

Can Korean Protestantism be Reconciled with Culture?

Rethinking Theology and Evangelism in Korea

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THE DOMINANT PATTERN OF KOREAN PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY

Korea is a genuinely pluralistic society in that it consists of large bodies of people belonging to different faiths, as well as those following a secular orientation in life. Like the European states, Korea is constitutionally a secular state which espouses the separation of religion and politics and the freedom of religion. While most of the secular states in the world have de facto a single dominant religious tradition, Korea has no such a religion; it is literally a pluralistic society as far as religious life is concerned. Beside the two major religions in Korea, Buddhism and Christianity (Protestant and Catholic have roughly equal numbers of believers—around 10 million each) there are many other minor religious communities such as Won Buddhism, the Unification Church, and Chungsan'gyo. This situation might lead one to anticipate a high degree of religious tension and conflict in Korea, such as we witness in India, Sri Lanka, and the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Yet, Korea has been relatively free from serious religious conflicts.

Several reasons may be given for this. First of all, Korea is an ethnically unified country using one language and sharing a common historical and cultural experience for a long time. Hence, despite the diversity of religious life, Korea is a highly homogeneous society with enough forces to integrate the society. Second, the role of Confucianism, at least its ethical values and orientation, provides Korean society with another integrating force. No matter what religious affiliation one may have, all Koreans are practically Confucianists in the sense that they all follow Confucian norms of behavior and share Confucian moral values in their way of life and thinking. Third, Korea as a secular state espouses liberal democracy as its social ideal, no matter what the actual practice may be. Thus, all Koreans share to certain extent the civil virtue of non-interference with, and tolerance toward, the faith of other persons.

All this, however, does not suggest that Korean society is entirely free from the danger of serious religious conflict. On the contrary, a careful observation of the Korean religious situation reveals that there exists a high degree of unexpressed sense of competition and antagonism among religious groups, especially Buddhists and the Protestants, as manifested in the effort to regularly sponsor super-large religious gathering and demonstrate their power. In the last presidential election many Koreans expressed serious concern over the fact that the religious identity of a candidate emerged as an issue, not so much publicly as under the surface, making it all the more worrisome. On the level of individual life, on the other hand, one only needs to visit the funeral ceremonies of one's friends' families to notice how delicate the situation is; not rarely does a family become bitterly divided on how to proceed with the funeral ceremony. In appearance religions seem to enjoy peaceful coexistence in Korea, but in reality hidden (and sometimes open) mistrust and antagonism rather than trust and cooperation prevail in their relationship to each other, especially between Buddhism and Protestantism. Korea is by no means free from the potential danger of the fanatical outburst of hatred and destructive behavior aimed at religious groups other than one's own.

According to a recent opinion (or consciousness) survey of the clergy belonging to the three dominant religions of Korea, namely Buddhism, Protestantism, and Catholicism, 72.3% of the Buddhist monks surveyed had an unfavorable view of Protestantism as a whole, whereas only 26.3% showed a negative attitude toward Catholicism. Interestingly, a good majority of the Catholic priests surveyed (63.7%) had a favorable view of Buddhism, whereas only 9.6% of them had such an attitude toward Protestantism. This clearly shows that, whatever the reasons may be, the Protestant church constitutes the major source of religious antagonism and ill-feeling in Korea. Although I do not have any statistics on the attitude of lay believers or even those without any religious affiliation, I believe that there is no significant difference between them and the surveyed clergy.

To what, then, should we attribute this general ill-feeling toward Protestantism in Korea? The same survey suggests the most obvious reason. First of all, the Protestant ministers in general do not show a positive attitude toward other faiths. Among those surveyed, 51.1% said that they do not have a favorable view of any other faith, while 35.5% of them indicated favor only toward Catholicism (which is in marked contrast with the above-mentioned 9.6% of the Catholic priests). Not only do they not have a favorable view of

other religions—barely 0.7% of them show an unfavorable view of Buddhism, a strong contrast with the 63.7% of the Catholic priests—most of them have either a very negative view of other religions or have no interest in them. 30.5% of the ministers surveyed expressed the view that other religions are thoroughly to be rejected and 10.7% regarded other religions as in competitive relationship with their faith, whereas 16.4% expressed no interest at all in other faiths. A meagre 29.9% of the Protestant ministers positively regarded other religions as partners of coexistence for the sake of humankind, a good contrast with the 81.7% of the Buddhist monks and 85.7% of the Catholic priests. What, then, accounts for this negative attitude of Protestant ministers toward other religions, especially Buddhism, which has long occupied an important place in the religious and cultural life of Koreans? We may ascertain two kinds of reason for this, one historical and the other theological. The general negative attitude toward the indigenous religion and culture, ranging from open hostility expressed in the form of accusation of idolatry and defamation of other religions to sheer disregard, goes back to the formative period of the Protestant church in Korea at the hands of foreign missionaries. Coming to the Korean peninsula during the heyday of Western imperialism when the confidence of the West in its cultural, if not religious, accomplishment was firm and went unchallenged, the missionaries generally showed no genuine interest in the native culture and religious traditions of Korea, although there were some exceptions too. In the eyes of the missionaries, Korea was not merely powerless militarily and politically but also far behind the West culturally. What they believed they saw in Korea around 1890s, when the Protestant mission began, was literally a sinking ship with people desperately reaching out their hands to anyone who would come to rescue them. Indeed, many Koreans turned to the missionaries and their religion, not out of genuine interest in the faith itself but in the hope of finding helping hands in their struggle against the Japanese rule, a hope which they soon realized to be an illusion.

On the other hand, the native religions found themselves in general decay and disarray when the missionaries came. Confucianism, the dominant religious-philosophical and socio-political tradition of the Choson dynasty, was in close alliance with the crumbling old order, unable to meet the challenge brought by the dawning new age. Buddhism and Shamanism, long despised and suppressed by the Confucian orthodoxy throughout the dynasty, lacked the vigor and vitality to resist the infiltration of a foreign faith into the land. In short, the country was defenseless, politically as well as religiously, against the

propagation of a new faith. It is no wonder that the missionaries felt no urgent need to take the native religious traditions seriously and adopt an accommodating attitude toward them.

Theologically, the kind of Christianity to which Koreans were introduced by the missionaries was of a conservative, puritanic, and fundamentalist brand, untouched by the liberal theological trends of nineteenth-century Europe. Biblicism verging on “bibliolatry” became the dominant tradition of Korean Protestantism, and faith was understood as believing a set of fixed doctrines and dogmas whose authority was never to be questioned or even creatively interpreted. Dry and inflexible doctrinal legalism was somewhat loosened by the highly fervent revival movements which regularly energized the Korean Protestant church, greatly contributing to its growth. Yet, this revivalist evangelism, which reduced Christian faith in a simplistic way to repentance and forgiveness of sin by accepting Jesus as the savior, and which understood salvation as life eternal in heaven, left little room for a positive interest in the native religious traditions. Strongly dualistic in its attitude toward the world and society, this “evangelistic” Christianity implanted among Korean Christians a form of faith extremely insensitive and even hostile to indigenous religion and culture.

During the 1930s the historico-critical method of studying the Bible was introduced into Korea by some Korean theologians educated in America and began to challenge the grip of fundamentalism and doctrinal legalism, causing a major theological division within the Korean Protestant church. This new approach to the Bible has ever since remained perhaps the hottest divisive issue in Korean Protestantism. On the whole, however, the effect of the new method of biblical studies on Korean Protestantism has been rather minimal, being confined to a small group of progressive theologians and ministers. It is still foreign to most Korean church leaders, not to mention the laity, to view the Bible and doctrines as historical products and to differentiate the essential spirit of the Gospel from its changing forms and expressions. Biblical records and doctrines are viewed as an immutable divine revelation, and the relativity of the historical and cultural elements in them is hardly realized or admitted. Lacking this historico-critical perspective, the majority of Korean church leaders tend to absolutize not only the biblical expressions and formulations of the Gospel but also the narrow theological tradition—fundamentalism and Protestant Orthodoxy combined with puritanical ethic—which they inherited from the missionaries, mostly Americans of conservative faith and anti-

intellectual and anti-humanistic background. It is readily understandable from the theological milieu outlined above that Korean churches have paid little attention to the cultural context in which evangelism is taking place, nor has it developed a creative theological enterprise which tries to relate the message of the Gospel to the indigenous religio-cultural situation. To be a Christian normally meant to sever one's ties with past beliefs and practices (such as the veneration of ancestors), to be uprooted from one's cultural environment and to adopt a totally alien form of life, usually Western. It is also no wonder then that Christianity is viewed by non-Christians as a foreign religion, an intruder into the Korean religio-cultural life. With two hundred years of history of Catholicism and one hundred years of Protestantism, and with a Christian population numbering around ten million, nearly one fourth of the total population, Christianity may no longer be considered all that "foreign" any more, but its foreignness as an imported religion nevertheless remains strong. Along with the rapid Westernization of Korean life, culture, and society, Christianity has not felt any pressing need to indigenize even its external forms and appearances, not to mention a creative indigenous appropriation of the essential content of the Gospel as well as a critical evaluation of the theological tradition formed in the West.

NEW THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The dominant pattern of Korean Protestantism briefly outlined above still continues without any real change. During the 1960s and 70s, however, new theological developments took place within the Korean church which radically broke with this dominant pattern. They took firm roots among some theologians and lay people, minority as they were within the church. Two developments deserve our special attention: inculturation theology (*t'och'akhuwa shinhak*) and *minjung* theology. Inculturation theology, mainly led by the theologians of the Methodist theological seminary, arose out of the cultural self-reflection of some Korean theologians. Aware of the rich and high religio-cultural heritage of their own country, and critical of the dominance of the Western culture accepted by Korean Christians as if it were part and parcel of the Gospel, they began to rethink the meaning of Christianity in Korea as a historical phenomenon and as a message of salvation. Reacting against what they considered as a blind imitation of Western theology, they brought the problem of indigenization and the relationship between Gospel and culture to the forefront of theological reflection, calling forth heated debates among

theologians and raising the consciousness of lay intellectuals concerning the issue. They made efforts to relate the Gospel message to the native religious and philosophical tradition of Korea. They were convinced that the meaning and truth of the Gospel need to be expressed in indigenous terms in order to appeal more widely to Korean hearts and make Christianity truly feel at home in Korean culture.

Despite the brave efforts of inculturation theologians, their activities remained largely on the level of theory, merely asserting the necessity of theological indigenization in Korea, and produced little visible result as far as concrete examples of theological indigenization were concerned. This is not the place to go into the reason of this failure (Cf. Keel, "Korean Theology: Past and Present" *Inter-Religio* 12, Fall 1987). Suffice it merely to point out here that the movement of theological indigenization, although recognized as a legitimate concern by many theologians, has not yet been able to gain wide sympathy and support among the Protestant ministers nor among the laity. The much-publicized recent incident in which Rev. Pyun Sun Hwan, a leading Methodist theologian and a long champion of interreligious dialogue and tolerance in Korea, was evicted from the Methodist conference elicited widespread concern and sympathy from non-Christian intellectuals but failed to gain enough support from fellow Methodist ministers to prevent his eviction.

Theologians' minds were occupied during the last decades—when Korean theologians acquired the ability to pursue an independent theological thinking—less by cultural concerns than by the concern for the liberation of oppressed people. Minjung theology was the outcome of the liberative concern and praxis of those theologians who identified themselves with the oppressed and exploited people and suffered with them during the dark years of military dictatorship in Korea. Minjung theology confesses Jesus as the liberator of oppressed people, finding in him the image of a suffering minjung who suffered with and for his fellow minjung, and finding Jesus' figure in the numerous minjung leaders who stood up for the rights of the dispossessed and suffered with and for them, even unto death. In a way, minjung theology is itself a good example of Korean theological indigenization in that it was a natural outcome of the deep hermeneutical reflection and agony of those who had been involved in the praxis for minjung's liberation, for the humanization of the dehumanized children of God. For minjung theology, salvation means liberation, and liberation means the humanization of those deprived of the rights belonging to humanity created in the image of God.

Due credit should be given to minjung theology for its creative hermeneutical efforts, for contributing theological freedom to Korean theologians and church leaders, for opening the eyes of numerous Christians to the socio-political dimension of the Gospel, and for demonstrating the universal meaning of the Gospel in terms of human liberation. Notwithstanding this important contribution, however, some of the basic limitations of minjung theology has to be pointed out, and at the same time, a new direction sought in Korean Protestant theology.

First of all, minjung theology has generally shown a negative posture toward the traditional religion and culture of Korea. Basically under the dominant influence of the Enlightenment perspective toward tradition, and thus operating with a dualistic scheme of tradition vs. liberation, it has failed to excavate the liberative elements in the religio-philosophical traditions of Korea which may help us to understand the meaning of the Gospel in new and deeper ways. Its negative attitude toward tradition renders the past basically meaningless; the past is considered a burden to unload rather than a source of wisdom and a reservoir of spiritual richness from which to draw fresh water unceasingly. To be sure, the oppressive elements present in the traditional thought should by no means be overlooked. Yet, just as the liberating message of the Gospel came to be newly discovered in Christianity by modern theologians, it is perfectly possible and legitimate to do so with regard to the religiocultural traditions of Asia. Tradition is never a static entity; it needs a continual reinterpretation to make it relevant to contemporary issues and concerns. Texts need to be read again and again in the light of changing contexts; contexts help us to discover the inexhaustible wealth of new meanings contained in the text, while the latter constantly throws light on the meaning of the context in which we are situated, turning our context into a "text" to be interpreted. Minjung theology has failed to engage in this kind of creative dialogue with the tradition.

Closely related to this failure to have a creative dialogue with the past is another weak point of minjung theology, namely its spiritual poverty. Overcoming the narrow salvation-history (Heilsgeschichte) view of Christianity and tearing down the wall of doctrinal orthodoxy, minjung theology brought the Gospel to bear upon the universal human aspiration for liberation. Yet, its concept of liberation and humanization suffers from a narrowness of its own kind, lacking the foundation of a religious anthropology which accords due recognition to the values of spiritual discipline in our struggle to maintain human dignity and in our fight against dire poverty and cruel oppression.

It is true that minjung theology, like the Latin American liberation theology, is highly critical of the traditional spirituality of the church, which has too often taken flight into the atemporal world of human interiority, closing its eyes to the harsh realities of external world. It has too often escaped from the arena of history and ignored the struggle of the minjung for justice and liberation. Thus minjung theology advocates a new form of spirituality—one without the escapism of the traditional metaphysical spirituality, a spirituality of poverty that comes into being in the midst of a life lived in solidarity with the deprived and the downtrodden. Yet, in its activism which often lacks the depth of moral self-reflection and spiritual confidence, and in its unconditional commitment to the dispossessed which often verges on a minjung idolatry, minjung theology tended to neglect the spiritual wisdom and discipline needed for a life of sustained commitment to the cause of liberation. Does not one need internal power to transcend the world precisely for the sake of saving the world? For this power, minjung theology could have turned to the spiritual wellspring of Asian traditions such as Zen and Taoism.

The neglect of spirituality is not the fault of minjung theology alone. From a comparative perspective, we can say that it constitutes a weakness of Christianity as a whole, especially its Protestant branch. It is for this reason that many in the West, including theologians and the religious, are turning to Eastern religions, and not only find there new spiritual experiences and insights but also rediscover the spiritual dimension latent in the Christian heritage itself.

Recently, the social milieu which gave rise to minjung theology and gave it impetus has greatly changed. Not only do Koreans today enjoy relative economic prosperity—at least in comparison with other third-world countries—but political authoritarianism and oppression have also virtually disappeared. This new situation may cause minjung theologians to re-examine their theological stance thus far and search for a new direction. This new direction of theological creativity, I am personally convinced, should be visible when minjung theology takes the religiocultural tradition of Asia more seriously than it has done thus far, in a spirit of “reconciliation” with the past. The past is never past, nor is it avoidable. The past is ever to be confronted in a new way in the light of the present and in view of the future to be grasped.