
Korean Church History: A Religio-comparative Perspective

Kim, Chongsuh*

1. Introduction

Christianity has long been a mainstream religion in Korea. The Korean National Census reports that the entire Christian population exceeded the Buddhist population in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ This fact indicates that terms like “persecution” or “mission-oriented religion” can no longer aptly be applied to Korean churches. Their remarkable growth has established Christianity as the most influential

* Professor, Department of Religious Studies, S.N.U.

1. The Korean National Census is known for its reliability because it collects information directly from the entire population instead of using the sampling method. The Korean National Census has published statistical data on the religious population only twice so far, in 1985 and 1995 respectively. The 1985 Census reports the religious population as 17.20 million (42.6%) out of a total population of 40.42 million. Buddhists are 8.06 million (19%), Christians 6.48 million (16.1%), and Catholics 1.86 million (4.6%). The 1995 Census reports the religious population to be 23.59 million (50.7%) out of a total population of 44.55 million. Buddhists are 10.32 million (23.2%), Christians 8.76 (19.7%), and Catholics 2.95 million (6.6%). See *Han-guk ui jonggyo hyeonhwang* [Korean Religious Affairs]. Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2000, p. 9.

religion in the nation and at the same time has made Korean Christian churches among the most vital and dynamic in the world.

The leading role of Christianity has changed the landscape of Korean culture as a whole as well as Korea's religions. Christianity in Korea is not merely another "foreign religion" that attached itself to other Korean traditional religions like Shamanism, Confucianism, or Buddhism. Neither is it part of the underground culture once only shared by marginalized classes. Today over a half of the religious population in Korea is Christian and over a quarter of the entire population share Christian beliefs.

In this regard, one can easily witness how a number of religious historians have sought to rewrite Korean church history, moving away from an earlier focus on the persecutions of the Catholics or Christian missionary work. Since the 1970s, these attempts have included the *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* [The National Perspective on Church History], *Minjung sagwan* [The Minjung [People]'s Perspective on Church History] and *Chongchejeok sagwan* [A Holistic View of Church History].² While these works have offered meaningful perspectives on Korean church history, it should be noted that these efforts were mostly limited to Korean church historians who were interested in re-examining their own work.

Given the unquestionable influence of Christianity in Korea, therefore, it is imperative that we overcome the past perspectives on Korean church history dominated by Korean church historians. The need for new approaches has arisen in large part due to rapid developments in the fields of theology, religious studies, and other

2. For a more detailed and recent study of Korean Christian history, see Gwang-Cheol Shin, "A Study of Korean Christian History," *Jonggyo wa munhwa* [Religion and Culture], 1996, 2: 175-197; Deok-Joo Lee, "The Diversity of Theological Studies: The Success of Theology of Indigenization," *Hebanghoo ohshipnyeon Han-guk jonggyo yeongoosa* [50 years after Hebang [Liberation]: A Study of Korean History], Seoul: Chang, 1997, pp. 69-116; Man-yeol Lee, "Past and Present: A Study of Korean Christian History," *Han-guk saron* [Korean History Studies], 1998, 28: 315-384.

secular sciences since the 1970s. In other words, just as the discussion of *Minjung sagwan* [The People's View] was impossible without Minjung Theology, the theological discussion of indigenization and Koreanization would not be sufficiently constructive without a comparative approach when analyzing churches. The study of Korean church history must provide a more comprehensive perspective in order to parallel the accumulation of Korean studies based on history, language and literature, sociology, political science, education, economics, and geography.

2. The Korean Perspective

Perhaps it is worthwhile to ask whether existing Korean church histories were written from a Korean perspective. There is little doubt that in the 1970s Kyeongbae Min's *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* [A National Perspective on the Church] first started to seriously embrace a Korean perspective in Korean ecclesiastical history. Unlike others who have contended elsewhere, it is less important to consider how many more Korean sources were actually cited than to recognize the shift in focus from a mission-oriented perspective to a perspective that stressed the national church and Korean references, since the actual application of sources could accumulate with further findings. Today, however, Korean church history demands a more fundamental approach that goes beyond the mere assumption of a national perspective and the use of Korean sources.

For instance, in the 1980s, when Buddhists questioned why Christianity was covered as a traditional Korean religion in the high school philosophy/ethics curriculum, the only response church historians were able to offer was that they took pride in Christianity's long history in Korea — the transmission of Catholicism

took place far over 200 years ago — and that Christianity’s present influence as a major religion could no more be described as “non-traditional” or “foreign.”

A historic rendering of imported foreign religions tends to carry quite disparate perspectives. For example, Erik Zürcher’s *The Buddhist Conquest of China*,³ first published in 1959, is considered a classic on Chinese Buddhism for offering a very thorough historical overview on how Buddhism was transmitted, spread, and adapted in China. Yet in 1973, a Chinese scholar named Kenneth Ch’en published a book that became another classic on Chinese Buddhism under a title that is ironically reminiscent of Zürcher’s — *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*.⁴ Ch’en historically examined how Buddhism took up its distinctive Chinese features through its interaction with Chinese ethics, politics, economics, literature, education, and society in general. It would be interesting to question which one of these is more “Chinese” in its perspective.

In fact, some well-known Korean church histories such as L. George Paik’s *Han-guk gaeshingyosa* [The History of Protestant Missions in Korea, 1832-1910] or Kyeongbae Min’s *Han-guk gidokgyohoesa* [A History of Korean Christian Churches] and even *Han-guk gidokgyo ui yeoksa* [A History of Christianity in Korea I, II], published by the Institute for Korean Church History, all share the same framework as Zürcher’s. Aside from minor additions or omissions, the only difference lies in whether the works include Catholicism, whether they trace church history up to Nestorianism, and to the degree to which they refer to Korean sources. The question is, then, whether we, like Ch’en, can examine how Christianity underwent its own transformations through its interaction with the everyday lives of the Korean people.

In other words, there are two different issues: one is to investigate

3. Zürcher, E., *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972 (1959).

4. Ch’en, Kenneth K. S., *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973.

how Christianity as a Western religion transmitted itself and contributed to Korean culture and the other is to take a closer look at how the Korean people with ancient religious traditions reshaped and adopted Christianity with distinctive Korean features. While the existing Korean church histories focus mainly on how Christianity exerted influence in Korea, they are less interested in examining what the Korean people's religious mindset was originally like and how it was transformed through Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and finally with Christianity. If Christianity is a mainstream religion in Korea today, should it not be placed in a more diachronic context of Korean religious history? Should not the study of Korean church history search for a more general and spiritual meaning that may be implied in the longer span of Korean history?

Though L. George Paik's effort to summarize Korean religion in his preface to *Han-guk gaeshingyosa* was brief and cursory and relied merely on missionary sources, it nevertheless deserves close attention. It is indeed a significant accomplishment in the sense that it demonstrated that an understanding of Korean church history requires an account of Korea's religious background.⁵ Most Korean church histories published since the time of Paik have paid little attention to this issue. There were attempts to establish a Korean perspective by replacing the missionary viewpoint of church history, but few have sought to view Korean church history in the larger framework of Korean religious history.⁶ Just as the debate

5. The fact that this was a dissertation published in a foreign country tells us that this preface could have been written to help readers who were not familiar with Korean culture. For a further study on L. George Paik and the contemporary understanding of Korean religion by missionaries, see Chongsuh Kim, "The Development of Korean Religious Studies in Old Korea and Japanese Imperialistic Rules." *Han-guk sasangsa daegye* [Historical Outline of Korean Thoughts] 6, Kyeongkido: The Academy of Korean Studies, 1993, pp. 249-266, pp. 310-311. While not an expert in church history, Neunghwa Lee has located Christianity in the Korean context along with other religions such as Shamanism [神教], Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. (Neunghwa Lee, *Chosun gidokgyo geup oegyosa*, Chosun gidokgyo changmoonsa, 1928.)

6. The United States, for instance, as a country founded by Puritans, traditionally

between the *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* [A National Perspective on Church History] and the *Minjung sagwan* [The People's Perspective on Church History] lacks such a larger framework, Yangseon Kim's *Han-guk gyohoesa yeongu* [Study of Korean Church History], a work strengthened by its direct utilization of Korean church history materials and Taekbu Jeon's *Han-guk gyohoe baljeonsa* [The History and Development of Korean Church], which stressed the "natives' faith" similarly failed to take a wider view. Ilseop Shim's *Han-guk minjok undong gwa gidokgyo suyong sago* [A Study of the Korean Folk Movement and the History of the Acceptance of Christianity], which focuses on the theology of indigenization, partially takes into account the Confucian background in Korean culture as a factor having an influence at the time of Christianity's first introduction in Korea. Ironic as it seems, Korean church history has been entirely ghettoized in historical studies of Korean religion. It is in this context that Seokheon Hahm's *Tteut euro bon Han-guk yeoksa* [Korean History from the Viewpoint of Meaning], while not thorough enough for a historiographical work, nevertheless deserves recognition for acknowledging the framework of Korean religion.

Then what is the significance of Korean church history in the diachronic framework of Korean religion? This question alone is weighty enough for a lengthy dissertation topic, but several points

equated American religious history with American church history. (See Ahlstrom, S., *A Religious History of the American People*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972.) A central theme of American religious histories often relates the story of Christian transmission from the Continent to the New World as its focus and the Christian conquest of the Wild West and the world in the end. Yet church histories written after the 1980s takes a self-reflexive turn and attempt to rewrite American church history on the basis of the history of American religion in general. For instance, Catherine Albanese offers a more comprehensive history of American religions including Native American religions, Judaism, and even the recent ones like the New Age movement in her book *Religions and Religion*. She focuses on how American churches established their own uniqueness from the European tradition, while presenting an extensive account of American religious culture covering mythology, rituals, and symbolism. (Albanese, C., *Religions and Religion*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981.)

can be briefly outlined.⁷ Apart from the political history of the dynasties, the history of Korean religion can be broadly divided into three phases with two climactic events: the first phase in which indigenous faiths and their Shamanistic patterns prevailed; the second phase in which the three major traditional religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism became popular with the influx of Chinese character culture; and, finally, the third phase of multi-religions, when Western Christianity was introduced and competed with the traditional religions. The transmission of Christianity was not only a significant event for Christians but also one of the two major climactic events that shaped the history of Korean religions.

In other words, the transmission of Christianity is a theme which carries questions of far greater significance than the question of merely recognizing who the first missionary to land on *Jemulpo* was or of deciding whether it was the missionaries or the booksellers (*kwonseo*) who were more active in preaching the gospel. It marks the birth of another worldview for the nation, with a massive tectonic change to Korea's religious topography that had previously been based on the three traditional religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism — religions that have persisted since Chinese culture was grafted on to the foundation of indigenous Shamanism over 2,000 years ago. Due to the introduction of Christianity, the multi-layered and pluralistic nature of Korea's religious culture, formed from indigenous traditional religions, was able to extend to a cross-cultural and global level by breaking out of Eastern provincialism and combining with Western religious cultures.

Also, after witnessing Christianity, the sense of the possibilities of an entirely new religion led to the foundation of a movement called Eastern Learning, which worshipped *Hanulim* [God], which was then followed by the foundation of Jeungsangyo by Ilsoon

7. See Chongsuh Kim, "Socio-cultural Changes and Religious Cognition of the Modernization Period in Korea," *Han-guk munhwa* [Korean Culture] 28 (2001. 12): 229-250.

Kang, who claimed he himself was God [*Shang-ti*]. The transmission of Christianity was not merely an addition of another foreign religion nor was its significance limited to the Westernization of the peripheral Korean culture. Instead, it called for a fundamental change in the symbolism of Korean religious culture. For instance, Christianity first introduced the idea that incarnation vitalized the faith community of laymen. Such transformations indicate that the transmission of Christianity was the turning point for the formation of the concept of religion in Korea. It was an event that entirely changed the religious cognition of the Korean people and was a moment of enormous religious transformation.

Another reason why Korean church history should be examined in the framework of the history of Korean religions is that it improves our understanding of the early division of mission fields. It is a well-known fact that the early division of mission fields is important in assessing the religious nature of local churches and the splits and developments in the discourses of various Korean churches. Yet most Korean church histories have done nothing more than reporting the fact that there were divisions, and merely refer to missionary source materials. Aside from explaining the fact that the Nevius method was applied, there have been few investigations into these historical works as to why such divisions were necessary. None of the church histories have explained why the largest North American Presbyterian Churches took the northwestern region as their center. Some of the recent local church histories have pointed out the significance of the socio-cultural backgrounds of the people in the region. Such an observation may account for the division at the micro level; however, at the macro level, it would be more fruitful to consider the varying conditions that characterized Korea's religious life before the transmission of Christianity.

In short, it was more difficult for the missionaries to preach the gospel in the Southern region where Confucianism was entrenched, rooted as it was in Toegae's Southeastern [Yeongnam] School and

Yoolgok's Midwest [Kiho] School. Several recent local church histories have feebly mentioned this point. Still, the fact that the Northwestern region was chosen as a vantage point during the early division of Christian mission fields demands further scholarly examination. While the Northwestern region had a relatively strong industrial background, none of the dominant Confucian schools were established in that region in spite of a considerably large population of *yooseng* [Confucian scholars]. It would be interesting to study how missionaries interpreted this situation as favorable to their efforts.

On the other hand, existing studies on Korean church history often emphasize the fact that Christianity contributed to the establishment of democracy in Korea. It is well known that Jaepil Seo and Chiho Yoon, who were part of the *Dongnip hyeophoe* [Independence Club], or Seungman Lee, who led the *Manmin gongdong-hoe* [Convocation of Ten Thousand People], all shared Western Christian ideals. So it may appear to make every sense that democracy was directly introduced by Christians, particularly when one considers the intimacy between democracy and Christianity in the West. Yet a diachronic framework of Korean history of religion offers another interpretation.

It should be noted above all that Christianity started off as a minor religion among the various Korean religions. The persecutions inflicted on Christians as a minority religious group during the period of its inception should not be romantically glorified as confessions of faith. The persecutions indicate that, given its minority status, Christianity tended to make peace and mutual prosperity its goal, thus going against absolute and monopolistic authority. It might be that such a tendency acculturated the nation to democracy as it expanded across the peninsula. In other words, if Christianity ever assumed the role of the carrier of democracy for Korea, it would be more plausible that such a role was a contextual by-product of the transformation of Christianity from a minority religion to a majority religion within the contextual

topography of Korea's multi-religious cultural landscape rather than a direct transmission from Western Christian culture.⁸

In order for Korea's church history to truly claim to be "Korean," the spirituality of the Korean people should be taken into consideration as a central issue. The study of Christianity as a major religion should provide the key to interpreting the spiritual meaning of Korean history in general. Conversely, this also signifies that the history of the Korean church should be written within the framework of Korea's religious history.

3. The Religio-comparative Viewpoint And the Postmodern Perspective

If Korean church history is to be discussed in the framework of the history of religion, we should pay attention to the nation's other traditional religions. One will be able to appreciate the germination of a Korean character in Christianity only when one first understands the nature of the Korean religions of Shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This understanding will also help comprehend how and why Christianity was Koreanized after its transmission.

For instance, even till the 1970s, one could easily witness elderly

8. A similar observation was made in this regard to the development of the idea of U.S. human rights. According to Robert Bellah, the Baptist Churches of Roger Williams were expelled from Massachusetts when John Winthrop led the mainstream Christians to unify the churches. But later on, as they grew into America's largest Christian religious body, they enabled a pluralistic approach to consider the rights of minority religions, which eventually became a significant background for shaping the idea of U.S. human rights. That is, the idea of human rights was not implanted by the European Christian culture but was self-generated from the American religious topography. (See Bellah, R. N., "Cultural Pluralism and Religious Particularism," Unpublished Paper read at the Conference on Freedom of Religion in America, University of Southern California, 1981, pp. 1-5.)

women giving a Buddhist style clasp of their hands to the Christian minister when they were late for a sermon. Such an instance shows how futile it would be to discuss only the influence of the American theology without considering the actual field in which it was implanted. Whether or not one criticizes the Holy Spirit movement in Korean churches, which is alleged to be linked with exorcism, this movement cannot be discussed without a comparative study of Shamanist beliefs. Similarly, in order to investigate whether early morning prayer meetings, one of the most conspicuous practices unique to the Korean church, can be related to Seonju Gil's Taoist experience before his Christian conversion, it is important to assess Taoist beliefs and practices of that earlier time.

Therefore, our interest in other traditional religions differs from the "mission theology" recently propounded by theologians who seek to convert other religious groups, from the "indigenization theology" that attempts to avoid the labeling of Christianity as a "foreign religion," from the "religious theology" that endeavors to start an open dialogue with other religious groups as a yielding gesture, and even from the "culture theology" that insists on finding a Christian theme in Korea's traditional religious culture. Rather, our interests lead us to take a synchronic comparative view in order to better understand Christianity in Korea itself. Discussing the characteristics of Korean churches, in short, is to place their locus in their genus by comparing them with churches in other countries and with other new religious groups in Korea.

As Joachim Wach, a well-known scholar of comparative religion, has observed, the value of a ruby will not drop even if you view it as one of many gems. Rather, as William James has once noted using another analogy, it is easier to understand the characteristics of a crab when you see it as a crustacean than merely as a crab. Religious phenomena should be understood in this manner. A phenomenon will better reveal its characteristics when it is viewed along with similar or comparable objects in the system of *Listenwissenschaft*.⁹

For instance, why is the Great Revival Service of 1907 a memorable event only within Korean church history? Is it not a momentous event for the world history of the Church as a whole and even for the history of world religion as well as for the history of the Korean Church? Yet even in L. George Paik's *Han-guk gaeshingyosa* [The History of Protestant Missions in Korea, 1832-1910], which boasts of a broad knowledge of world church history, the author fails to include a direct comparison of that event with the revival movement of other regions such as the United States.

Most Korean church histories along with Kyeongbae Min's *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* [The National Perspective on Church History] only describe this event as a local affair. Therefore, the accounts are seriously lacking in depth and mostly rely on confessional narratives or missionary reports. It is interesting that Taekbu Jeon's *Han-guk gyohoe baljeonsa* [The History and Development of the Korean Church], which focused on indigenous belief theories, discusses the event's relevance to the revival movement that had continued since the 18th century when it was first led by Jonathan Edward in the United States. Still the account does not seem to reach to the genus level in *Listenwissenschaft* and fails to pursue a further comparison of the movements.

If this event is to be regarded as a revival movement, there are numerous instances of revival movements in world church history such as utopianism, millennialism, Adventism, and enthusiastic fundamentalism. Furthermore, revival movements in world religious history include those in Africa, Russia, and Latin American countries, and even the cargo-cults of Melanesia. To interpret these revival movements, previous studies offer well-established systemized morphologies using psychological, sociological, historical, religious hermeneutical frames and its characteristic schema is often analyzed as destruction, restoration, and a happy ending. Unless

9. Smith, J.Z., "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," in *Imagining Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 36-52.

we employ these hermeneutical frames, it is hard to imagine how the study of Korean ecclesiastical history will overcome its localism, a localism exposed in its simplistic emphasis on confessional interpretations. On the other hand, if the Great Revival Service of 1907 in Korea is incorporated into comparative studies, it will contribute to a better account of other world revival movements.

In addition, Korean church histories often deal seriously with the “Yongdo Lee Phenomenon” as in the case of Ikdu Kim and Seonju Gil when describing the 1920-30s faith revival movement. Why is Yongdo Lee a mystic? If one were to answer that he was a mystic for being mystical, the answer would be deemed laughable by academics of mysticism. This is because studies on mysticism have developed their own theoretical systems, assessing the self-centeredness of Hinduism, the emptiness of Buddhism, or the mysticism of the medieval Christianity, Sufism, Cabbalah, Hasidism, and others.

In fact, the “mysticism” of Yongdo Lee was a derogatory label used by Presbyterian theologians such as Hyuk Namkung and Hyoungryong Park to brand Yongdo Lee as anti-theological. Although following Jongho Byun, Kyeongbae Min’s *Han-guk gidokgyohoesa* [A History of Korean Christian Churches] mitigates the negative image of Yongdo Lee’s mysticism characterizing Korean churches as the national churches, the usage of such a labeling itself has been taken for granted in later writings on Korean church history. Kyeongbae Min’s study notes the obvious mystic elements found in Yongdo Lee’s writings, such as the “identification with Christ” and “muteness,” which are characteristic of the mysticism of Medieval Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart. However, are these mystic elements enough to justify the categorization of Yongdo Lee as a mystic? What marks the distinction between his mysticism and the fanaticism of self-deification threatening established churches or other heretical Jesus church movements? To discuss Yongdo Lee’s mysticism in a comparative framework of mysticism, it should be examined along with other

comparable mystic phenomena in a systemized *Listenwissenschaft*, which will invite more rigorous academic interpretations of his mysticism, which do not merely dismiss it as something peculiar to the popular religious movements.

Postmodernists or post-colonial theorists have often criticized this comparative perspective as “imperialist” in the sense that it promotes a meta-theory through generalization or universalism. Since historical events *per se* may be fragmentary as “monads without windows” or may consist of arbitrarily changing aggregates as seen through a kaleidoscope, a consistent interpretive system may not be applicable for these events. Nevertheless, a comparative perspective is considered epistemologically inevitable in modern comparative religious studies.¹⁰ Recent scholarship has attempted to overcome its imperialistic tendencies by stressing the individual contexts that underlie religious phenomena.¹¹ Rather than deconstructing the religio-comparative method for analyzing religions itself, postmodern thinking seems to contribute to uplifting it in a more reflexive and mature manner.

Anyway, from a comparative religious viewpoint combined with postmodern thinking, it was thought to be implausible to claim a single consistent description of Korean church histories that relies solely on *Seongyo sagwan* [The Missionary Perspective on Church History], *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* [The National Perspective on Church History], or *Minjung sagwan* [The Minjung [People]’s Perspective on Church History]. What is needed is a comparative

10. Sullivan, a scholar of comparative religion, uses the example of the binocularity of human vision to show how innate comparison is to human perception and understanding. While most of the individual cells in the visual vortex fire in response to signals coming from both eyes, the left and the right eye see differently. Many different retinal images are sorted out into a single perception after a complex process of comparison. (Sullivan, L. E., “The Net of Indra: Comparison and the Contribution of Perfection,” in Patton, K. C. & B. C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, pp. 213ff.)

11. See Chongsuh Kim, “New Comparativism: Comparative Methodology in Contemporary Religious Studies,” *Cheolhaksasang* [Philosophical Thoughts]. Special Ed. 1/6 (2002), Institute of Philosophy at Seoul National University: 15-50.

analysis of religious events that takes a variety of possible conditions into consideration.

In this respect, Namsik Kim's *Iljeha Han-guk gyohoe sojongpa undongyeongu* [A Study of Korean Protestant Minority Sect Movement] (1987) deserves scholarly attention. Although his study grew out of *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* [The National perspective on church history], it called attention to minority sects that Korean mainstream churches considered heretical. But this study is also open to a postmodernist critique that questions whether these groups can indeed be uniformly contained under the rubric of "minority sects."

4. The Problem of the Historical Perspective

Since the 1980s, the historical perspective has been stressed in the study of Korean church history. The publication of Korean church history materials by scholars at the Institute of Korean Church History represents a noteworthy feat. The existing written histories of Korean churches often reflected the authors' biases toward sources, and tended to be confessional narratives. Such individualism actually marginalized Korean church history from other academic fields so that it was likely to be regarded as mystified, dogmatized, and non-academic. The recent works by the Institute of Korean Church History confronted these challenges through a collaborative project and contributed to adopting a scientific methodology in the study of Korean ecclesiastical history.¹² Yet this does not mean that church history should be only based

12. Yet we still need to figure out what the authors truly mean by "scientific" when they emphasize the scientific and empirical method and confess at the same time that all of the authors are "Christian believers" and that the study has a "confessional character."

on fact-centered description as in secular history. That is another story.

The debate in the 1950s between the Chinese scholar Hu Shih [胡適] and the Japanese scholar Suzuki [鈴木大拙] on the methodology of Chinese Zen [Ch'an] Buddhist history may offer a heuristic message for us here.¹³ Hu Shih argued that Shen-hui [神會] was the true author for the Six Platform Sutra, which formerly had been known to be written by a mythicized monk named Hui-neng [慧能]. He also argued that while Suzuki mysticized Zen Buddhism by exaggerating its irrational aspects, a thorough historical examination would tell us that Zen Buddhism can be understood in rational terms and that it is actually a reformation of Chinese Buddhism. Suzuki, on the other hand, argued that Hu Shih was too immersed in a historical paradigm to recognize that Zen [禪] is a trans-rational intuition that cannot be explained through intellectual analysis. In brief, Hu Shih blamed Suzuki for belittling history and Suzuki chastised Hu Shih for writing the history of Zen Buddhism without an understanding of Zen. In the aftermath of the debate, Zen Buddhist history in China has stressed both religious significance and historical fact, though the emphasis given to each is not of equal weight.

Then the question for Korean church history is which of these should be given more weight, church or history. It is apparent that *Han-guk gidokgyo ui yeoksa* [A History of Christianity in Korea I, II] published by the Institute for Korean Church History focuses on history and church, and on the historical facts themselves rather than the interpretation of meanings: the book describes in detail various course of events and particular characters. This work may appear close to the meaning of the English term "history," whose etymology in Latin [*historia*] means to know or to learn, but it falls a little short of a deep reflection on the meaning of the

13. For a further sketch of this debate, see Hu Shih, "Ch'an [Zen] Buddhism in China: Its History and Method," *Philosophy East and West*, 3/1 (1953): 3-24; D. T. Suzuki, "Zen: A Reply to Hu Shih," *Op. cit.*, 25-46.

German term “*Geschichte*,” which means not only to record the facts themselves but to analyze and interpret them.

Han-guk gidokgyo ui yeoksa [A History of Christianity in Korea I, II] is quite different from the existing Korean church histories for offering an event-oriented, positive historiography rather than relating the Christian view. For instance, the anti-Japanese struggles are covered in a manner that is extensive when compared to the book’s coverage of the restoration movement of the Korean churches. The external socio-cultural movements are more central to the narrative than the inner-faith of the church or the transformation of worship. It is doubtful who would take an interest in reading these histories if they merely covered minor sectarian conflicts or secular socio-cultural movements.

This is not to say that the significance from a Christian viewpoint has been sufficiently documented in other Korean church histories. At the risk of simplification, it is possible to say that the most disputed subject has always been who should be the main body in Korean church history (i.e., whether it is the missionary or the people). Of course, the question is dependent on church historians’ choice of materials, but it is hard to deny a non-religious trend in Korean church history when most of these debates were carried on predominantly as a struggle for hegemony.¹⁴ We will have to admit that the trend reflects the *Zeitgeist* of church historians concerned with the struggle for human rights against the military regime in the 1970s. Yet just as Liberation Theology or Minjung Theology revealed its contextual limits, this debate which revolves around

14. I am open for other opinions on this point. Yet when we think of the most disputed point in Korean Buddhist history at the same time, while there were some debates on the orthodox tradition, the central debate was on whether practice along with enlightenment was a sudden or gradual issue. This is not to say that Korean Buddhist history was more advanced than Korean Church history in academic terms. A simple comparison of the research staff or the research results show that Korean Buddhist history has a long way to go. Yet if one were to merely focus on what ought to be in religious history, the enlightenment debate of the Buddhists seems to be more purely religious compared to the hegemony debate of the Christians.

the hegemonic viewpoint of Korean churches should be overcome by new church historians.

To discuss the Church as “Christ’s body,” one needs to further consider theological and religious themes. Instead of merely relying on statistical data regarding the translations and publications of the Bible in Korea, would it not be more worthwhile to study how the Bible was read by the Korean people so as to analyze the kind of spiritual transformations occurring in people’s minds and how such transformations were actually reflected in their beliefs and rituals? Should historians of general Korean history limit themselves to dealing more “scientifically” and objectively with subjects such as the type of people who came as missionaries to Korea to colonize the nation and the number of such missionaries, or questions such as who fought with them to regain sovereignty, or which Christian reverends denied their faith when they were forced to worship the Shinto shrine, or how North Korean Christians crossed the southern borders to escape the persecution during the Emancipation and the Korean War? Is it not the privilege of church historians to read the trans-historical meaning that transcends all of these historical events?¹⁵

It goes without saying that a thorough examination of historical materials or the development of new perspectives is an indispensable and inevitable part of historical studies. Neither a study without historical sources nor a study without a distinct viewpoint will have any significance. Church history will be empty without fresh insights. But church history without theological or religious significance would be even more problematic.

15. The Resurrection of Christ was only observed by true believers. The analogy can be applied to church historians today. For instance, it would be improper to write, “The Holy Spirit was immanent there at that time” for an event in 1907. Yet it would be equally unsuitable to delete anything unscientific. Rather, if one were to say that many people believed that the Holy Spirit was immanent at that time, that would be a fact and it would be necessary for the historian to document the fact. Again, only church historians will be able to pay special attention to these kinds of details.

Many existing Korean church histories, which have often had background affiliations with certain denominations, occasionally distort historical facts to suit particular agendas. In this regard, the “holistic methodology” used in *Han-guk gidokgyo ui yeoksa* [A History of Christianity in Korea I, II] is laudable. Taking all available historical sources and viewpoints into account would seem to offer the only way to maintain a semblance of objectivity. Yet the question remains whether this is a practical approach. It may therefore be possible to criticize this work for including too many different perspectives and deter the readers’ ability to grasp the significance of certain events. It may be convenient for scholars checking factual references but inaccessible to the layperson.

While the contemporary study of religious histories takes a variety of historical materials and methodologies seriously, researchers in the field prefer a multi-disciplinary method to a holistic one. Rather than depending on all materials and methods, different materials and methods are selected according to the researcher’s interest to interpret religious phenomena. Not all of the tools in the toolbox will be used for a makeover. One will only need the tools that are required for the work at hand. More importantly, one will have to remember what work needs to be done and why.

Why do we study Korean church history? What does it mean for the Christian community to exist in the nation? Would it not be disappointing to learn that the tradition of the Korean church, which has sustained itself through great struggle, is merely a narrative of characters and stories from the past? What is the disposition of Providence that only God knows of? How did humanity understand His deeds and express them?

If we recognize the fact that the Bible begins its history with Abraham, the father of faith, instead of numerous other characters and events, it is easy to find the key. The history of Christianity, like other religions, should focus on the theme of salvation, whether the viewpoint be that of people, missions, struggles, or other perspectives.¹⁶ Korean church history will have to creatively

analyze the soteriological motives of the Korean Christian community through the prism of different historical viewpoints.

This is far from exhorting scholars to return to a confessional mode or to non-academic testimonial writings. Rather, the soteriological motives should be objectified with more witnesses and materials of faith, ritual, and symbolism.

5. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, to foster new perspectives on Korean church history, the following key points should be considered:

- 1) If Korean church history is to be truly “Korean,” we should consider it from the wholly diachronic framework of Korean religious history;
- 2) In-depth research into Korean church history should be conducted along with comparable phenomena in a systemized *Listenwissenschaft*;
- 3) If Korean church history is to be a church history in the true sense, it should also be capable of interpreting its trans-historical salvational significance.

In other words, Korean church history should be made more meaningful not only for Christians in Korea but also for Koreans in general and for other peoples around the world. In this respect, it is fitting to conclude with a quote from Seokheon Hahm, who once noted that it is not good memory but sound judgment that

16. From the perspective of world religious history, this is how the sacred is expressed in the forms of mythology, ritual, and other symbolism in history. See M. Eliade. *A History of Religious Ideas*, I, II, III, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978, 1982, 1985.

makes a historian:

In the past history used to be a narrative of a nation as if each were an isolated island. Yet as the procession of history brought traffic, it revealed that such an island could no more exist One will never understand Korea if one were to see it as an island. One will have to see its position in world history to truly understand Korea Only through this panoramic vision will one be able to find the locus, mission, and ethics of the Koreans, and what Korean history is about Only focusing on the political and economic issues between the states, while missing the religious and philosophical mentality, would be the same as selecting a housing site without going up on the higher grounds.¹⁷

(Translated by Dohoon Lee)

17. Seokheon Hahm, *Tteut euro bon Han-guk yeoksa* [Korean History from the Viewpoint of Meaning], Seoul: Hangilsa, 1993 (1967), p. 52.

ABSTRACT

**Korean Church History:
A Religio-comparative Perspective**

Kim, Chongsuh

Christianity has long been a mainstream religion in Korea and many scholars have attempted to understand Korean church history in their own respective ways. The author reviews the perspectives of existing church histories in Korea and suggests a new comparative perspective for a more creative and reliable approach to Korean church history.

This approach may be summarized as follows: First, if Korean church history is to be truly “Korean,” scholars should consider it from the wholly diachronic framework of Korean religious history. Secondly, in-depth research of Korean church history should be carried out along with research of comparable phenomena in a systemized *Listenwissenschaft*. And thirdly, if Korean church history is to be a church history in the truest sense, it should be able to interpret the trans-historical salvational significance implicit in the history of Christianity in Korea.

The paper concludes that Korean church history should be meaningful not only for Christians in Korea but also for the Koreans in general and even for the population of the world at large.

Keywords:

Korean church history, Korean religious history, Christianity in Korea, Christians in Korea, Religion in Korea