

A Study of Korean Church History

-- A Religio-Comparative Perspective

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1. Introduction

Christianity has long been a mainstream religion in Korea. The Korean National Census reports that the entire Christian population, combining the Protestants and Catholics, exceeded the Buddhist population in 1980s and 1990s.¹ It means the fact that the terms like “persecution” or “mission-oriented religion” can no longer describe the Korean Church. Its remarkable growth has established Christianity as the most influential religion in the nation and at the same time has made the Korean church one of 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 the Korean 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 the ignored lower class. Today over a half of the religious population in Korea are Christians and over quarter of the entire population share the Christian belief.

¹ The reliability of Korean National Census is known for collecting information from the entire population instead of using the sampling method. 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 the entire 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 23.59 million (50.7%) of religious population out of the entire 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.

In this regard, it is easy to witness that a number of religious historians have sought to rewrite the Korean church history apart from its earlier focus on the persecutions of the Catholics or Christian missionary work, which seems to have been less appealing. Among these attempts since the 1970s are *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* (National Viewpoint of Church History), *Minjung sagwan* (Minjung[People]'s Viewpoint of Church History) and *Chongchejeok sagwan* (Holistic Viewpoint of Church History).² While these works have contributed to offering meaningful perspectives for the Korean church history, it should be noted that they 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, the study of Korean church history demands to overcome the existing perspectives that were dominated by the Korean church historians. Such a demand has a lot to do with the rapid development in the fields of theology, religious studies, and other secular sciences, which resulted from academic differentiation and increase in the number of scholars since the 1970s. In other words, just as the discussion of *Minjung sagwan* (The People's Viewpoint) was impossible without Minjung Theology, the theological discussion of indigenization and Koreanization would not be constructive enough without the religio-comparative interest. The study of Korean church history is required to 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 the existing Korean church histories were written from a Korean perspective. It is little doubt that Kyeongbae Min's *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* (National Church Viewpoint) in the 1970s first started to seriously embrace the Korean perspective in writing Korean church histories. Unlike others who

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.

have contended elsewhere, it is less important to consider how many more Korean materials were actually cited than recognizing the shift of the focus from the mission-oriented perspective to the perspective that stresses the national church and Korean references, since actual application of materials can accumulate with further findings. Korean church history of today, however, demands a more fundamental approach beyond such perspectives and materials.

For instance, in the 1980s, when Buddhists questioned why Christianity was covered as one of the Korean traditional religions in the high school philosophy/ethics curricular, the only responses Korean church historians were able to offer were that they took pride in a long history—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 “non-traditional” or “foreign.”

Historic rendering of 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 research 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 examines how Buddhism takes 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 Korean I, II) published by the Institute for Korean Church History, all share the same framework as Zürcher’s. Besides the minor additions or omissions, the only difference lies in whether the works include Catholicism, or whether they trace up to Nestorianism, or whether they refer to a lot of Korean materials. The question is, then, whether we, like Ch’en, can examine how

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

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

Christianity made 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 how Christianity as a Western religion made its own transmission and contribution to Korean culture, and the other is to take a closer look at how the Korean people with ancient religious traditions transformed Christianity with distinctive Korean features. While the existing Korean church histories focus mainly on how Christianity acquired its influence in Korea, they are less interested in examining what the Korean people's religious mind were 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 the study of Korean church history not look out for a spiritual meaning that Korean history in general might imply?

Although too brief and cursory merely relying on missionary materials, L. George Paik's effort to summarize Korean religion in his preface to *Han-guk gaeshingyosa* deserves a close attention. It is indeed a significant accomplishment in a sense to testify that Korean church history requires a background account of Korean religion.⁵ Most of the Korean church histories published since then 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 sought to view Korean church history in the larger framework of Korean religion history.⁶ As the debate between the *Minjok gyohoe*

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 the 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 degae* (Historical Outline of Korean Thoughts) 6 Kyeongkido: The Academy of Korean Studies. 1993. pp.249-266, 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 United States, for instance, as a country founded by Puritans, traditionally 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

sagwan (National Church Viewpoint) and the *Minjung sagwan* (The People's Viewpoint) lacks such a view, so do Yangseon Kim's *Han-guk gyohoesa yeongu* (Study of Korean Church History) that even had its strength in utilizing Korean church history materials and Taekbu Jeon's *Han-guk gyohoe baljeonsa* (The History and Development of Korean Church) that stressed the 'natives faith.' Ilseop Shim's *Han-guk minjok undong gwa gidokgyo suyong sago* (A Study of Korean Folk Movement and Christian Acceptance History) that focused on the theology of indigenization partially relates the Confucian background in Korean culture when Christianity was first introduced in Korea. Ironic as it seems, Korean church history has been entirely ghettoized from the history 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 (*tteut*)), while not thorough enough for a historiography, has its own gravity in recognizing the framework of Korean religion.

Then what is the significance of Korean church history in the diachronic framework of Korean religion? This question alone would deserve a dissertation topic, but several points can briefly be outlined.⁷ Apart from the political history of the dynasties, Korean history of religion can be broadly divided into three phases with two climactic events: first, the phase of indigenous faiths when Shamanistic patterns were prevailing; second, the phase of three major traditional religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism that became popular with the influx of Chinese character culture; and third, the phase of multi-religions when the Western Christianity was introduced and competed with the traditional religions. The transmission of Christianity was not only a significant event for the Christians but also one of the two climactic events that shaped the Korean history of religions.

end. Yet church histories written after the 1980s takes a self-reflexive turn and attempts to rewrite the American church history on a 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)

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.

In other words, the transmission of Christianity carries much more significance than merely recognizing whom the first missionary landing on *Jemulpo* was or deciding whether more active in preaching the gospel were missionaries or booksellers(*kwonseo*). It marks a national world(view) creation with a massive crustal change to the religious topography based on the triadic traditional religions—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—that have continued on foundational Shamanism over 2000 years since the influx of Chinese character culture. Due to the introduction of Christianity, the multi-layered and pluralistic nature of the Korean religious culture, formed by indigenous traditional religions, was capable of extending itself to a cross-cultural and global level by breaking the Eastern provincialism and combining the Western religious cultures.

For other instances, after witnessing the possibility of an entirely new religion, Eastern Learning was founded to worship *Hanulim* (God) and then Jeungsangyo was founded by Ilsoon Kang who claimed himself as the God (*Shang-ti*). The transmission of Christianity was not merely an addition of another foreign religion nor was 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, the idea of incarnation was first introduced and a layman based faith community was vitalized. Such transformations evidence the transmission of Christianity as the turning point for forming the concept of religion in Korea. It is this event that entirely changed the religious cognition of the Korean people as the moment of enormous religious transformation.

Another reason why Korean church history should be examined in the framework of Korean history of religion is that it helps understand 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 split and growth discourses of Korean churches. Yet most of the Korean church histories only have reported the fact itself that there were divisions, simply referring to the missionary materials. Besides the fact that the Nevius method was applied, there is little investigation of 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 region's socio-cultural backgrounds. Such an observation may account for the division at the micro level; however, from the macro level, it would be more fruitful to consider the conditions that Korean religion took before the transmission of Christianity

In short, it was more difficult for the missionaries to preach the gospel in the Southern region where the Confucian background was too solid with Toegae's

Southeastern (Yeongnam) School and Yoolgok's Midwest (Kiho) School. Some of the recent local church histories have sparsely made this point. Still, the fact that the Northwestern region was chosen as the vantage point during the early division of mission fields demands a 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 considerable number of *yooseng* (Confucian scholar) populations. It would be interesting to study how missionaries interpreted this correlation to their favor.

On the other hand, the existing Korean church histories 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 share Western Christian ideals. So it appears to make every sense that democracy was directly introduced by Christians judging from 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 amongst the Korean religions. The persecutions inflicted on Christianity as a minority during its inception should not be always glorified as romantic confessions of faith. These suggest that given its minority status, Christianity tended to make peace and mutual prosperity its goal, going against absolute and monopolistic authority. It might be that such a tendency acculturated democracy as it expanded across the nation. In other words, if Christianity ever took the role as 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 in the topography of multi-religious Korean culture rather than a direct transmission from the Western Christian culture.⁸

⁸ A similar observation was made in this regard to the development of the idea of US 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 US 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

In order for Korean church history to truly claim to be “Korean,” it is needless to say that the spirituality of the Korean people should be considered central. Christianity as a major religion should be able to interpret the spiritual meaning of Korean history in general. And it would also signify that Korean church history should be written in the framework of the Korean history of religion.

3. The Religio-comparative Viewpoint and the Postmodern Perspective

If Korean church history is to be discussed in the framework of Korean history of religion, we should be able to pay attention to other traditional religions. One might be able to appreciate the germination of Korean nature of Christianity only after understanding the Korean religious nature 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 ladies giving a Buddhist style clasp of their hands to the Christian minister when they were late for the sermon. Such an instance would show how it would have been a futile effort to only discuss the American theological influence without considering the actual field. Whether or not one criticizes the Holy Spirit movement, which is allegedly linked with exorcism, this movement cannot be discussed without the comparison with the Shamanist beliefs. In the similar respect, to examine if the morning prayer meetings, one of the most conspicuous characteristics of the Korean church, were related with Seonju Gil’s Taoist experience that existed before his Christian conversion, it is important to assess the Taoist beliefs and practices of that time.

Therefore our interests in other traditional religions differ from those from the “mission theology” of the recent theologians who have sought to convert other religious groups, the “indigenization theology” that attempted to be free from being labeled as a ‘foreign religion,’ the “religious theology” that endeavored to start an open dialogue with other religious groups as a yielding gesture, or even the “culture theology” that insisted to find a Christian theme in the Korean traditional religious culture. Rather, our interests need 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 themselves with churches in other countries and other new religious groups in Korea.

As Joachim Wach, a well-known scholar of comparative religion, has observed, the price of a ruby will never drop even if you see it as a gem. Rather, as William James has once noted, it is easier to understand the characteristics of 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 its similar or comparable objects in the system of *Listenwissenschaft*.⁹

For instance, why is the Great Revival Service of 1907 a memorable event only in the Korean church history? Is it not an event to be remembered in world church history and even in world religious history as well as Korean church history? 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, fails to include a direct comparison with the revival movement of other regions such as the United States.

Most of the Korean church histories along with Kyeongbae Min's *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* (National Church Viewpoint) only relate this event as a local event in Korean churches. Therefore the accounts are seriously lacking in academic interpretations and mostly rely on confessional narratives or the missionary reports. It is interesting that Taekbu Jeon's *Han-guk gyohoe baljeonsa* (The History and Development of Korean Church), which focused on indigenous belief theories, refers to 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* to further compare 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. Further, revival movements in world religious history include those in Africa, Russia, and Latin American countries, and even cargo-cults of Melanesia. To interpret these revival movements, well-established systemized morphologies have been offered with psychological, sociological, historical, religious hermeneutical frames, of which characteristic is often schematized as destruction, restoration, and a happy ending. Without employing these hermeneutical frames, it is hard to imagine that Korean church history overcomes its localism as

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

shown in its simple emphasis on the confessional interpretations. On the other hand, if the Great Revival Service of 1907 in Korea is contained in religio-comparative studies, it will contribute to accounting for other world revival movements.

In addition, Korean church histories often deal seriously with the “Yongdo Lee Phenomenon” as with 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, academic communities of mysticism would have to do nothing but laugh. It 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 disciplinary label given 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, such a labeling per se has been taken for granted in the usage of later Korean church histories. Obviously Kyeongbae Min’s study shows mystic elements found in Yongdo Lee’s writings, such as the “identification with the Christ” and “muteness,” which are characteristic of mysticism in the Medieval Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart. However, are these mystic elements enough to justify Yongdo Lee as a mystic? What makes a distinction between his mysticism and fanaticism attacking established churches by self-deification or other heretical Jesus church movements? To discuss Yongdo Lee’s mysticism in the religio-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 on his mysticism, not merely regarding it as particular in the People’s Religion Movements.

Postmodernists or postcolonialists have often criticized this religio-comparative perspective as imperialist in the sense to promote a meta-theory through generalization or universalization. Since historical events per se may be fragmentary just as ‘monads without windows’ or consist of arbitrarily changing aggregates as those of 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 the imperialistic trend by stressing the individual contexts that underlies religious phenomena.¹¹ Rather than deconstructing the religio-comparative method itself, postmodern thinking seems to contribute to uplifting it in a more reflexive and mature manner.

Anyway, from the comparative religious viewpoint combined with postmodern thinking, it may not be plausible that a single consistent description about Korean church histories can be made relying on either *Seongyo sagwan* (Missionary Viewpoint of Church History), *Minjok gyohoe sagwan* (National Viewpoint of Church History), or *Minjung sagwan* (Minjung[People]'s Viewpoint of Church History). What is necessary is an analysis of religious events in terms of comparison made with a variety of possible conditions taken 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* (national viewpoint of church history),' it called attention to minority sects that Korean mainstream churches considered heretical. But this study is also open to a postmodernist criticism questioning whether these minority sects are indeed uniformized as a 'universal (?)' conceptualization of "minority sects."

4. The Problem of the Historical Perspective

Since the 1980s, the historical perspective has been stressed in Korean church history. The publication of Korean church history materials by the young scholars at the

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.

Institute of Korean Church History has been a noteworthy feat for the academia. The existing Korean church histories had a hard time securing an objective position since they were written by individuals and often reflected the author's bias of materials and tended to be confessional narratives. Such individualism actually alienated Korean church history from other academic fields so that it was likely to be mystified and dogmatized as non-academic, and as a result, it led to a bizarre regionalization. We might think that the recent works of the Institute of Korean Church History took such issues as a collaborative project and contributed to adopting a scientific methodology to the study of Korean church history.¹² Yet this does not mean that church history should be only based on fact-centered description as in secular history. It 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 the 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 was so far 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 aspect, 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 is too much caught in a historical paradigm to recognize that Zen(禪) is a trans-rational intuition that cannot be explained through an intellectual analysis. In brief, Hu Shih blames Suzuki for belittling history and Suzuki blames Hu Shih for writing the history of Zen Buddhism without the understanding of Zen. Since the debate, Zen Buddhist history in China has stressed, although giving unequal weight to, both the religious significance and the historical facts.

Then the question for Korean church history is what should be given more weight, church or history. Apparently *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 various course of events are described in detail and the related characters are

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."

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," *Ibid.*, 25-46.

enumerated. 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 fall a little short to reflect the meaning of the German term “*Geschichte*,” which means not only to record the facts themselves but to document an interpretation with significance.

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 significance. For instance, the anti-Japanese struggles are covered in such an excessive manner compared to the restoration movement of the Korean churches. The external socio-cultural movements are central to the narrative than the inner-faith of the church or the transformation of worship. Then it is doubtful who is to read these histories to merely confirm the minor sectarian troubles or the secular socio-cultural movements.

This is not to say that Christian significance is sufficiently documented in other Korean church histories. Despite the risk of simplification, the most disputed subject has always been on 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 where most of the debates were made predominantly from a view on hegemony struggle.¹⁴ We will have to admit that the trend reflects the *Zeitgeist* of the church historians who had to struggle for human rights against the military regime in the 1970s. Yet just as the Liberation Theology or the Minjung Theology revealed its contextual limits, the debate revolving the hegemonic viewpoint of Korean church should be overcome by new church historians.

To discuss the church as ‘the Christ’s body,’ one should further consider theological and religious themes. Instead of merely relying on the statistical data for the translations and publications of the Bible, would it not be more worthwhile to study how the Bible was read by the Korean people and so the kind of spiritual

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 the 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.

transformations were made in their minds and how such transformations actually were reflected in the belief and rituals? Would historians of the general Korean history not deal more “scientifically” and objectively with how many and which missionaries came to Korea to commit themselves to colonializing it, who fought with them to regain sovereignty, or which Christian reverends denied faith when they were forced to worship to 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 an establishment of historical viewpoints is inevitable in historical studies. Neither a study without historical materials nor a study without viewpoints will have any religious significance. Church history will be empty without the historical materials or the historical viewpoints. But church history without a theological or religious significance is simply blind.

Many of the existing Korean church histories, which often had affiliations with a certain denominational background, have occasionally tended to distort the historical facts from their prejudiced historical materials and viewpoints. The “holistic methodology” of *Han-guk gidokgyo ui yeoksa* (A History of Christianity in Korea I, II) should be an applaudable approach in this context. Taking all available historical materials and viewpoints into account allows for a break off from a prejudiced perspective. Yet it is still a question whether this is a practical approach. Perhaps this work includes too many different perspectives for readers to grasp the significance of certain events. It may be convenient for checking factual reference for scholars but too dull and dry for a layperson.

While the contemporary study of religious histories takes a variety of historical materials and methodologies seriously, it prefers a multi-disciplinary method to a holistic one. Rather than depending on all materials and methods, different materials

¹⁵ The Resurrection of the Christ was only seen by the true believers. The analogy can be applied to the 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 there were a lot of people who 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 the church historians will be able to pay special attention to these kinds of details.

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 home makeover. One will only need the tools that are required for the work. More importantly, one will have to remember what and why the work needs to be done.

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 Korean church that has continued with the hardships and struggles is merely an enumeration of characters and stories from the past? What is the disposition of Providence that only the working God knows of? How did the ignorant human beings 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 its salvational history, whether it is the story of the people, missions, or the hardships, struggles and whatever.¹⁶ Korean church history will have to creatively interpret the soteriological motives that are related to the Korean Christian community through many different historical viewpoints.

I stress here again that this is far from returning to confessional and non-academic testimony. Rather the soteriological motives should be objectified with more witnesses and materials of faith, ritual, and symbolism.

5. Concluding Remarks

I have so far enumerated my personal humble opinions on Korean church history as a student of religious studies, which might be summarized as the following:

- 1) If Korean church history is to be truly "Korean," we should consider it from the wholly diachronic framework of Korean religious history;
- 2) The depth research of Korean church history should be done 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 be able to interpret the trans-historical (salvational) significance.

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.

In sum, Korean church history should be meaningful not only for the Christians in Korea but also for the Koreans in general and even for the population around the world.

I would like to end with citing the words from Seokheon Hahm who once noted that it is not the good memory but the right judgment that 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

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

<Abstract>

**A Study of Korean Church History
-- A Religio-Comparative Perspective**

Chongsuh Kim

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

It might be summarized as the following: First, if Korean church history is to be truly "Korean," we should consider it from the wholly diachronic framework of Korean religious history; Secondly, the depth research of Korean church history should be done along with comparable phenomena in a systemized *Listenwissenschaft*; And thirdly, if Korean church history is to be a church history in the true sense, it should be able to interpret the trans-historical (salvational) significance which is hidden in the Christian history in Korea.

These might mean the fact that Korean church history should be meaningful not only for the Christians in Korea but also for the Koreans in general and even for the population around the world.