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Christ, Culture, and the Story of Korean Theology

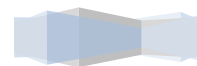
Daniel J. Adams¹

1. Christianity and Culture Today

Following the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, Australia in 1991, the WWC embarked on an ambitious program of publishing a series of small booklets on the general theme of Christianity and culture. This was in partial response to the controversy which erupted following a presentation by the Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung in which she used images from Korean culture and traditional religion in reference to the Holy Spirit. In the days immediately following Chung's presentation debates arose on the issue of Christ and culture which involved evangelicals, Eastern Orthodox, moderates and liberals, feminists, Australian aborigines, and of course, Chung herself. It was hoped that by the time the Eighth Assembly of the WCC was held in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1998, ecumenical leaders and church members would have a grasp of the issues involved through their reading of these booklets. Perhaps in Harare the individual churches would have moved past the controversies of Canberra or would be able to deal with these controversies in a mature and constructive manner.

I attended both assemblies and it was clear to me that the matter of Christianity and culture had neither been decisively resolved nor was it better understood in Harare. The officials of the WCC had, however, learned something about damage control, so much so that the daily worship services included no preaching and Sunday church visits were carefully arranged to minimize the possibility of controversy. Although in attendance at the assembly in Harare, Chung Hyun-Kyung and other "unconventional"

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theologians were given no public roles and functioned primarily as observers. Special interest groups were represented in a kind of postmodern intellectual marketplace where each could freely express their views, but the WCC carefully avoided endorsing any of the views expressed. Issues of Christianity and culture simmered under the surface and in small discussion groups during meals and at coffee breaks, but these issues were never allowed to emerge in any of the open forums.

I was not present at the Ninth Assembly of the WCC in Brazil, so I cannot comment on how issues related to Christianity and culture fared at that assembly. What I do know is that the Ninth Assembly was primarily a non-event so far as the secular news media was concerned and it was almost a non-event in most denominational media as well. I found very few references to that assembly in Presbyterian Church (USA) publications and I could not discern any way in which the Ninth Assembly impacted my denomination.

Korea is now looking toward hosting the Tenth Assembly of the WCC in Busan in 2013 and the issue of Christ and culture has by no means gone away. It is perhaps for this reason that such classic texts as *Christ and Culture* by H. Richard Niebuhr and *Theology of Culture* by Paul Tillich have never gone out of print.² As delegates to the Tenth Assembly are bussed from their hotels to the assembly venues they will be confronted with issues relating to Christianity and culture. Buddhist temples are visible on the hillsides, shaman shrines can be seen along the beach areas, Confucian shrines and family ancestral halls are a common sight, and in virtually every Korean they meet they will become aware of a value system shaped not by the western Judeo-Christian tradition but rather by the Asian Neo-Confucian tradition. Perhaps seasoned ecumenical observers will wonder if the issue will erupt again as it did in Canberra. Is it possible that another Korean theologian may burst upon the scene in a manner that does not follow the carefully ordered ecumenical script? New attendees at the assembly will be overwhelmed on the one hand and seek answers to numerous questions on the other. Will they be able to make sense of it all as they see temples, shrines, and churches existing side by side in the valleys and on the hillsides of Busan? And what will they make of Korea's well-

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951) and Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

known denominational splits? Will anyone at the Tenth Assembly be able to figure out the differences between the *yejang* and the *kijang* or between the *tonghap*, the *hapdong*, the *hapshin*, and the *koshin*? Certainly only insiders will understand how two theological seminaries with the same name in English—the Presbyterian Theological Seminary—can have two different names in Korean—*Changshin* and *Chongshin*—and represent two very different theological positions even though they once were the same institution with one founding date.

My book *Korean Theology in Historical Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2012) was written to provide answers to these questions and to frame the issues relating to Christianity and culture within the context of the historical development of Korean theology. Originally conceived of as a textbook for use in theological schools, it soon became apparent that this book can also serve as a valuable resource for those who will be participating in the Tenth Assembly of the WCC in Busan. Indeed, it is an excellent resource for study groups in churches—including Korean-American congregations—as the younger generation seeks to understand the Korean churches as they exist today. The story of the development of Korean theology is a rich one that to date has remained largely inaccessible to the English reader. Works of Korean theology in English, both original and in translation, are few in number and most deal with specialized topics or with the two most well-known movements in Korean theology, church growth and *minjung* theology. Beyond the efforts of the early missionaries and these two theological movements, the wide range of Korean theology remains unknown outside of Korea. The time has come for Korean theology and its historical development to be known throughout the world.

2. The Context for the Development of Korean Theology

There are few countries in the world today that are as fertile a context for the growth and development of Christian theology as Korea. To begin with, Korea is home to three religious and ethical traditions that have interacted with Christianity down through the centuries. The religious traditions of shamanism and Buddhism, and the ethical tradition of Confucianism and its later form Neo-Confucianism, have shaped the Korean worldview. Christianity has both been in conflict with these three traditions and been

enriched by them so that the story of Korean theology is to some extent the story of the relationship between Christianity and Korean religious and ethical culture.

Christian theology in Korea began with the conflict between Neo-Confucianism and Roman Catholicism over the observance of the ancestral rites. Initial contacts began in China in the 1600s and continued following the establishment of the Church in Korea in 1784. With the condemnation of the ancestral rites in China by the Vatican in 1715, Korean Catholics became caught up in the conflict in 1790-91 and soon endured intense persecution which largely decimated the church and brought its theological creativity to an abrupt end. It was not until the twentieth century that Korean Catholics were to reemerge as a theological force to be reckoned with. Arriving in Korea a century later in 1884, Protestants escaped the persecutions and experienced rapid growth. The great revival of 1907 followed by the development of the institutional church put the churches in a position of strength to oppose Japanese colonialism in the Independence Movement of March 1, 1919. The issue of ancestor rituals arose for the Protestants in the controversy over the Shinto shrines which came to a head in the 1930s and 1940s. Whereas the Catholics were in conflict with Neo-Confucianism, the Protestants were in conflict with the state Shinto of the Japanese colonialists. Both conflicts brought the issue of Christianity and culture to the fore. The big difference for the Protestants was that the culture in conflict was not Korean but Japanese so that Christian resistance for theological reasons also became Christian resistance for political reasons.

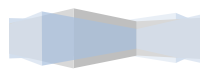
As the indigenization debate began in the 1920s and later reemerged in the 1950s and 1960s, it was the Methodists who led the way. While the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pyongyang was largely under the influence of conservative American missionaries, the Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul became a center of creative theological work under the leadership of Choi Byung-Hyun (1858-1927). Other well-known Methodist theologians included the layman Pyun Young-Tai (1892-1969), Yun Sung-Bum (1916-1980), and Pyun Sun-Hwan (1927-1996). Pyun Young-Tae and Yun sought a theological interaction with Neo-Confucianism while Pyun Sun-Hwan attempted a theological encounter with Buddhism. Unfortunately Pyun was accused of heresy by conservatives in the church and was removed from his church and academic positions. It was clear that a theological encounter with the ethical tradition of Neo-Confucianism was

acceptable; a theological encounter with the religion of Buddhism was not. The indigenization movement in theology continues today under the leadership of the Methodist Ryu Tong-Shik and the Presbyterians Kim Heup-Young and Kim Kyoung-Jae.

At the Presbyterian Theological Seminary the missionaries and their theology held sway perhaps best represented by the American biblical scholar and theologian J. C. Crane (1888-1964) and his three-volume *Systematic Theology*.³ Crane represented the best, albeit conservative, theological scholarship of the missionaries and he was among the last of the missionaries to have a significant influence upon Korean theology. As he retired and left Korea the stage was being set for the end of the missionary era and the bringing of Korean theology to the foreground in the Korean churches. The actors on this stage were two men—Park Hyung-Nong (1887-1978) and Kim Chai-Choon (1901-1987). Park represented the conservative side and Kim championed the liberal side. Each took different sides in three disputes. The first concerned accepting back into the church those ministers and church leaders who bowed at the Japanese Shinto shrines during the occupation period. The second concerned which of two seminaries would become the official Presbyterian seminary, one of which was perceived of as conservative and the other which was perceived to be liberal. The third was over participation in the ecumenical movement and the WCC. By the time the dust had settled from these disputes there were four Presbyterian denominations with their associated seminaries—the *Koshin* group centered in and around Busan, the *Kijang* (Christ church) group known as the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, the *Yejang* (Jesus church) *Tonghap* group known as the Presbyterian Church of Korea which is ecumenical, and the *Yejang Hapdong* group also known as the Presbyterian Church of Korea which is not ecumenical. Ironically *Tonghap* and *Hapdong* both mean “union.” In the words of Kim Kyoung-Jae, these disputes have “a meaning greater than that of a simple dissension within the Korean Presbyterian church. It rang the death knell of the era of the Western mission. It was a proclamation of the independence of Korean Christianity....”⁴

³ J. C. Crane, *Systematic Theology* (Gulfport, MS: Specialized Printing Co., 1953).

⁴ Kim Kyoung-Jae, “History and Prospects of the Protestant Church in Korea,” in *Korea and Christianity*, ed. Yu Chai-Shin (Seoul/Berkeley/Toronto: Korean Scholar Press, 1996), 167.



3. The Story of Korean Theology Continues

From this time forward Korean theology was written exclusively by and for Koreans. Some were theologians of the middle way who took a moderate position such as Rhee Jong-Sung (1922-2011) and Han Kyung-Chik (1902-2000). Their influence enabled the Presbyterian Church of Korea (*Yejang Tonghap*) to be both ecumenical and evangelical. Others championed the conservative orthodox theology of the evangelical movement such as Han Chul-Ha, Kim Myung-Hyuk, and Ro Bong-Rin. Although retired, all three are still theologically active and each takes a different position on issues related to Christianity and culture. Certainly one of the best known—and controversial—of all contemporary Korean church leaders and theologians is the Pentecostal Cho Yonggi who has brought together the principles of church growth and the theology of the prosperity gospel. Criticized by some as a “Christian shaman” he has also advocated a Christian form of ancestral veneration thus bringing up to the present some of the same issues discussed in the earlier indigenization debates. If nothing else this shows that issues relating to Christianity and culture are found not only among those usually considered to be more “liberal” but are also found among those who are solidly classified as “conservative” or “evangelical.”

The rise of *minjung* theology in the 1960s thrust Korean theologians once again into the international spotlight. Among the early leaders of the movement were Suh Nam-Dong (1918-1984), Hyun Young-Hak (1921-2004), and the contemporary theologians Noh Jong-Sun and Suh Kwang-Sun. They struggled to relate Christianity to such Korean themes and movements as the experience of *han* (unresolved suffering), the mask dance, the Tonghak Movement of the late 1800s, and the ancient yet contemporary tradition of shamanism. Other *minjung* theologians wrestled with scripture including Ahn Byung-Mu (1922-1996) and contemporary thinkers such as Moon Hee-Suk and Yim Tae-Soo. Ahn focused his attention on the ministry of Jesus in relation to the *ochlos* or masses of the common people and from this developed a contemporary Christology. Moon pointed out the differences between external suffering brought about by oppressors from other nations and internal suffering brought upon people by their own leaders. Yim asserted that human suffering is always concrete. More recently he has suggested that personal conversion is not enough; there must also be a second reformation resulting in ethical

action. The poet Kim Chi-Ha and the theologian Kim Yong-Bock focused on the philosophy of dialectics and the process of history respectively. Kim was especially influential due to his making the minjung movement known through his extensive writings in English. Although never a popular theology among the local churches, minjung theology and the larger minjung movement of which it was a part, helped to profoundly change Korean society in the 1980s and 1990s from an economically poor military dictatorship to a lively democracy supported by a large and prosperous middle class.

In the 1980s the feminist movement arose in Korea and such early leaders as Lee Oo-Chung (1923-2002) who boldly challenged the patriarchy of Neo-Confucianism, and Park Sun-Ai (1930-1999) who founded the influential magazine *In God's Image*, laid the foundations for the development of feminist theology. Chung Sook-Ja not only excels at leading Bible studies at ecumenical gatherings throughout the world, but also became the pastor of the Women's Church in Seoul where women, who often are members of denominations which do not recognize women leaders in the church, are given the opportunity to lead worship and preach. Chung Hyun-Kyung, following her presentation in Canberra in 1991, has continued to move in an even more controversial direction by openly championing syncretism while accusing traditional male theologians of refusing to admit their own syncretism. More recently she has become involved in interfaith activities and considers herself to be a dual practitioner of both Christianity and Buddhism.

Ham Sok-Hon (1901-1989) was a Quaker who became one of Korea's most astute social and theological critics. A leading dissident he was imprisoned on numerous occasions by the Japanese, the Russian army, and the dictatorial governments in Korea led by Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-Hee, and Chun Doo-Hwan. Known simply as "Teacher Ham," he founded several journals, taught courses to thousands on an informal basis, and wrote hundreds of essays. His masterpiece is entitled *Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea* and there is nothing quite like it.⁵ Part history, part theology, and part social analysis it chronicles the sufferings of the Korean nation down through the

⁵ Ham Sok-Hon, *Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea*, trans. E. Sang Yu, ed. John A. Sullivan (London and Philadelphia: Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1985).

centuries. Ham was a grandfatherly figure who always wore traditional Korean *hanbok* (Korean dress) and influenced many dissident political leaders and minjung theologians.

In the 1990s the Catholic Church in Korea underwent a period of growth and ecclesiastical reform and it re-emerged as a crucible of creative theological thought and action. This was due in large part to the role of Cardinal Kim Su-Hwan (1922-2009). Kim dared to challenge the authorities. When a bishop went missing upon arrival in Seoul in 1974 following a trip abroad, Kim went directly to the Korean CIA headquarters and to the President Park Chung-Hee's official residence to protest and to demand the bishop's release. On another occasion Kim directly challenged President Park on nationwide TV during his sermon at Christmas Eve mass in Seoul's Myeongdong Cathedral. The state KBS TV network cut him off but the Christian CBS network carried his sermon to its conclusion. When riot police threatened to enter the cathedral to oust protestors who had taken refuge in the cathedral, Kim personally confronted the police and challenged them to either shoot him or arrest him. When the Vatican threatened to scuttle the organization of the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conference in Hong Kong, Kim personally changed the Vatican emissary's mind and single-handedly founded the organization. A theologian in his own right with numerous articles to his credit, Kim was primarily a theologian of action who inspired not only the Catholic Church but the entire nation of Korea. He reopened windows and doors of the Catholic Church to embrace Korea and its culture.

Other notable Catholic theologians include the systematic theologian Shim Sang-Tae who champions inculturation (the Catholic version of indigenization), the pastoral theologian Chon Ho-Kyong who provides leadership in the highly influential Catholic Farmers' Movement, and Sister Kim Sung-Hae noted for her efforts on behalf of interfaith dialogue. Kim's work has been especially significant as it relates to Confucian contemplative practices and to new religious movements in Korea such as the modern reform movement Won Buddhism. Contemporary Catholic theologians are seeking ever more creative ways to bring about inculturation of the Christian faith into the Korean context.

Korean theology is also thriving in the Korean diaspora communities where much of the work has been written in English. Lee Jung-Young (1930-1996), a Methodist,

carried out a life-long theological encounter with the ancient book of divination the *I Ching* (*The Book of Change*) and sought to do theology from an Asian theological perspective. His work on ethnic marginalization in American society has been especially significant. Another Methodist, Andrew Sung Park, is taking the Korean concept of *han* and applying in a way that moves the discussion from out of the Korean-American community and into the broader American social and cultural context. The Catholic theologian Min Kyong-Suk (Anselm Kyongsuk Min) proposes a theology of solidarity which urges Koreans and other Asians to move beyond their own self-interests and to focus on developing a civic consciousness that involves all citizens. Min is especially strong in his criticism of Korean ethnocentricity, excessive nationalism, and focus on quantitative church growth at the expense of quality. As an increasing number of Korean-American theologians occupy positions in American theological seminaries and university departments of religion, we can expect to see continued theological creativity as the diaspora moves more into the mainstream.

Korean theology undoubtedly has a great future. Korean has now taken its place—along with English, German, French, Spanish, and Portuguese—as a major theological language. Korean theological schools are training leaders not only for Korea, but for much of the developing world. Global issues such as secularism, the digital revolution, the conflict between denominational exclusivism and the ecumenical movement, the ever-present divide between those perceived to be conservative-evangelical and those perceived to be liberal-progressive, and the search for a public theology that reaches beyond the Christian community are forming a background context for the ongoing theological task. And always present is the encounter between Christianity and culture whether it is in relation to the western theology brought to Korea by the early missionaries, the ethical and ritual traditions of Neo-Confucianism, or the challenge of a renewed and revitalized Buddhism. Korean Christians have a particular difficulty in making a distinction between the historical and cultural contributions of Buddhism to Korean society and Buddhism as a religion which is in competition with Christianity.

All of these challenges serve to show that one way to understand the relationship between Christianity and culture is to know something about the historical development

of Korean theology in the past and the promise of Korean theology for the future. My book, *Korean Theology in Historical Perspective*, seeks to provide a resource to aid in this understanding so that the reader will become acquainted with the story of Korean theology as it has unfolded in the past and moves forward into the future.