

Sicheonju (侍天主): Theology and Anthropology in *Donghak*

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I. Introduction

The relationship between human and the Absolute in *Donghak* (東學) must be conceptualized within the context of the philosophical history of the *Joseon* dynasty. It would be difficult to claim that *Donghak* (Eastern Learning) philosophy is a direct outcome of the developments of previous Neo-Confucianism or Western Learning (西學). Yet, the idea of the Absolute and its relationship with human within the *Donghak* philosophy can be distinguished from those of the preceding philosophies.

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We will start with two questions. First, when the Absolute of Suun Choe Je-u (水雲 崔濟愚) is compared with the Absolute of the pre-existing philosophy, namely Confucianism, what are the differences? “*Choenju* (天主)”, “*Sangje* (上帝)”, “*Jiki* (至氣)” that appear in the *Donggyeongdaejeon* (東經大全), by Suun, and the term “*Ha-nal-nim* (하늘님)” that appear in his *Yongdamyusa* (龍潭遺詞) are representative expressions for the Absolute of *Donghak*. It is important to distinguish how the meanings behind those terms are different from the terms “Heaven (天)”, “Heavenly Principles (天理)”, “Principle (理)”, “*Sangje* (上帝)” that were used in Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning.

Second, how is the human position understood in relation to the ultimate reality of *Donghak*? The foundation of religious experiences can be said to be a human reaction to ultimate reality. No matter whether it is *Donghak* or Confucianism the understanding of the Absolute cannot be separated from our understanding of the essence of human. In Confucianism, continuous effort has been made to establish the Absolute in order to secure the basis of human subjectivity for the practice of self-cultivation. The reason is because the foundation of human morality is provided by the Absolute, it is inevitable that an understanding of the Absolute will lead to questions of human subjectivity in human morality. In that case, we need to look deeper into how the understanding of an Absolute in *Donghak* can lead to an understanding of human centeredness.

In order to answer these two questions, I will discuss *Donghak*'s idea of “*Sicheonju* (侍天主)”. *Sicheonju* means to “serve the lord of heaven” but implicit within this term are two ideas. One is “great *Ha-nal-nim* as the heavenly being who is to be worshipped by

human” and the other is “noble human as the receiver of *Ha-nal-nim*.” If the first idea is *Donghak*’s understanding of an Absolute Being, then the second is an understanding of human in *Donghak*. The first idea emphasizes a transcendent being while the second idea emphasizes *Ha-nal-nim* that is immanent within human. Though the two aspects of the Absolute, transcendence and immanence, were present in the early stages of *Donghak* development, the former aspect was prominent in the philosophy of Suun, the founder of the movement. The latter aspect was emphasized in the thoughts of Haewol Choe Si-hyeong (海月 崔時亨), the second patriarch. With further developments, rather than the transcendence of *Ha-nal-nim*, immanence of the Absolute was emphasized. Moreover, there was a tendency to give significance to human as the place of immanence and not to the transcendent being.

II. *Ha-nal-nim* as the One to be worshipped: Theology

Suun Choe Je-u (1824-1864) lived during a time when *Joseon*, a Confucian state, started to disintegrate. It was a time when natural calamities and widespread diseases were frequent and the pressures of Western world power was widely felt on the peninsula. Within the social confusion, Suun could not maintain his family’s name and wealth at a level of a *Yangban* and this led him to leave his home and wander the land. He went on repeated retreats for self-cultivation into the mountains in order to overcome his immediate conditions. It was during a retreat in April of 1860 that Suun had a mystical experience. This provided him with a new turnabout from the dire conditions of this home and the surrounding

social crises. He has recorded his experience as follows.

Unexpectedly it was April my body was shivering and my mind was uneasy. The sickness was unknown and indescribable. Then, suddenly words from a supernatural being came to my ears. Surprised, I got up and asked who it was and the voice answered, "Don't be afraid. People call me *Sangje* (上帝). How is it that you don't know me?" Then I asked why he appeared and the voice answered, "My deeds have not yet given any fruit, that is why you were born. You are to teach the people the way. Don't doubt me." I then asked, "Do I teach through the Western teachings?" The voice answered, "It will not be so. I possess the talismans. They are supernatural medicine. They take the shape of *taeguk* (太極) or *gung-gung* (弓弓). Take this medicine from me and save the people of their sicknesses. Take the incantations and teach the people in praise of me. If you do this you will live long and spread merit all over the world."¹⁾

Suun experienced an encounter with a supernatural being that referred to itself as "*Sangje* (上帝)". It is similar to the experience that Moses had when he encountered *Yahweh*, a transcendent and a personal being. Suun met a god who appeared as a transcendent and a sovereign absolute being. Other than the name *Sangje*, another name that referred to absolute beings, "*Cheonju* (天主)", was used on several occasions in *Donggyongdaejeon*. At that time, *Sangje* was considered the foremost being within the Confucian tradition and *Cheonju* was used to refer to an absolute being in the Western Learning tradition. Though *Cheonju* coincided with the god of the Catholic tradition, it was most likely a word in classical Chinese that

1) *Donggyeongdaejeon*. "Podeokmun". "不意四月 心寒身戰 疾不得執症 言不得難狀之際 有何仙語 忽入耳中 驚起探問則 曰 勿懼勿恐 世人謂我上帝 汝不知上帝耶 問其所然 曰余亦無功故 生汝世間 教人此法 勿疑勿疑 曰 然則西道以教人乎 曰不然 吾有靈符 其名仙藥 其形太極 又形弓弓 受我此符 濟人疾病 受我呪文 教人爲我 則 汝亦長生 布德天下矣"

expressed “Ha-nal-nim” of the Korean tradition. In *Yongdamyusa*, “Ha-nal-nim” written “하늘님” or “하늘님” referred to an Absolute Being. In classical Chinese, “Sangje” or “Cheonju” were used to express *Ha-nal-nim*. When we refer to the fifteenth century texts in Korea, words *Sangje* and *Cheon* (天) were both written as “Ha-nal (하늘)” in Hangeul.²⁾ With the honorific suffix “nim (님),” it becomes “Ha-nal-nim (하늘님).” As a result the Absolute Being that Choe Je-u encountered came to be expressed by different names but it nevertheless referred to a unifying and commonly shared supreme being who was both transcendent and personal.

As mentioned in the above, the Absolute Being that Choe Je-u encountered gave him incantations and magical talismans and ordered him to save the people. This incantation consists of no more than twenty-one letters.

至氣今至 願爲大降 侍天主 造化定 永世不忘 萬事知

We desire the utmost ki (氣) will descend fully upon us.

Worshipping *Cheonju*, the world will be harmonious according to his principle. Remembering him eternally we will awaken to all things.³⁾

The ‘twenty-one letter incantation’ contains the core doctrine and thought of *Donghak*. It accurately expresses the religious desires of the *Donghak* followers. Choe Je-u’s thoughts show that he considered selfish attitudes (各自爲心) that do not follow heaven’s principle and mandate as a great evil.⁴⁾ Choe Je-u believed that people needed to get rid of such selfish attitudes and replace them

2) *Yongbieocheonga*, 19. “皤皤老嫗天之使兮 셴 할미를 하늘히 보내시니”

Yongbieocheonga, 102. “維皇上帝降我身病 하늘히 병을 낙리오시니”

3) *Donggyeongdaejeon*, “Jumun(jejajumun)”.

4) *Donggyeongdaejeon*, “Podeokmun”. “又此挽近以來 一世之人 各自爲心 不順天理 不顧天命 心常悚然莫知所向矣”

with respect and reverence for *Ha-nal-nim* (爲天主). The essence of respect and reverence is evident in the expression “worshipping *Choenju* (侍天主)” found in the twenty-one letter incantation. The transcendent being of *Donghak* is the object of human worship, and this transcendent being encountered Suun as an absolute and as an external “other”. His religious experience was of a direct encounter with the Absolute Being, not of an inner feeling of being present before the Absolute, regardless of his actual presence.

Given that the Absolute is called “*Cheonju* (天主)” and “*Jiki* (至氣),” an interesting question to ask would be, “what is the form of transcendence that the Absolute has?”⁵⁾ Considering that the Absolute is understood as a form of “*ki*(氣)” shows that it can be considered to be within the tradition of *ki* philosophy where *ki* is a cosmic essence. However, from the point that the incantation is a “wish for the utmost *ki* to come now and descend”, we see also that it is an expression of directly encountering the absolute transcendent being by having the transcendent become manifest in human.

In Neo-Confucianism, *li* (理) is considered to be the absolute principle. It is the foundation of the cosmos, a cosmic principle, and as a result cannot take a personified form. Therefore to Neo-Confucianists of that time, even Heaven or *Sangje* could not be experienced as a sovereign existence who looks over or interacts with human. There was a limitation in their imagination of an all-powerful and almighty transcendent being. In the case of Dasan Jeong Yak-yong (茶山 丁若鏞), the representative of Practical Learning, he imbued Confucian *Sangje* with both transcendent and

5) On the parallelism between transcendence and immanence of the Absolute in *Donghak*, see Kim Sang-il, *Suun and Whitehead*, Seoul, Jisiksanupsa, 2001. He provides process theologian interpretations of “*Cheonju*” and “*Jiki*”.

personal qualities, the result of influence from Western Learning. In spite of the differences, *Sangje* was the focus of cultivation who by accentuating the existential tension encouraged all the more, moral living. The *Sangje* that Dasan describes is not the same transcendent being of Suun. Though Dasan tried to overcome the weakness of *li-ki* theory for self-cultivation, his idea of *Sangje* did not reach Suun's transcendent being who can be directly encountered. What Suun did was to overpass the abstract and yet immanent characteristics of the Confucian *li*, *Sangje*, Heaven and formed a new god that resonated with the masses. As a result Suun created a new faith of *Ha-nal-nim*. The god of *Donghak* was an Absolute Being who gave orders to the people to worship and to serve him in order that the world, brought to a state of confusion by the selfishness of people, will be saved. Humans must "serve permanently (永侍)"⁶⁾ the transcendent absolute. Suun was deeply affected by the Catholics who believed in an Absolute Being that possessed human characteristics. Suun absorbed these new ideas and provided a new belief and a new thinking of *Sangje* in a Confucian society where it was difficult for such ideas to become officially accepted.

III. Human as the receiver of *Ha-nal-nim*: Anthropology

The understanding of *Donghak*'s ideas of human subjectivity obviously started from the words "serving *Choenju*". It is because humans must serve *Ha-nal-nim* and at the same time *Ha-nal-nim* is residing in their hearts and minds. At the same time that

6) For "youngsa(永侍)", see *Donggveongdaejeon*, "Sudeokmun", "Chukmun".

Donghak accepted a transcendent god that receives worship from people, it also accepted an immanent god that resides within human. Suun emphasized an external and transcendent being that he apprehended through his powerful religious experience, yet he referred to a god that existed in the inner world within human.

You who can't make correct judgements,
are you still blindly believing in me?
I am not the one you should fully believe.
Believe in *Ha-nal-nim*.
He resides in you so don't look for it far away.⁷⁾

Ha-nal-nim who came to be the object of worship through a powerful religious experience became an immanent god who resided within everyone. It is possible that the demand for "serving permanently" *Ha-nal-nim* can be understood as an awakening to humans within whom *Ha-nal-nim* is served permanently. This tendency started to become more prominent with the leadership of the second patriarch Haewol Choe Si-hyeong (1827-1898). *Ha-nal-nim* was a highly exalted being and that is why he was worshipped. But, having *Ha-nal-nim* reside within human made human exalted. Haewol stressed that it was people who should be the object of worship and ritual since *Ha-nal-nim* resided within people.⁸⁾ Haewol insisted that when performing ancestor-worship ceremonies one should not setup a ritual table in the direction of the wall and prostrate in that direction. Rather, following the idea of "serving *Cheonju* (侍天主)", Haewol said people should perform ceremonies facing human who is the residing place of *Ha-nal-nim*

7) *Yongdamyusa*, "Gyohunga". "힘을 업는 이것들아 날노 밋고 그러흐냐 늑는 도 시 밋디 말고 하늘님을 미뎛셔라 네 몸의 모셔시니 스근취원 흐단 말가"

8) *Haewolsinsabeopseol*, "Hyangaseolwi".

(向我設位). By implying that people should perform rituals not only to *Ha-nal-nim* but also to living humans, the idea of “serving *Cheonju*” is an indication of a transition to a human dignifying attitude that puts focus on human as the residing place of *Ha-nal-nim*. Haewol, by claiming that hitting a child is no different than hitting *Ha-nal-nim* who resided within a child, extended the idea of *Sicheonju* to the idea of “love for children”.⁹⁾ That is why he understood all the people as the bodily place of *Sicheonju*.¹⁰⁾

The idea of “Serving *Cheonju* (侍天主)” was transformed by Haewol into “serving the people as if serving *Ha-nal-nim* (事人如天)”.¹¹⁾ *Donghak* that started with the idea of “serving Heaven” (事天) shifted its focus to “serving people” (事人). This shift was possible because within people’s hearts and minds there dwelled an Absolute Being. *Donghak*’s Cultivation and practice are done more by being steadfast and maintaining one’s heart and mind (修心正氣), the dwelling place of *Ha-nal-nim* than by reciting incantations and talismans. Promoting the growth of *Ha-nal-nim* within the self through cultivation is what Haewol called “*Yangcheonju* (養天主)”. With the development of the Haewol’s ideas of “*Yangcheonju* (養天主)” and “*Sainyeocheon* (事人如天)”, *Donghak* gradually departed from the transcendent being that the founder of *Donghak* experienced. Instead, immanence became more prominent and as a result realization of human centeredness became more distinct.

9) *Haewolsinsabeopseol*, “*Daeinjeopmul*”.

10) In fact, Haewol also saw all things (birds, fish, plants) to be the bodily place of *Sicheonju*. *Haewolseonsangmunjip*, “*Kyongin Jeongwol*”. “演局曰 一鳥之鳴 不啻混元之氣 凡天下飛潛動植 莫非侍天主之一體者乎 先生曰 然”

11) *Haewolsinsabeopseol*, “*Daeinjeopmul*”.

IV. Conclusion

The Absolute of *Donghak* that was both transcendent and immanent can be explained through the idea of “serving *Cheonju*”. Also, the shift in the idea of *Sicheonju* shows the development of *Donghak* thought from being theological to anthropological. *Cheonju* was so great and exalted as to be deserving of worship and respect by human. In turn, the individual who received and served a great and an exalted being in their hearts, also became great and exalted. The development of *Donghak* through history shows a transformation of the Absolute from being transcendent to being immanent. “The great god who was served by human”, was transformed to “the great human who served god”. Thus, the initial mystical experience of the Absolute metamorphized into revolutionary and cultural movement that gave practical verification to human dignity. Additionally, the *Donghak* religious community transformed from a spiritual community to a social community.

〈국문초록〉

시천주 사상: 동학의 신학과 인간학

최종성

시천주 사상은 조선후기 종교사상사의 맥락에서 신과 인간의 이해에 대한 동학의 독특성을 표현한다. 시천주는 우선적으로, '인간이 모셔야 할 신으로서의 하느님'을 강조하면서도, 또한 '하느님을 모신 주체로서의 인간'에 주목하는 이중성을 지니고 있다. 전자가 동학의 절대자에 대한 이해라면, 후자는 동학의 인간에 대한 이해를 의미한다. 전자가 초월적인(transcendent) 하느님을 강조하는 것이라면, 후자는 인간 안에 내재한(immanent) 하느님을 강조한 것이다.

다시 말해 동학의 절대자가 지니는 초월적이며 내재적인 측면은 시천주 사상에 의해 설명된다. 그리고 신학에서 인간학으로 변모해가는 동학의 흐름도 시천주 사상에 의해 설명될 수 있다. 신은 인간에게 모셔지고 공경되어야 할 만큼 고귀하고 위대한 초월자이다. 한편 절대자가 고귀하고 위대한 만큼 그를 모시고 있는 인간 또한 귀하다는 것이 동학사상의 흐름이었다. 이러한 흐름 속에서 두드러진 경향은 동학의 절대자가 초월적이었던 것에서 점차 내재적인 것으로 변화해 갔다는 사실이다. 그리고 논의의 중심이 '인간에게 모셔지는 위대한 신'에서, '신을 모시는 위대한 인간'으로 변해갔다는 점이다. 따라서 초월적인 신을 의식하는 초기 영성공동체의 신비적인 종교경험은 점차 인간의 존엄성을 실천적으로 확인하는 사회공동체의 혁명운동이나 문화운동으로 변화될 가능성이 있었던 것이다.