reinforced by biblical image of "sanctuary" and "priest". Therefore, to participate in the early morning prayer meeting is to "build an altar". "Altar" and "sanctuary" are still used frequently for church service and church building, respectively. The practice of faith for Korean Christians is mainly church building centered. The official services of a local church, beside several meetings and Bible studies, includes two Sunday services, pre-dawn prayer services every morning including Sunday, Wednesday evening prayer service, and an all-night prayer meeting on Friday. The negative effects of this kind of spontaneous indigenization should not be overlooked. Pastors have taken the position of the priest in the Old Testament and church buildings have become sacralized as Temples. The world outside the church building is regarded as profane, having nothing to do with God's reign. Belief in God is nothing more than to reserve a ticket for Heaven in the future and to guarantee success and material welfare in the present life.

5. Post Korean War Revival Movement and "This-Worldism"

The rapid growth of the Korean church following the Korean War seems due to the evangelistic fervor of Korean Protestants. Almost one out of five South Koreans is now Protestant. Another factor may be Korean's identification of Christianity with the West. An additional factor may also be the rapid urbanization and industrialization of South Korea, which has ripped millions of Koreans out of villages. Churches in big cities provided "an oasis of friendship and community in a desert of strangers".¹⁸⁾ This could be confirmed by the fact that there have been more conversions to Christianity in the cities than in the countryside, and that the rate of growth of Protestant churches has slowed as urbanization has slowed.

During the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's, there were two different reactions of Korean Christians to the social, economic and political situation. One reaction was to go hand in hand with President PARK, Chung-Hee's policies of economic development at the price of dictatorship. The other reaction was to battle for democratization. Both Catholic and Protestant churches took leadership and spoke against PARK, Chung-Hee's dictatorial system as well as against corruption, injustice and the exploitation of workers and farmers which were parts of Korea's economic growth. Many pastors,

18) Donald Baker, "Christianity", in: Hohn H. Koo & Andrew C. Nahm (ed.), *An Introduction to Korean Culture* (Seoul: Hollym, 1997), p. 191.

priests and Christian activists who shared their belief in the social gospel, were jailed for their non-violent expressions of concern for the rights of the underprivileged. But not all Christians and Christian pastors espouse the social gospel and most Christians are not drawn to Church pews by political concerns. As Donald Baker accurately points out, "for many, personal happiness is more important than what kind of government they live under".¹⁹⁾ Apolitical Christians, who in the past would have turned to shamanism, now choose Christianity instead as a more appropriate, effective, and modern tool for obtaining worldly goods.

One of the prominent leaders of the *popular Christianity* after Korean War period is, undoubtedly, Rev. Paul (now, David) CHO (CHO, Yong-Gi, 1936-). CHO preaches prosperity rather than politics. He proclaims that faith in Jesus will be awarded with good health, material prosperity as well as spiritual well-being. "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well"(3 John 2). This is the favorite passage quoted almost every time CHO, Yong-Gi preaches. This is the source of CHO's so-called "Triple Blessings": the well-being of soul, good health and material prosperity. His message is so popular that his church, the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, claims to have the largest membership of any single church in the world, over 700,000.²⁰⁾

CHO, Yong-Gi's message and ministry are unthinkable without taking into account the miserable situation of the common people after liberation from Japanese power (1945) and the subsequent war (1950-1953) with North Korea (supported by the Soviet Union and

19) Donald Baker, *ibid.*, p. 194.

20) See Donald Baker, *ibid.*, p.195.

Communist China) and South Korea(supported by the United Nations). CHO, Yong-Gi tells us about the situation of the people at the end of the 1950's.

The poor people in my area were not too concerned about heaven or hell. They lived from hand to mouth each day and were more concerned about daily survival. Often they didn't know where their next meals would come from. They had no time to think of their future.²¹⁾

In facing the poverty and despair of the common people, CHO proclaimed the gospel of hope and comfort instead of the other-worldly apocalyptic message, fashionable in the Korean Church since the 1920's and KIL, Seon-Ju being a good example. Under the Japanese oppression, the second coming and millennial reign of Jesus seemed to be the only hope for Koreans. During and after the War, however, every Korean faced having to survive or to perish. In this situation, neither apocalyptic or ethical message could console people in their unbearable sufferings. In stark contrast to the revivalists of the former generation, CHO, Yong-Gi was oriented to this world. For him and for many other revivalists of his generation, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was the power to change the situation "here and now". Therefore, what Christians must do was only to believe and to think positively, because Jesus said: "Everything is possible for him who believes."(Mark 9:23) This is the other favorite passage of CHO quoted in his preaching and healing. It is not difficult to imagine how the Christian gospel interpreted and proclaimed in this way, has worked effectively and

21) David (Paul) Yonggi Cho, *The Fourth Dimension* (Seoul: Seoul Logos Co., Inc., 1979), p.172.

powerfully as the source of comfort, power and hope to the miserable, powerless and hopeless people.

CHO, Yong-Gi understood common powerless people very well because he was one of them and he had suffered from the same agonies as other people: poverty, sickness, despair, hate, and the sense of the guilt. Although born into a Buddhist family, Buddhism was not an answer for him. The Christian Gospel was good news for him which proclaimed the liberation from all these negative things in human life. He experienced the fullness of the Holy Spirit, speaking with tongues and receiving healing from tuberculosis. He was comforted by, and satisfied with the Gospel.²²⁾ From this experience he could proclaim the comforting Gospel. There was nobody and no church so successful as CHO, Yong-Gi and the Yoido Full Gospel Church in comforting and satisfying common people who must live in a situation of survive or perish.²³⁾ His message of "Triple Blessing" touched the heart of common Koreans, moved it, and made it pulsating with power. It ignited the "will to live" and reinforced the conviction that "we can do it". What is remarkable in this movement is that "filled with the Holy Spirit" is regarded as the most effective means for the Triple Blessings. Speaking with tongues and "fasting and praying" are strongly recommended. The most effective way to cope with daily problems is to pray and fast at the Kidowon. In addition to the "Yoido Sanctuary," Yoido Full Gospel Church manages one of the biggest

22) For Cho's conversion story see Yonggi Cho, *ibid* p. 17ff.

23) I agree with KIM, Heung-Soo who is of opinion that CHO, Yong-Gi and Yoido Full Gospel Church is most successful in developing a theology of material prosperity and health, satisfying the "survival motif" of Koreans. See KIM, Heung-Soo, *A Study of the Korean War and This-Wordly Blessings in the Christian Churches* (a Ph.D. dissertation, in Korean) (Seoul: Institute for Korean Church History, 1999), p. 145.

Kidawons near Seoul.

In my opinion, CHO, Yong-Gi is more successful than any other person in the last two decades, in the spontaneous and natural indigenization of Christian faith on Korean cultural soil. This is not to say that he intended to do this, as some theologians have tried by means of "theology" since the 1960's. He did not start from a doctrine or a theology. Quite contrary to the attitude of the Presbyterian and Methodist pastors forming the majority of Korean churches, CHO captured actual problems of the people in suffering and helped them to a solution. "He stressed what he called the here-and-now of the gospel, plus love," says his biographer.²⁴⁾ For CHO, Yong-Gi, faith is needed for problem-solving. He advises us: "Have faith in God in order to solve your problem!". His ministry is directed to problem-solving. This is shown in his attitude to preaching. When he prepares for the Sunday sermon, he says,

"So, I go to our prayer mountain on Saturday, crawl into a prayer grotto, close the door and sit there until the Holy Spirit comes and gives God's spoken Word. Sometimes I stay the whole night through during that time praying, "Lord, tomorrow the people are coming with all kinds of problems, -sickness, disease, family problems, problems in business - every type of problem that can be imagined.

"They are coming not only to hear general knowledge about you, but they are coming to receive real solutions to their problems. If we don't give them living faith, then they are going to go back home without receiving their solutions. I need to have a specific message for the

24) Nell L. Kennedy, *Dream Your Way to Success. The Story of Dr. Yonggi Cho and Korea* (Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos International, 1980), p. 165.

specific people on this specific Sunday.

"After I preach, people in the congregation come to me and say, "Pastor, your sermon was exactly what I needed. I've got the faith that my problem will be solved."²⁵⁾

This attitude of problem-solving is in itself not to blame. It is human reality that there are so many people with so many problems and troubles. In Matthew 4, we read: "When Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them"(4:23-24) Many people came to Jesus with their own problems. Jesus never dismissed the people. He had compassion for them.

What I find difficult in the problem-oriented ministry of CHO, Yong-Gi is its formative power which has reinforced a specific type of the practice of faith, viz., "faith oriented in this-worldly blessings". To speak honestly, this is not the invention of CHO, Yong-Gi. "This-worldliness" or "Temporality" is the most persistent characteristic of religious practice in Korea, whether Buddhism or Confucianism. It is rooted very deeply in the religious affections of Koreans and is strongly influenced throughout history by Korean shamanism. In my opinion, CHO, Yong-Gi definitely contributed to annexing Christian faith to this form of Korean religion. He and other revivalists and many pastors following him

25) CHO, Yong-Gi, *The Fourth Dimension*, p. 106.

widely outside the Pentecostal movement, have disseminated the thought that material prosperity in this world is the good sign of God's blessing. Christians are encouraged to strive for material prosperity and worldly success much more than non-Christians. Listen again to CHO, Yong-Gi in the seventh meditation of his Fourth Dimension:

Dear Brothers and Sister in Christ, as Christians you too have all of God's power dwelling within you right now. You can tap that resource for your tuition, your clothes, your books, your health, your business, everything!²⁶⁾

More recently, CHO has accentuated the primacy of the well-being of the soul over material prosperity and health. Nevertheless, his concern lies undeniably in providing solutions to the problems of his audience like "sickness, disease, family problems, problems in business". To the extent that I am constantly oriented to personal problems (eg. "my" family, "my" success, and "my" church), they will become primary and other people's sufferings and troubles will become secondary and mostly overlooked. This type of practice of faith, starting from my own needs, is inevitably self-centered. Isn't self-centered *Christian* faith *contradictio in terminis*?

26) CHO, Yong-Gi, *ibid.*, p. 206.

6. Faith, Human Needs and Beyond Needs

Let's consider the relationship between the practice of faith and human needs. Religious faith is always related to human needs. As Nicholas Wolterstorff precisely expressed it, faith is for some "the solution of a sense of guilt so deep and pervasive that nothing in the world will free them".²⁷⁾ Wolterstorff continues in the same passage,

"For some, it is a way of calming fears and anxieties and finding the peace that passes understanding. For some it provides inspiration and drive where otherwise they would flag in performing the tasks and duties or ultimate security or awe and mystery. For some it "explains" miraculous happenings, explains the design and order of things, explains why there is anything at all. For some, it is an alternative and preferable way organizing their beliefs about the universe to that which can be found in natural science. For some it answers the riddle of human existence and reveals the meaning of human life."

Wolterstorff concludes this passage by saying: "The character of man's faith depends on which of these needs he feels; its focus depends on which of these needs he feels most deeply." And I believe that these needs, in turn, depend on cultural tradition, social context, as well as on personal quests and desires.

The three individuals I have discussed here are no exception. YUN was in a solitary and frustrating situation in Shanghai, an exile place for him after the failure of revolution in 1884. Later on,

27) Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Faith and Philosophy," in Alvin Plantinga (ed.), *Faith and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 28.

he saw in Christianity the alternative to Confucianism for personal perfection and social reform. A Taoist, KIL, saw his country almost collapsing due to the war between Japan and China, which made the Korean peninsula their battlefield. Having to escape out of Pyongyang, he sought for the true *Tao*, the Way, which can provide individuals and countries with real power to transcend and manipulate this world. CHO, being brought up during Japanese colonialism and the Korean War, was confronted with poverty and sickness. The needs of each enticed them into the Christian faith.

In the end, we are left with a question. Can I practice my faith in Jesus Christ solely on the basis of "my" needs, "my" problems or "my" troubles? Surely, Jesus invites us: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give rest."(Matthew 11:28) Before this passage, in chapter 4 we read: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them"(Matthew 4: 23-24) Jesus touches human needs and gives solutions. But I think that Jesus does not want me to be one of the crowds(*okloi*) who follows out of needs(Matthew 4: 25). He wants me to be a disciple who must deny oneself and take up one's cross and follow him(Cf. Matthew 16: 24). A disciple of Jesus is someone who lives out of God's command, not out of his needs. True Christians must confess as Paul confesses: " I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in

the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”(Galatians, 2: 20).

One's motif and focus in faith can be varied, but all Christians share belief, trust and obedience to the triune God in common.²⁸⁾ Christian faith is a personal commitment to God. Though the practice of faith can be clothed by cultural tradition, faith is personal in its core, a relationship to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This personal relationship to God brings change in life, in the direction of life and in worldview. So, if this change does not occur, faith and eventually God might merely become instruments of my needs, my strivings, my plan of life. This tendency lies deeply in human religiosity: to make use of God or the Transcendent in order to implement my needs and desires. It might be an exaggeration to say that the Korean Church is driven by this kind of religiosity. Nevertheless, this is one of the biggest dangers inherent in Korean religious culture. Korean Church and Korean Christians are really in need of meeting Jesus Christ as the "critic" who brings everything into crisis, as well as the healer and a "life-giving spirit"(I Cor. 15:45).

- 요약 -

이 글은 한국의 전통 종교 문화가 한국 그리스도인들의 신앙 생활에 어떤 영향을 미쳤는가 하는 물음과 함께 시작되었다. 이 물음을 다루기 위해 필자는 윤치호, 길선주, 조용기 세 사람을 다루었다. 이들을 택한 까닭은 이들이 한국 근대 문화 형성에 큰 영향을 주었다거나 한

28) These three elements of faith is discussed by Dewey J. Hoytenga, Jr. See his *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga. An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 38ff.

국 그리스도인의 순수하고 열정적인 신앙을 보여준 탁월한 모범이기 때문이 아니라 - 만일 그런 분을 찾았다면 다른 분들이 더 적합했을 것이다 - 이들의 신앙 생활이 당시의 시대적 상황과 한국 전통 종교 문화의 영향을 선명하게 보여주기 때문이다. 윤치호는 비록 유교를 비판하지만 그의 신앙의 태도는 유교의 영향을 가장 분명하게 보여주는 예라면, 길선주는 유교 배경에서 자랐지만 특별히 기도의 습관과 관련하여 한국 선도의 영향을 보여주고, 조용기는 불교 환경에서 자랐지만 한국 종교 전통이 지닌 현세성을 분명하게 보여준다. 논문의 결론 부분에서 필자는 인간의 욕구에 기인한 신앙이 전적으로 무의미한 것은 아니지만 그럼에도 현실적 욕구와 이익을 뛰어넘어 제자도를 실천하는 것이 신앙 생활의 참된 의미임을 강조하였다.