

# Korean Theology: Past and Present

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## THE IDEA OF ASIAN THEOLOGY

We live in an age of theological pluralism. Theological pluralism has always existed within the church, but what distinguishes today's pluralism from that of the past is that the former takes it as a virtue rather than a vice. No longer considered as an undesirable consequence of the unfortunate divisions within the church, theological pluralism is being deliberately pursued with a great deal of enthusiasm and firm methodological conviction. Nowadays theologians are fully aware of the historical conditioning of theologizing activity. Theology is no longer regarded naively as a quest for some universal truth; its inevitable historicity due to human finitude is openly confessed to be taken as a starting point for a new way of doing theology, giving rise to unprecedented theological freedom and creativity. We not only have liberation theologies but also theological liberation.

The historicity of our theological activity reveals itself in two forms: cultural and ideological. Theology is not merely culturally bound but also ideologically conditioned. Truth itself may indeed be universal, but the way theologians—qua human beings—conceive it varies from culture to culture and from social situation to social situation. We do not deplore this fact. Instead, we humbly and honestly acknowledge our human finitude and try to do theology in a more responsible way. Thus we have a variety of theologies: Asian theologies, liberation theologies, *minjung* theology, women's theology, black theology, and so on.

Theological pluralism is found within the bible itself. Already in the bible the gospel is witnessed to different groups of people operating within different conceptual frameworks. It is also well known that throughout the history of Christian theology theologians have relied upon various philosophies in order to enunciate the meaning of the gospel. What is to be noted particularly in this theological pluralism is the fact that the gospel has not merely been expressed on different philosophical grounds; it has also been understood in different ways.

It is out of this awareness that Asian theologians, repudiating their former subservience to the theologies formulated in the West, have launched bold theological adventures. Asian Christians have to hear the Word of God in their own words if they are going to “hear” and “understand” it truly. Doing theology with Asian resources does not merely mean that Asian theologians try to express the meaning of the gospel—already defined and understood in Western terms—in Asian cultural language. The gospel is never understood by Asian people in the state of a mental vacuum, and there is no such a thing as “pure gospel” which somehow has to be translated into Asian terms. In this respect, concepts such as “seed and soil” and “clothing” are all

inadequate to express the real nature of the task. They may have been useful strategies employed by the Western missionaries, but they do not truly indicate the nature of the task confronting Asian theology today. Asian theology seeks an Asian understanding of the gospel.

No less important than the cultural conditioning of theology is its ideological limitation. Formerly, theology was understood as an objective rational discipline free of ideological bias. But now, after Marx, we realize that theology too, as a human enterprise, is subject to ideological distortion. No theology can any longer claim ideological innocence consciously or unconsciously, theology is bound to take sides with ideology of one sort or another. It was above all the Latin American liberation theology that brought this painful awareness to us in such a clear and challenging way. Asian theologians no longer believe in theology which closes its eyes to the harsh reality of poverty and oppression in the name of some transcendent universal truth. Poverty and oppression, no less than the cultural heritage of Asia, form the Asian context in which Asian theologians listen to the Word of God and search for the meaning of the gospel.

The story of Korean theology is essentially the story of how Korean theologians have taken the two conditioning factors, cultural and ideological, into their theological reflections. Unlike cultural tradition, however, poverty and oppression do not constitute "resources" for doing theology in Asia, even though they are certainly a part of Asian reality to be taken seriously. Asian theologians in their theological activity. As in any cultural tradition, there exists elements of evil in Asian cultural tradition, and this problem has to be dealt with by Asian theologians when they do theology with Asian cultural resources. At any rate, in the following brief survey of Korean theology past and present I am going to omit the story of how Korean theologians have understood the meaning of the gospel in the midst of the massive poverty, injustice, and oppression in Korea. I will confine my remarks to the Korean Protestant theology that has developed in serious dialogue with the indigenous religio-cultural traditions of Korea over the past hundred years.

#### KOREAN THEOLOGY IN THE PAST

Protestant Christianity came to Korea around the end of the nineteenth century largely through the American missionaries, most of whom were of conservative faith and came from a puritanical background. Although there were some missionaries who showed positive appreciation of indigenous Korean culture and encouraged the indigenization of the Christian faith, the great majority of them were either indifferent or antagonistic toward the native Korean religious traditions. Conversion rather than dialogue, confrontation rather than sympathetic understanding were the dominant way in which they presented the gospel to Koreans. Needless to say, this uncompromising attitude caused a great deal of trouble and pain to the Korean Christian converts who were simply unable to cut themselves off so abruptly from their cultural roots. Given the fact that even today most of the Korean Christians are Confucian Christians, it is not difficult to imagine what it was like when they were converted to Christianity generations ago.

The first Korean thinker of the Protestant faith to cope with the relationship between Christian faith and Korean indigenous religions was Ch'oe Pyōng-hōn (1858–1927) who had been deeply nurtured in Confucian learning before he was converted to Christian faith. According to Ch'oe, the gospel, as witnessed in the bible, should be distinguished from Christianity as a religion—a remarkable insight, and one that appeared long before Karl Barth, from a lay Christian who had little formal training in theology! From the vantage point of this “biblical absolutism,” which he contrasted with the “relative absolutism” of all religions of the world, he tried to evaluate the various religious traditions of the world with which he was familiar, including Christianity.

To Ch'oe all religions were cultural phenomena existing in a world created by God. There is a continuity between them and Christianity as a religion, even though there is a sharp discontinuity between them and the gospel of Christ. He saw a particular affinity between Confucianism and Christianity, particularly in their beliefs in the supreme lord (*sangje; shangti*). Nevertheless, he pointed out that the divine human relationship in Confucianism is merely based on the attitude of reverence, worship, and sacrifice, not on love, grace, and the promise of eternal life in the kingdom of God as in Christianity. Ch'oe Pyōng-hōn recognized the validity of the world religions up to the time of Christ; but after Christ they were all fulfilled in him as their final point and perfection. This was the spirit in which he wrote his *Manjong illyōn* (1924), the first history of religions written by a Korean, who was also the first Korean “theologian of religion.”

Real theological education began in Korea with the establishment of the Presbyterian theological seminary in 1901 and the Methodist Theological Seminary in 1907. It was particularly after the return of a large number of Korean theological students from study abroad—mostly in the U. S. and Japan—in the first few decades of this century that Korean theologians began to deal with the theological issues confronting the Korean churches. They published journals like *Shinhak segye* (1916), *Shinhak chinam* (1918) and *Shin saengmyōg* (1923), and produced theological works of their own.

Three main theological lines which had lasting effects on Korean churches came to be formed during this period: the fundamentalist orthodox theology represented by Pak Hyōng-nyong (1897–1978) of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the liberal theology based on the historical-critical study of the bible and strong socio-historical concern, represented by Kim Chae-joon (1901–1987) of the Han'guk (Chosōn) Theological Seminary, and the moderate liberal line represented by such figures as Nam Kung-hyōk (1863–1930), Yang Chu-sam (1879–1950), Ch'ae P'il-gun (1885–1973), Chōn Yōng-t'aek (1894–1968), Song Ch'ang-gun (1898–1950), and Chōng Kyōng-ok (1903–1945).

Unfortunately, however, most of these early theological leaders of the Korean Protestant church showed little interest in the kind of issues with which Choe Pyong-hon had grappled. Long dissatisfied with the intellectually sterile theological education they had received from the hands of the missionaries at home, they became excited by the new approaches to Christianity to which they were exposed abroad. Returning to Korea, they eagerly propagated the new ideas they had learned and tried hard to instill new life into Korean churches. While it is undeniable that

through their efforts Korean Christians arrived at a deeper understanding of the Christian faith, they initiated a long period of theological dependency for Korean Christianity. In this regard, the Japanese colonial and the American missionary policies were in no small measure responsible.

Among the theologians mentioned above, it was Ch'ae P'il-gun and Chong Kyōng-ok alone who showed theological interest in religions other than Christianity. Chong was of the view that the word of God is not confined to the bible alone, that God is greater than the biblical witness. God speaks not merely through the bible but also through culture and history. In other words, Chong recognized a "general revelation." He defined Christianity as "man's communion with God as revealed and realized in Christ and belief in the brotherhood of all mankind." This faith, according to him, did not have to be exclusivistic vis-à-vis other religions.

Despite this tolerant attitude toward other religions and the great concern he showed for them, Chong Kyōng-ok did not actually study Asian religious traditions in depth, nor did he try to develop a theology of his own based on such study. This was true of Ch'ae P'il-gun also, even though he taught courses on world religions and wrote a book titled *A Treatise on Comparative Religion* (1960).

Compared with Ch'oe Pyōng-hōn a generation ago, Korean theologians of the thirties and forties showed a tendency to retrogress rather than forge ahead creatively. The Western theological dominance continued unchallenged until the 1960s, no serious effort having been made by Korean theologians to do theological justice to the rich religious and philosophical traditions of Korea.

The situation changed in the sixties when Korean theology began to show a great deal of internal dynamics. New theological developments in the West gave impetus to this dynamics. Paul Tillich's theology of culture, radical theologies of the sixties such as the theology of secularization, the death-of-God theology, the W. C. C. theology of mission, and the emerging Asian theologies all contributed to this theological dynamism and loosened the rigid patterns of thought among Korean theologians, stimulating them to make bold experiments in their theological thinking. Among the host of Protestant theologians who participated in this upsurge of new theological activities, two methodist theologians stand out as champions of the indigenization of theology in Korea: Ryu Tong-shik and Yoon Sōng-bōm.

It was above all Ryu Tong-shik's article, "The Indigenization of the Gospel and the Task of Mission in Korea" (1962), that unleashed a torrent of theological debate among Korean theologians on the issue of theological indigenization. In addition to Ryu and Yoon, Yi Chang-shik, theologians who generally favored the cause of indigenization included Hyōn Yōng-hak and Chōng Ha-un; among the opponents were Chōn Kyōng-yōn, Han Ch'ōl-ha, and Pak Pong-nang.

Influenced by the thought of R. Bultmann, H. Kramer, and D. T. Niles, Ryu Tong-shik explained indigenization as missiological reflection on how the seed of the gospel can take strong roots in the cultural soil of Korea and bear abundant fruits. In his book, *Korean Religion and Christianity* (1965), he distinguished the gospel from Christianity as a religion and tried to understand the meaning of the Korean indigenous religions in the light of the gospel, which alone can constitute the universal norm to evaluate all the religions of the world including Christianity. From this perspective he acknowledged the presence of the gospel in the traditional religions of Korea such as

Buddhism and Ch'ondogyo, which he compared to “the satellites reflecting the light on the gospel.” But salvation comes solely from the gospel of Christ. The night when the satellites can emit light is gone; now is the morning when the Sun rises and illuminates the world.

Despite this positive appreciation of the traditional religions of Korea, Ryu Tong-shik was hardly in a position to develop a Korean theology in the proper sense of the term. His was primarily a missiological rather than a theological concern; he tried to understand the traditional religions of Korea from the perspective of the gospel rather than the other way around. This was his basic limitation as a constructive theologian. The same may be said of another Korean theologian, Yoon Sōng-bōm, whose name was for some time almost synonymous with “indigenization theology” in Korea.

Yoon Sō-bōm also used the analogy of seed and soil to explain the concept of indigenization. Utilizing Bultmann's concept of the gospel and its pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*), he urged Korean theologians to take the Korean “cultural a priori” seriously in their theologizing. He surprised the Korean churches by interpreting the traditional Tan'gun myth in the light of the doctrine of the trinity. Identifying the three figures appearing in the myth—Hwanin, Hwanung, and Hwan'gōm or Tan'gun—with the trinity, he called the Tan'gun myth a *vestigium trinitatis* and asserted that the myth could only be correctly understood in the light of the trinitarian doctrine. In his *Korean Theology* (1972), he attempted to construct a Korean theology of his own on the basis of the central concept of “sincerity” (song, 誠) as interpreted by Yi Yul-gok, a famous sixteenth-century Neo-Confucian philosopher of the Choson dynasty. Yoon equated sincerity with God's word and revelation (*logos*), humanity being its keeper.

While Yoon Song-bom's bold attempts to indigenize theology did a great deal to awaken Korean theologians to the need of theological indigenization and stimulate their thinking, the actual content of Yoon's theology was not well received. His work suffered from the same weakness that Ryu Tong-shik's had. Instead of seeking Confucian (or Tan'gun mythological) understanding of Christian gospel, he sought Christian understanding of Confucian thought. He began with an understanding of Christian faith is given first—basically the trinitarian understanding drawn from Barth's theology—and then tried to read this version of Christianity into some aspects of the traditional religious thoughts of Korea such as the Tan'gun myth and the Neo-Confucian thought of Yi Yul-gok. Not only did this render his interpretation of the Korean material questionable, but it also deprived his theology of creativity. As such, it contributed neither to our understanding of the Korean religious tradition nor to a new understanding of the meaning of the Christian gospel.

In fact, it is questionable whether Yoon Sōng-bōm and Ryu Tong-shik really understood the full theological implication of the notions of “pre-understanding” or the “cultural a priori” which they emphasize so much in their methodological reflections on the indigenization of theology in Korea. In this respect, it was the eminent biblical theologian of the Han'guk Theological Seminary, Ahn Pyōng-mu, who demonstrated better appreciation of the hermeneutic significance of this concept for the Korean theological indigenization.

In his article, “Christianization and Westernization” (1971), Ahn pointed out that Korean theology cannot simply be a translation of Western theology into Asian con-

cepts or frames of thought. He emphasized that a de-Westernization of theology should be preceded by the act of going back to the bible to liberate it from the tradition of Western doctrinal interpretation. Korean theology, in his view, would emerge only when Korean Christians were able to bring to the bible genuine existential questions of life arising from their own historical situation.

Another theologian who proposed the de-Westernization of theology in Korea was Kim Kwang-shik of Yōnsei University. Like Ahn, Kim also points out in his book *Mission and Indigenization* (1975) that merely to translate Western theology into Asian concepts is a mistake and shows too simplistic an approach to indigenization. The indigenization of theology should begin with a question on the meaning of the gospel in the Korean historical and cultural situation; Korean theology, or theology indigenized in Korea, is nothing other than an attempt to answer this question.

Like Yoon Sōon-bōm, Kim also focused on the Confucian concept of “sincerity” as the key hermeneutical concept to interpret the meaning of the gospel and develop his theology. But he criticized Yoon’s metaphysical understanding of the concept and interprets it as meaning “words being fulfilled, that is, as man’s existential attitude of being true to one’s words, the agreement between word and action. According to him, sincerity is the very personality of God in that He is true to His word and fulfills His promises. Christ is the prime example of sincerity who demonstrated the perfect accord between faith, word, and action, his cross being the ultimate result of this accord. Criticizing Western theology for its excessive preoccupation with sin and human alienation from God, and the role of Christ as the mediator between God and sinners, Kim emphasized Christ as the perfect teacher and perfect exemplar. Faith is to be not merely a verbal confession of Christ as the Lord but is sincerity as the agreement between word and action, a ceaseless effort to emulate Christ and move from imperfection to perfection.

The most important theological development in Korea during the 1970s was the emergence of *minjung* theology. Strongly concerned with the massive reality of poverty, injustice, and oppression in Korea, *minjung* theologians on the whole showed a rather negative attitude toward the religious and philosophical heritage of Asia, regarding it as a conservative ideology which has served the ruling classes of the traditional societies.

At the same time, some of them showed a great deal of interest in the popular folk religio-cultural traditions of Korea. Especially noteworthy in this respect was Hyōn Yōng-hak’s interpretation of the Korean traditional mask-dance as an expression of *minjung*’s religious experience potentially charged with liberating power for the *minjung*. According to him, the *minjung* experience through the mask-dance a “critical transcendence” with regard to the established social order and religions of the ruling classes by ridiculing them through satire. Participants also experience a self-transcendence as well as the transcendence of the world by showing the spiritual capacity to distance themselves from their own situation in the midst of the drama.

While this interpretation of the mask-dance by Hyōn Yōng-hak provides a fine example of doing theology with Korean native cultural resources, it should be noted that for the most part the *minjung* theologians have failed to extend a similar *minjung* hermeneutical perspective to the profound philosophical wisdom of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.

The names of two other theologians should be mentioned here to conclude this brief sketch of Korean indigenous theology. A missiologist and a theologian of religion, Pyōn Sōn-hwan of the Methodist Theological Seminary has been a leading advocate of inter-faith dialogue in Korea, especially Buddhist-Christian dialogue. As yet his long experience of interreligious dialogue has not borne fruit in terms of a notable Korean theology of his own, nor is it clear whether he intends it to or not. His concern has been more missiological than theological.

Kim Kyōng-jae of the Han'guk Theological Seminary is another theologian who is searching for a Korean theology. Influenced by Tillich's theology of culture, he is engaged in a wide-reaching study of traditional Korean religious thought with a view to finding its "ultimate concern" and evaluating it in the light of the gospel. From the dialogical encounter of the traditional thoughts of Korea and Western theology, Kim believes that there will emerge a new form of theology which is "neither a translation of the former into the latter nor a syncretistic melting of the latter into the former."

### KOREAN THEOLOGY TODAY

How does Korean theology as outlined above stand today within the Korean churches? How is it received by other theologians and seminarians? And what are the problems facing attempts to do theology with Asian resources in Korea today?

Basing myself upon my own personal experience and upon a recent survey I made in July of this year (35 out of 78 people engaged in theological education responded to the questionnaire), the following picture of the present situation of Korean theology can be drawn.

To begin with, most of the theologians who responded to the survey indicated the need for a Korean theology that reflects the religious concerns and cultural traditions of the Korean people; hardly anybody admitted that Western theology alone is sufficient. This affirmative attitude toward the idea of a Korean theology, however, was counterbalanced by reservations of several kinds.

First, many confess that despite their interest in Korean theology they are at a loss as to how it should be done and where to start it; some expressed the reservation that the whole idea of a Korean theology is still much too vague and undefined.

Second, not a few people expressed disappointment at the results obtained thus far by Korean theologians of indigenization. They charge that quite often their Korean theologies are artificially constructed and based on forced arguments.

Finally, an equal number of people showed some apprehension that the indigenization of theology might lead to a sacrifice of the essence of the gospel in favor of some sort of syncretism.

It is interesting to note that about half of those surveyed, including those who object to indigenization, rated Confucianism as the religion to which they feel closest; they are of the view that as an ethical teaching rather than as a religion, Confucianism is easily compatible with Christianity. Whether this view is justified or not, they hardly seem to be aware of the profound theological implications of their view. Given the fact that without exception Korean Christians are Confucian Christians to a certain extent, Korean theology has yet to work out the theological implication of this tremendous fact.

One of the most important requirements for doing theology with Asian resources is the theologian's in-depth knowledge of Asian religio-philosophical traditions. But unfortunately it is in this area that Korean theologians are in general ill-prepared. On the one hand, this reflects the general poverty of Asian studies in Korea. On the other, it is a result of Korean theological education, which has neglected the study of the world religious traditions other than Christianity. It is true that most of the major theological seminaries are offering one or two courses in Asian religions. But hardly any theological seminary has a full-time faculty member specially trained in the history of religions or Asian philosophies. Often the seminaries rely on outside lecturers who are employed on a part-time basis and who, while they may be knowledgeable on the subjects they are teaching, have hardly any theological background at all.

In contrast to this low quality of education in the history of religions, student interest in Asian religions in seminaries is extremely high, and their response to the courses being offered varies a great deal. Some students claim that their theological thinking was deepened as a result of their study of the Asian religions; others feel

confused and find conflict in world-views between Christianity and the traditional religions of Korea. At the same time, many students admit with regret that their knowledge of Asian religions is very fragmentary and not deep enough to give them a solid basis for comparison and evaluation.

The nature and task of Korean theology has to be more clearly defined in Korea. In my view, Asian theology or Korean theology has no real chance of developing in Korea until Korean theologians can get beyond the missiological concerns that so far have characterized their approach to Korean theology. It has to be recognized that Korean people, with their long and profound religio-philosophical tradition, constitute the *subject* of theology, not the mere object of evangelization. They are the ones who hear the gospel and understand its meaning in their own way with their own theological reflection.

Just as the Korean people are more than mere objects to be converted to Christianity, Korean culture is more than "clothing" in which to wrap the gospel so that it may appear more attractive and palatable to Koreans. Korean culture is also more than a mere "resource" to aid the theological task. Korean identity is never to be sacrificed or abandoned when Koreans hear the Word of God. To be sure, it will be challenged, enriched, and deepened by its encounter with the gospel; but in turn it must also challenge, enrich, and deepen our understanding of the gospel.