

The Comparative Process of the Embodiment of God: From an Organic Perspective in East and West

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to engage in an inter-cultural dialogue over the concept of God's embodiment between Western and Eastern tradition within the category of panentheistic hermeneutics. The idea of panentheism as a functional philosophical vehicle of integration of the East and West that pursues the organic way of thinking as a heuristic device for suggesting a new way of conceiving God's relation to the world. The major aim of this organic model of God's embodiment is to recognize the importance of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all existences in this life-destroying context where the divine intimacy with the world is far more required.

The panentheistic model of God's embodiment emphasizes the radical immanence of God as embodied spirit or *ki*, with a focus on the relational aspect of God and the world. The core idea of this also

follows along the lines of the definition of panentheism: God is in all things and all things are in God. God's involvement with the world is assumed to be realized by its bodies, that is, human and ecological communities. God's action in the world is supposed to be realized through these; in other words, it is analogous to the way human beings move their bodies in accordance with their minds. This perspective denotes the traditional interpretation of anthropomorphism which views the human being as the prototype for divine action.

Therefore, the idea of God's embodiment reflects a sensitive awareness of the inadequacy of classical concept of God which alienates God from the world. The comprehensive philosophical articulation of a global search for a new spirituality and a more holistic way of looking at the intimate relation between God and the world are highly relevant and significant contributions for our time. The revision of God's embodiment is believed to be suited to the postmodern situation. In order to achieve these religio-philosophical tasks, using pantheistic hermeneutics, I shall develop the idea of God's embodiment in a dialogical way between Western and Eastern (Korean in particular) understanding of the Ultimate reality. I shall then bring together the two streams of thought, affirming the organic way of God's transcendent and immanent spirit or *ki* as 'beyond and yet within' nature which has been drawn out the soteriological and ecological implication for both human and cosmic order.

II. The Embodiment of God and Organism in Western Tradition

The philosophical idea of embodiment and organism can be found in the form of "process panentheism" in the Western tradition.¹⁾ The process panentheism is conceptually based on Whitehead's dipolar

theism; one is the primordial nature of God, and the other the

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- 1) Besides the panentheistic interpretation of God and the world of process theology, the Hegelian and the Tillichian can be considered as two important panentheistic positions among modern theologies. The heart of Hegel's religious philosophy is the affirmation of the unity of God and the world. For Hegel, God's total separation from the world would mean the disruption of truth itself because God is inconceivable without the world: *Ohne Welt ist Gott nicht Gott*. However, Hegel's idea of God-world unity is not identical with the pantheistic oneness of Spinoza. Although there is some affinity between Hegel and Spinoza in repudiating all "transcendent" reality, the former does not go as far as the Spinozistic formula *Deus sive Natura*, which implies nature is God rather than God is in nature. Hegel defends his own doctrine of Universal Spirit or Cosmic Mind, contending that the world truly exists, but not in a final or absolute sense, since it is God alone who is ultimately real and primary. Hegel's panentheistic tenets become more obvious in his idea of appearance and the supersensible world. This idea, theologically speaking, is that God "is not the world, nor is the world God, but the world is God's appearing, God's activity of self manifestation, appearing which is completed in man. The world, and man in it, are real only to the extent that God is in them, and their true being is in God, which is another way of saying that the finite is the appearing of the infinite and has its being in the infinite." Williamson, *Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, quoted by McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 254; Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind (or Spirit)* (London: George Allen & Unwin; Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press Inc, 1949), translated by J. B. Baillie, pp. 180-213; Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Hegel's Philosophy of Religion* (Guildford, London & Worcester, 1977), pp. 100-104.

Tillich explains the intimate relationship between God and the world with the notion of life. For him, God is the principle of participation and the principle of individualization. God as the divine life participates in every life and everything in the universe. The life, here, does not stand in contrast to body. Life as Spirit of God transcends the duality of body and mind, which is the all-embracing function in which all elements of the structure of being participate. Therefore, Tillich says, "the statement that God is Spirit means that life as spirit is the inclusive symbol for the divine life. It contains all the ontological elements." Here is the profound immanence of God in the world. For further discussion, see Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. I. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), pp. 241-252.

consequent nature of God, presenting the radicalization of God's transcendence and immanence. The primordial nature is associated with the transcendent aspect of God, which is pure potentiality and cannot be conditioned by the world or any other actual entities. Whitehead says, "He (God), in his primordial nature is unmoved by love for this particular or that particular."²⁾

The consequent nature of God is connected to his immanent aspect in the concrete matters of fact in this world. God's consequent nature is characterized by the fact that God is finite, temporal, and responsive, referring to his concreteness in the actual world. Although these two poles seem, at first glance, incompatible with one another, due to his separate treatment of them, they are merely poles of one actual entity working as a tool of the conceptual polarity in Whitehead's metaphysical scheme. For example, his notion of the primordial nature of God is not totally identical with the traditional conception of God who is perceived as the infinite, eternal, and unchanging Being. Whitehead contends that the primordial or mental pole alone cannot be a full description of God. He rather speaks of the immanence of the primordial nature, an immanence that certainly attenuates God's transcendence. For him, God's primordial nature is not necessarily meant to be exclusive of the world. God has never been pure potential, because potentiality, he argues, has to be actualized or embodied in some actual occasion. In this sense, the primordial nature maintains a constant engagement with the consequent nature, and therefore, becomes immanent in the world. This idea points to an intimate two-way relationship between God and the world without completely eliminating the distinction between them. The consequent or physical nature of God is also rooted in the

2) Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, the Free Press, 1978), p. 125.

primordial nature, so that God exists as an organic whole. Though Whitehead does not explicitly mention the metaphor of the universe as God's body, he tends to identify the connection of the two natures of God with the intimate relationship of God with the world.³⁾

In fact, the metaphor of God's body is taken up by later process thinkers like Charles Hartshorne. They attempt to interpret Whitehead's alternative dipolar-organic thinking by recourse to that analogy in which the body is presented as God's material self-actualization.⁴⁾ God is then immanent in the sense that he is the supreme example of self-creativity. In other words, God creates the world because he requires a body in order to attain self-consciousness.⁵⁾

The process panentheism has been immersed and theologized in Western Christian tradition. Embracing the process pantheistic interpretation of God and the world, Sallie McFague portrays God as the "inspired body" or "embodied spirit" of the universe in which all bodies of the creation become "intimations" of God. She promotes a Spirit theology by depicting God as the "empowering, continuing breath of life throughout its billions of years of history and in each and every entity and life-form on every star and planet."⁶⁾ With this understanding, she breaks with the immense tradition according to which there is no genuine mutual interaction between God and the universe and with the conventional understanding of God's sovereign nature as self-subsistent

3) Whitehead, *Ibid.*, pp. 104-106.

4) Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (New York: Willett, Clark, and Co., 1941), pp. 171-211.

5) Reynolds explains that this point relates to Whitehead's doctrine of consciousness in *Process and Reality*, p. 284. See Reynolds, *Towards a Process Pneumatology* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press; London: Associated University Press, 1990), p. 31.

6) McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 155.

and independent from the fate of the world.⁷⁾

The organic embodiment of God, she explains, has firm roots in Christian tradition, but mainline theology has not been comfortable with that idea because of its pantheistic tenets. She, too, clearly distinguishes her panentheism from pantheism, concluding that panentheism is “a strong motif in both Hebrew and Christian traditions that take seriously the mediation of God to the world.”⁸⁾ Although McFague emphasizes the radical immanence of God in her thought, she does not reduce the mysterious nature of God’s independence from the world. The organic perception of embodiment is well placed in the scope of panentheism as she defines it: “everything that is is *in* God and God is *in* all things and yet God is not identical with the universe, for the universe is dependent on God in a way that God is not dependent on the universe.”⁹⁾

7) Since the metaphor of the universe as God’s body evokes God’s radical sensitivity to all things, the problem of evil in this model needs to be clarified. If the world is God’s body, and if God is also “Being embodied,” as McFague emphasizes, how then can evil or sinful nature be understood in relation to the idea of God’s immanence? If her notion of transcendence is presented only in the context of divine immanence, how can she defend the implication in her metaphor of the world as God’s body that evil also exists within God? The real difficulty here is how evil can be included within God without making God sinful. Harold Wells points out this problem, asserting that McFague’s metaphor, the universe as God’s body, is not a “radicalization of incarnation” but a “de-radicalization” or a “domestication of incarnation.” Her approach, Wells argues, is closer to a pantheistic interpretation of God and the world, and, consequently, carries profoundly conservative implications, tending to divinize the world, which includes the whole creaturely realm of evil and sin. Such implications, he notes, are contrary to the whole ethical intention of her metaphorical, panentheistic theology. Wells, “The Flesh of God: Christological Implications for an Ecological Vision of the World.” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 15/1(1999), pp. 60-61.

8) McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 150.

Pantheism seems to take a middle way between classical theism, which claims God's total disembodiment, and pantheism which, on the contrary, speaks of the complete identity of God and the world. Differing from both of these, pantheism denotes God's partial embodiment. God is sacramentally, rather than necessarily or totally embodied. In this framework of pantheism, God cannot collapse into the world, for God's transcendence must be preserved.

Nevertheless, the notion of God's transcendence is different from that in classical theism; her view is developed in terms of embodiment. That is, all the humble bodies of our own planet are visible signs of an invisible grandeur. McFague's understanding of transcendence seems congenial to Hartshorne's notion of "dual transcendence," which promotes the relational nature of the divine-human reality.¹⁰ Based on this notion of transcendence, McFague also argues that there are real relations between the mundane and the divine reality and not just among the three members of the Holy Trinity itself.

She pursues the organic embodiment as a heuristic device for suggesting a new way of conceiving God's relation to the world. The major aim of this idea is to recognize the importance of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all bodies in creation. She contends that ecologically responsible perspective needs to begin with

9) McFague, *Ibid.*, p. 149.

10) For Hartshorne, the idea of an impassible and immutable God can be retained, though only as an aspect of the divine life in its fullness through the world. He explains further: "God is exalted above the other realities not as cause, surpase effect, or unity, plurality, or being, becoming; but rather as eminent cause surpasses ordinary causes, and eminent effect, ordinary effects; similarly, as eminent being *and* becoming surpass ordinary being or becoming, or eminent unity *and* plurality surpass ordinary unity and plurality." Charles Hartshorne, *Insights and Oversights of Great Thinkers: An Evaluation of Western Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1983), pp. 314-315.

the recovery and development of an organic embodiment of God, which follows along the lines of the Western definition of panentheism: *God is in all things and all things are in God, yet God is more than the universe*. In this way, God is depicted as the totally interrelated and interdependent Spirit (breath of life) of the body (the world, universe) rather than as the supreme cause or mind which directs or governs the whole world.

III. The Embodiment of God and Organism in Korean *Donghak* Tradition

1. The Shamanic Embodiment of God in *Donghak* Tradition

The idea of embodiment and organism in terms of the process panentheism has already been existed in Korean *Donghak* tradition before the Western tradition was introduced into Korean cultural soil. *Donghak* is an indigenous tradition in which both of the transcendent and personal God and immanent and natural spirit or *ki* in Korean are interfused. *Donghak* means “Eastern Learning” in contrast to Western Christian tradition.

The distinctive characteristics of the embodiment of God in *Donghak* tradition can be described as the syncretic combination of the pantheistic feature of Shamanism, Daoism, and Neo-Confucianism and of the Korean indigenous God (or *Hanûnim*) faith. This syncretic aspect of God was produced from a particular social context of late nineteenth century Korea. This unique development of God carries attributes of a personal anthropomorphic *Hanûnim*, presented together with the perception of *ki*, which took its distinctive nature from a diverse but separate tradition. For example, the Ultimate in *Donghak*, *Hanûnim*,

which also denotes the Ultimate Spirit or *ki*, is described by various names such as *Hanûnim* from the indigenous Korean faith, *Sangje* from the Confucian tradition, and *kwisin* (ghost-spirits) from the Shamanist/Religious Taoist traditions. Suun, the founder of *Donghak*, takes the liberty of calling and perceiving the Ultimate as *Hanûnim* in his belief system. As he attempted to emphasize a personal aspect of God *Hanûnim* or *Sangje* emerged, though he also employed a term characteristic of pantheistic modes of *ki* like *kwisin* (ghost-spirits) to enhance the eminent character of God.

Suun (honorific name) Choi Je-u, a founder of *Donghak* tradition, perceives the embodiment of God not merely associated with Neo-Confucian philosophy; rather it is an expansion of the empirical religious dimension of Shamanism. For example, although the God of Suun is in part based on the theory of *Taegûk* of Chou Don-i, Suun applied the theory to his religious system by replacing the metaphysical Great Ultimate, *Taegûk*, into *Ch'ônju*, as personal *Hanûnim* whose spirit descends upon human beings through religious experience. Suun describes this as *Shi Ch'ônju* (waiting on Heaven),¹¹⁾ which cannot be

11) *Ch'ônju* is a Chinese word of *Hanûnim* in Korean. Suun uses them interchangeably in his philosophy; *Ch'ônju* was mainly used in *Donggyông Daejôn* written in Chinese while *Hanûnim* was used in *Yongdam Yûsa*. Both of them can be translated to “God” in English. The dilemma in studying Suun’s concept of *Ch'ônju* (God) is the difficulty of categorizing it in a particular theistic formula due to the syncretic religious elements found in his system. On the surface, it might seem inconsistent and unsystematic because of its emphasis on a transcendent and personal image of *Ch'ônju* in some cases, and a “process” perception of God in other cases. Because of his combined description of *Ch'ônju*, his thought might be seen as self-contradictory. However, if one looks closely at his understanding of *Ch'ônju*, (or the different terms to indicate the Ultimate), it functions not in a contradictory or antagonistic way but in a constructive, and possibly

automatically given by human nature, but is achieved by sincere cultivation of one's mind and purifying one's *ki*. Suun believes that through the constant cultivation of mind and *ki*, all human beings are able to become a Confucian ideal human being or Shamanist immortal (or mountain god), that is, divine human beings. In this respect, although Suun employs Confucian terminologies derived from his philosophical background, the nature of the embodiment of God is also closely associated with the mystical aspect of Shamanist *ki*. The Shamanist feature of embodiment is further observed in his description of a theophanic experience as follows.

In April, my heart had a sudden chill feeling and my body was strangely shaking. Even though I thought it must be a sickness, I could find no symptoms and could not express my state of mind. Just then there was a *Sónô* (mysterious words of Taoism) heard from Heaven, and I was greatly amazed; 'fear not, be not troubled. I am One who is called *Sangje* by the people of the world. Do you not know me?' Inquiring of him further, *Sangje* replied, 'I humbly send you into the world to teach this Way. Be not doubtful, have no doubt at all.' Then I asked, 'shall I teach this the Western Way?' *Sangje* replied, 'not so, I have a spiritual mark which is called *Sónyak* (mysterious medicine) and its form is like *Taegûk* (the ultimate reality of the universe, the symbol of the universe in Chinese philosophy) and also like the *Kunggung* (an ambivalent, curved, bow-like figure).'

collaborative "paradoxical" way. The epistemological limitation on human knowledge of *Ch'ônju* is noted here, which is similar to the confession of mystics whose experience of "God" or "Godhead" can never be expressed in human words. For Suun, all the terms we employ for the discussion of the possible interpretation on *Ch'ônju* are nothing but tentative and partial. This is quite congenial with McFague's point of view in which all kinds of God-talk are partial descriptions of God (the backside of God), and therefore metaphorical.

Sangje ordered to Suun, ‘receive this mark and deliver the people from their diseases. Take my mark and teach people. If you do these things for me you will enjoy long life and your virtue will spread through the earth.’¹²⁾

This mystical experience which was accompanied with sudden physical change is close to Shamanist traditions. In particular, Shamanic-Daoist syncretic characteristics are distinctively observed in his religious experience through expressions such as *Sônô*, *Sônyak*, and *Kunggung*. Accordingly, Suun’s embodiment of God cannot be categorized merely within the scope of materialistic interpretation dominant in Neo-Confucianism of that time, but rather needs to be extended to the Shamanist/religious Daoist understanding of *ki*, which is particularly combined with the *Hanûnim* faith. This aspect of the embodiment is also well expressed in the main doctrine of *Donghak* religion, *Shi Ch’ônju*.

The Korean term *Shi* (“bearing” or “waiting on”) can be interpreted in relation to the Shamanist idea of waiting on the spirit of the body which assists a shaman to receive diverse spirits. In Shamanism, at the moment of becoming a shaman or of the ecstasy during the *gut* (shamanistic ritual), the shaman has mystical experiences in which she is able to make contact with the spirits. This can be described both as

12) Choe Suun, *Donggyông Daejôn*, chapter on *P’odôkmun [Writing on Conveying Virtues]*, translated by Yun Sôk-san (Seoul, Korea: Tonghagsa, 1996), pp. 18-28. This is the mystical experience that Suun had in 1860. *The Centennial History of Ch’ôndogyo* Vol. I. Chapter 1 & part 2, p. 72; Choe Dong-hee, “The Basic Thought of Suun and the Context,” in *The Korean Thought* Vol.12 (Seoul, Korea: The Study Group of Korean Thought, 1974), quoted by Kim Byông-jun, *The Understanding of Religious Experience from the Perspective of C. G. Jung’s Analytical Psychology -Focusing on the Understanding of Mystical Experience of Choe Suun*. M.A. Thesis (1995) Methodist Theological Seminary, pp. 51-53.

“waiting on spirits” from the side of the shaman (human world) and as “descending spirits” from the side of the gods. A similar feature is found in the religious experience of Suun, which is viewed as a moment of encountering *Hanûnim* as explained above.

Although Suun borrowed Neo-Confucian terminologies to express his own religious experience and thought, Neo-Confucianism is not the major religious source of Suun’s thought and the teaching of *Shi Ch’ônju*. Rather, an equal emphasis needs to be given to Shamanism-Daoism, for an understanding of Suun’s embodiment and his religious synthesis.¹³⁾ Through his mystical experience, Suun believed that just as a shaman experiences the spirits descending from the gods, human beings are also able to wait on (*Shi*) the spirits of God in their bodies. Although the way Suun experienced God can be understood in terms of Shamanistic and Taoist tradition, his notion of *Shi* holds some distinctive characteristics. For example, whereas in Shamanism, shamans are able to possess the spirits of gods alone for a particular period of time, Suun presents the universal implication of *Shi*, i.e., that anyone who wants to wait on the ultimate *spirit* of God through spiritual-physical cultivation can find union with the Ultimate reality in the presence of the spirit or *ki*.¹⁴⁾ How then does then Suun interpret the idea of *Shi*? For a deeper understanding of the embodiment of God, it is essential to relate the concept to one of the main tenets of *Donghak*, namely, *Shi Ch’ônju* and *Yang Ch’ônju*.

2. God in the Process of Embodiment in *Donghak* Tradition

The distinctive feature of Suun’s embodiment can be found in the idea

13) Ryu, Byong-dock, *Donghak and Ch’ôndogyo* (Seoul, Korea, 1987), pp. 520-528.

14) Ryu, *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

of *Kihwajisin* (the mutation of *ki* itself is “God”; “God” in process), which presents a radically different vision of “God” from the monotheistic God of Catholicism, at least the Catholicism of that time. Suun says, “I share with them [Catholics] in *Tao* but differ from them in *li* (principle).”¹⁵⁾ That is, the ultimate purposes of the two approaches are the same, but how each achieves it is different. This statement of Suun is noteworthy when we consider the profound difference between the theism of Suun and that of Catholicism. In other words, Suun’s understanding of God similar to that of Catholicism in terms of affirming a personal God who is deeply concerned with the liberation or salvation of the oppressed. However, the principle *li* is radically different in terms of the process of embodiment of God.

In the idea of *Kihwajisin* (“God” in process), the spontaneous movement of the ultimate spirit or *ki* itself, is identified with “God,” who is comprised by or comprises the movement of the embodiment. The ultimate *ki*, which can be characterized both as matter and spirit, is the basic component which constitutes all the myriad of things. For Suun, the ultimate *ii* is also life which is fulfilled in the world. Life is not a static but a dynamic entity which is constantly in process within the cycle of birth and death. As mentioned above, “God” for Suun can be described as the fullness of the ultimate *ki*, and the process or operation of the ultimate *ki*. For Suun, it is essential that the ultimate *ki* descends upon human beings and leads them to the world of divine ecstasy. With this experience, human beings are able to wait on (*Shi*) God. This is the first step, in Suun’s idea of embodiment, to becoming divine beings, which is achieved through one’s holistic cultivation of purifying *ki*. The relationship between God and the world is not conceived in a hierarchical or antagonistic, but in a collaborative or

15) Choe Suun, *Donggyông Daejôn*, chapter on *Nonhakmun* [Writing on Learning].

reciprocal way. This is a distinctive aspect of Suun's embodiment, which maintains the continuity or union between God and human beings or world.

The unique feature of Suun's embodiment, *Kihwajisin*, culminates in the thought of *Osim jûk Yôsim* drawn from his mystical experience, which means, "my [*Ch'ônju* or *Sangje*] mind is your [Suun or human's] mind."¹⁶ Lee Don-hwa, a *Donghak* scholar, points out that the personal God of *Donghak* cannot be adequately explained only by recourse to the claims that God is a transcendent anthropomorphic God whose ontological existence is sharply distinguished from humans. Suun's God can also be depicted as immanent natural *ki* which is fully exhibited in humanity. In other words, a human being is the best existential example on which God's ontological nature is well expressed. Such interpretation of God and the world is rooted in the notion of *Osim jûk Yôsim* which Lee explains as follows:

...Human beings derived from and are dependent on God (*Hanûnim*). Humanity is the closest image reflecting God's very nature. However, this does not imply that even the incomplete personality of a human being, which is vulnerable or corrupted, is part of God, but means the human possibility of becoming God, because they share the homogeneous spirit of God, the ultimate *ki*. This process leads to God...¹⁷

This statement affirms the immanent existence of God residing in the world. Suun often criticized the idea that God exists somewhere up there in some "other or totally transcendent world," governing everything in

16) Choe Suun, *Ibid.*

17) Lee, Don-hwa, *Perspective on Life in Donghak* (Seoul, Korea: Chôndogyo Chungang Bonbu, 1973), pp. 52-53.

the world in a perfect way. This interpretation for him was absurd, for God is truly in this perilous world, with the poor and the oppressed, rather than living outside of the world. According to Suun, God dwells in the human mind, which is identical with the mind of God. There is no human mind apart from God and no mind of God separate from human mind. God does not exist in a paradise, but in human minds, which are in the process of becoming divine. The immanent trait of God for Suun is apparently exposed with the concept of *kwisin*.

Suun teaches that the self-governing activity of *ki* itself is God. He says, “*kwisin* is no other than the totality of Heaven and earth as well as its *yin* and *yang*.”¹⁸⁾ His “epiphanic experience,” in which he heard the voice of God saying “contrary to the general understanding that the totality of Heaven and Earth and the being of *kwisin* are unrelated, *kwisin* is also I (God or *Sangje*).”¹⁹⁾ Thus, God is the harmony of the cosmic principle underlying the reality of change and process through which all things came into being. Attenuating the transcendent characteristics of God, without eliminating the anthropomorphic image of God, the embodiment of God is depicted as both the transcendence and immanence of the ultimate *ki*.²⁰⁾

Therefore, the doctrine of *Shi Ch'ônju* can be understood in two ways. First, it can be interpreted, “to wait on God sincerely like parents.” Second, it can be interpreted to mean, “pay attention to God who already resides in all human beings,” since God is present in any human being

18) Choe Suun, *Yongdam Yusa*, chapter on *Todôgga* [*The Song of Ethics*]

19) Choe Suun, *Donggyông Daejôn*, chapter on *Nonhakmun* [*Writing on Learning*].

20) Kim, “The Study of *Donghak* Theism,” *The Thesis of the Centennial Celebration of Donghak Revolution* Vol. I (Seoul, Korea: Ch'ôndogyo Chungang Ch'ongbu, 1991), edited by the Committee of the Centennial Celebration of *Donghak* Revolution, pp. 176-193.

and in nature. This is an essential tenet of *Donghak*: “Everyone can wait on God with her/his body.” The first interpretation tends to stress the transcendent aspect of God, while the second emphasizes its immanent aspect. However, for Suun, again, the two characteristics of God cannot be interpreted in a dualistic way, for the two cannot be thought of separately from each other. For this reason, Suun's theism belongs to the category of panentheism in which both transcendent and immanent aspects of God are observed.

3. The Embodiment of God and Life in *Donghak* Tradition

The unique contribution of Suun's successor, Haewol is the actualization of Suun's embodiment of God in order to bring forth its ethical implications, which include human equality, woman's liberation, and ecological concern. Like Suun, Haewol did not remain under the shadow of classic Confucianism but attempted to actualize Suun's thought into the concrete life of the people. Haewol suggests *Yang Ch'ônju* literally meaning “to wait on God within.” Haewol expresses the idea that all people possess a divine reality by birth. The individual needs to nourish this divine reality in order to *Yang*, “nurture” or “embody” the ultimate *ki* within. He offers an analogy of a “seed and life” for the understanding of embodiment. According to him, if one is able to wait on God, s/he should also be able to nurture God, who dwells in the human mind as the ultimate *ki*. This is similar to the kernel of life which resides inside a seed. Just as a seed is planted in soil to facilitate its growth, the human mind needs to nurture the ultimate *ki* to achieve Dao. Although all people possess the ultimate *ki*, those who do not realize the fact that they are part of God and thus refuse to nurture the *ki* are like farmers who throw seeds into the river only to allow them to die. Therefore, only those who sincerely nurture the ultimate *ki* are able to

recognize that they are becoming divine-human beings.²¹⁾ This shows that Haewol rejects any discrimination given by birth or social status and merely relies on human efforts to cultivate *Shi* (waiting on) and *Yang* (nurturing) in order to become one with God, the embodiment of God in process.

Emphasizing the immanence of God's Spirit, the ultimate *ki*, that resides in human beings without prejudice, Haewol advocates the idea of human equality on the basis that all people share the same *ki* of God. He subsequently insists on the abolition of social classism, which was commonly practiced in the nineteenth century Korean society. He preaches as follows:

Since all human beings are in the process of becoming *Hanûnim*, social classism, which distinguishes people based on their birth and family-lineage is exactly opposed to the good will of *Hanûnim*. Therefore, we have to struggle to eradicate the unjust social caste system and to promote the idea of human equality in order to bring divine harmony to this world.²²⁾

Haewol's assertion, rooted in the thought of Suun, is a revolutionary proposal for human liberation, considering the social context of Korea in the nineteenth century. During that period, the sharp distinction between *yangban* (the aristocratic) and *sangnom* (the plebeian or the vulgar) was maintained as an ideological tool for maintaining the existing social hierarchy. Moreover, women and children were of very low social status. Despite the rigid social ostracism of the vulgar, women, and children (particularly illegitimate children), Haewol

21) Lee, Don-wha, *The Founding History of Ch'ôndogyo* (Seoul: Chôndogyo Cungâng Chongliwon, 1933), p. 36.

22) Lee, *Ibid.*, p. 7.

advocates that all human beings are able to become divine beings through their sincere cultivation of the ultimate *ki*, coming from God but residing within. Such ideas become more obvious in his sermons as follows:

One day, when I visited my friend, I heard the sound of weaving on a loom made by my friend's daughter-in-law. I asked, "Is God weaving on a loom? Or is it your daughter-in-law?" My friend did not understand what I meant. I was sure he is not the only one who did not understand.²³⁾

Acknowledge that all human beings are divine. If you have a visitor, you may say that God visits you. Also, do not batter children, for this is the same as battering God.²⁴⁾

For him, strangers, children, and women weaving on a loom all share the same ultimate *ki* of God, which leads them to become divine beings. As his sermons indicate, Haewol led people to realize the importance and value of human labor, which was disregarded in Korean society, and taught that the creative activity of human beings themselves is a process that participates in God's creative activity. In conjunction with this, Haewol consequently reformed the old method of the Confucian ritual which places an altar towards the wall which symbolizes "transcendence," "other world" or "paradise." He created a radically new form of the ritual in a very radical manner by changing the direction of the altar toward "oneself" rather than the wall. This carries significant philosophical meaning, which suggests that God cannot be found in a transcendent world alienated from the earthly human world but within

23) Lee, *Ibid.*, p. 36.

24) Lee, *Ibid.*, pp.40-41.

ourselves as a cosmic breath of life, the ultimate *ki*.²⁵⁾

The philanthropic philosophy of Haewol becomes an archetype of neo-humanism which is formulated together with *Samgyông*, reverence for life, that is, reverence for Heaven, for humans, and for all things in the world. This is a step further toward the idea that the world is an organic ecological whole. In particular, this philosophy emphasizes ecological consciousness, since it teaches people to respect and to care for nature in the same way that they must care for God. Reverence for life is also reflected in the liberative conscious notion of *Sain Yôch'ôn*, which teaches that humans, as well as the eco-system, should be treated as divine. The idea of reverence for life, that is, reverence for Heaven, for humans, and for all things in the world, supports the contention that the world is an organic ecological whole. This is certainly a new interpretation of Suun's thought, stressing the immanent aspect of the embodiment. He preached,

The universe is a spiritual living being in an organic whole, and the spiritual being works in harmony. The living world is the actualizing manifestation of the living Spirit, God. Is it only human to wait on God? The entire universe waits on God as well. It is the principle of the universe that one eats Heaven by Heaven. Therefore, if you hurt or injure a living being, you are hurting God.²⁶⁾

From the beginning, Haewol insists that God cannot exist without humanity and the world, and vice versa. Furthermore, Haewol extends the notion of *Shi Ch'ônju* to *Yang Ch'ônju*, including all creatures and

25) Cha Ok-sung, "Haewol Thought and Religious Experience of People" in *Korean Thought* (Seoul, Korea: The Study Group of Korean Thought, 1998), pp. 105-106.

26) Choe, Dong-hee, *The History of Korean Religious Thought*, Vol.3 (Seoul, Korea: Chôngogyo, 1992), p. 54.

everything in nature. Haewol frequently preached on this theme, as in the following:

Even the song of a bird possesses the sound of waiting on God. It is not only humans who possess the divine image but all creatures. Therefore, eating things means participating in divinity. We should not harm all forms of life, even insignificant small forms, without any reason. This is regarded as the same as harming God, and is contrary to the divine Harmony.²⁷⁾

This means that all the myriad creatures are able to wait on God within. That is, all creatures possess the divine reality. If Suun's embodiment focuses on the particular human capacity to wait on God, Haewol's embodiment does not restrict this capacity solely to humans but extends it to all creatures of the universe.

IV. "Beyond and yet Within": The Embodiment of God in Dialogue

The focus of this dialogue is to explore a richer and fuller metaphysical concept of God's embodiment in a comparative way. The distinctive characteristics of God's embodiment in both Western and Korean tradition can be expressed in the inter-relationship of God's transcendent and immanent. The pantheistic nature of God's embodiment exhibits some notable similarities with western process thinkers including McFague in terms of emphasizing the "beyond and yet within" presence of the Spirit of God. As explained earlier, the pantheistic Spirit of God, for McFague, is distinct from the world in an ontological sense,

27) Choe, Ibid.

but it is also true to say that the Spirit intimately relates her/himself to the world. The Spirit of God is not only present as the transcendent entity, the primary source, animating other forms of life, preserving her/his own providence, but also affirms the “transcendent immanence.”

Process thinkers and McFague, again, in their different ways, emphatically propose a radical immanence of the Spirit in their pantheism without compromising or reducing God’s transcendence. Despite the subtle theological differences between them within the Western pantheistic tradition, there is a clear attempt by both to seek a togetherness of God and the world. They both emphasize that the concept of God as the life-giving Spirit includes attributes of contingency while preserving room for immanent transcendence. This paradoxical interrelation of the transcendent immanence and the immanent transcendence of the Spirit of God can be found both in the concept of the God in the Western and Korean *Donghak* traditions. Perhaps the point at which they are distinguishable is their differing emphasis on the two poles of the reality. The immanent aspects are more essential for Korean pantheistic thinkers, whereas the transcendent aspects of God are more foundational for Western pantheistic theologians.

As we have seen, the idea of Korean transcendence is well represented in God (*Hanūnim* in Korean) faith or *Ch’ōnju*. God in the process of embodiment is not conceived as a self-transcendent being in terms of a “first cause” or “original substance.” God in the process of embodiment needs to be understood in connection with the ultimate *ki*; God is an anthropomorphic expression for the ultimate *ki*. Since the ultimate *ki* can be described as the root from which the myriad of creatures are generated, it should not be misread to represent a kind of absolute immutable substance.

The idea of embodiment of *Donghak* presents that God and the

ultimate *ki* are present in all experience and, therefore, cannot be restricted to the particular realm called the primordial pure world of the divine.²⁸⁾ God as the personification of the ultimate *ki*, therefore, is not ontologically categorized as an absolute transcendent creator of the world. Rather, God is a supreme Spirit of life, “beyond and yet within,” who is never conceived apart from the world. The idea of deity or the affirmation of the existence of God is always understood in connection with human life. A Korean description of transcendence does not require the concept of God as an independent entity creating the world out of nothing, but affirms the mysterious nature of God who is the formless abyss out of which all forms of life are generated and sustained. This understanding precludes anything determinately transcendent of the world and eliminates the traditional ontological dualism between God and the world.

The idea of embodiment entails the mysterious nature of God with the emphasis on the self-creating aspect of the ultimate *ki*. Although Suun believes that beings are generated and completed by the ultimate *ki*, for him, it cannot be explained clearly. It is a mystery. One of the central ways to describe the living presence of the ultimate *ki* is the idea of embodiment, which applies to both the divine and the human realms. In referring to the transcendent-immanent mystery of reality, for Suun, such ambiguous expressions were the best descriptions.

In this respect, this Korean interpretation of the God-world relation can be described as an “anthropocentric and nature-oriented mysticism.” It is anthropocentric not in the negative sense of selfish human arrogance which has no ecological concern, but in the sense of an orientation toward serving and relating to human life. At the centre there is always

28) Park, Chang-gôn, *Suun Thought and Ch'ôndogyo* (Seoul, Korea: Ch'ôndogyo Chungangch'ôngbu, 1973), pp. 29-32.

a concern for the cosmic harmony, including human existence. Perhaps the famous Confucian dictum “humanity makes the *Tao* great, not that *Tao* makes humanity great” (*Analects* 15; 28) is helpful in understanding the prevalent religiosity of East Asian culture, which entails the relational and mysterious nature of the embodiment of the Ultimate reality or God and the world.

Far from entailing the conceptual dualism of the traditional interpretation of transcendence, the immanence of the ultimate *ki* is, as explained earlier, emerged with the mystical experience of *Osim jûk Yôsim* (union with God) and the concept of *kwisin* (ghosts-spirits). In that experience, Suun falls into a spiritual ecstasy in which the boundaries between transcendent and immanent fields become blurred, and whatever might be constructed as transcendent in *Hanûnim* faith is not independent of this world, nor is it theocentric. The ultimate *ki* operates as the ongoing active creation and as the creativity to sustain the cosmic harmony rather than the simple instantiation of what is theistically given to the human world. *Kwisin* is also another phenomenon of the dynamic nature of the ultimate *ki* which is an ongoing creative process that both stimulates and is affected by the synergistic interface between human mind and the movement of the ultimate *ki*.

The enlightened state of Suun is a key concept for entering into union or embodiment with the Ultimate reality which results in the transformation of the self. This is not a denial of the transcendent existence of the divine, but a Korean way of understanding the relation between the divine and the human world without a sharp ontological disparity. Suun is, of course, aware of the difference between the two worlds but not in an ontological sense. From the viewpoint of the ultimate *ki*, for Suun, the difference consists in the transformation of self by the cultivation of one’s mind and purification of one’s *ki* which

takes place when the boundary between the two become one. In other words, “humanity can participate in the creativity of the universe as a cosmotheandric agent of the highest order.”²⁹⁾ In this mystical state, one comes to realize that everything in the world belongs to the same spirit of the ultimate *ki* and its actualization. The state of harmony of the ultimate *ki* accentuates the notion of the transformation of self through the process of becoming God, the divine embodiment. In the immanent dimension of the ultimate *ki*, any radical notion of “otherness” becomes illusive, and the continuity and the mutual relationship between the Ultimate reality and humanity is fully explored as it is expressed in the mystical experience of *Osim jûk Yôsim* and *kwisin*.

V. Conclusion

We have engaged in an inter-cultural dialogue over the concept of God’s embodiment between Western and Korean traditions. The important similarity is in the comprehensive life principle of organism that animates all forms of life and integrates both material and spiritual dimensions. The God of Suun, as illustrated by the doctrine of *Shi Ch’ônju*, is One who participates in the process of becoming divine existences. This power to change or move, following Whitehead’s notion, is not a coercive one; it is instead the power to ceaselessly care for the well-being of all beings. All the world’s formations and changes are included in the process of becoming God. Accordingly, Suun experienced the God who constantly reveals the transcendent essence of the divine mind in a mysterious way through human beings, who

29) John Berthrong, *All Under Heaven: Transforming Paradigms in Confucian-Christian Dialogue* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 114.

represent the highest stage of the evolutionary process. There is a certain affinity between this concept of an anthropomorphic God and the one which Western process pantheism affirms. Suun describes God as One who possesses certain personal attributes, this God is truly One who can never be totally transcendent, but immanently transcendent and transcendently immanent in God's relationship with the world.

In other words, this God is not the "wholly Other," but the "beyond and yet within" spirit of life. For Suun, God is seldom regarded as completely separated from humans and nature. This aspect is quite similar to McFague's interpretation of God as the embodied Spirit. This pantheistic embodiment of God becomes more obvious when we consider the scripture of *Donghak* as a whole. Both Western process thinkers and Korean *Donghak* thinkers commonly see the need for revision of the classical notion of God's immutability and ontological separation from the world. The fruit of the dialogue on God's embodiment in the West and East would be the recognition and affirmation of the "beyond and yet within" as the common ground for the multi-cultural and ecological age.

The embodiment of God is closely associated with the ideas of "life-giving spirit," of "transcendent-immanent spirit," of "cosmic harmony" entails God's own involvement with the world and further reinforces the intimate relationship of God and the world. The transcendent-immanent nature of God is fully present in all existences. The holistic aspect of God's embodiment has direct relevance for the people. In other words, God as the spirit or ultimate *ki* is not to be perceived merely as an abstract remote deity insensitive to the suffering of the people, but as an immanent deity keenly responsive to the deepest feelings which grow out of the experience of pain, death, and human agony. God's embodiment in the process of becoming the ultimate *ki* or spirit is affected directly by all of the happenings in the world. Such an intimacy

of God's embodiment emphasizes God's immanence and, therefore, the relation between the world's suffering and God's suffering. This is a significant soteriological implication of the divine embodiment, which points to God's role as a divine energy affecting social change in the world.

The multiple forms of systemic suffering and social malfunctioning, which continue to oppress the people, cannot be ascribed to God as their perpetrator. In this immanence of God's embodiment, God and all forms of life become co-partners in the process of life-liberation. Systemic injustice, ecological destitution, social diseases, such as "ism oppressions," which are caused by human greed and self-centeredness, need to be healed by the co-creative activity of God and the world. Therefore, God's embodiment as the panentheistic spirit who leads the liberation of the people and further brings harmony and organism into the universe. The life centered embodiment of God provides the climate for understanding God as the presence of the spirit without alienating the diverse indigenous spiritual world of Korea. The embodiment of God promotes a self-creating and self-referential spirit or *ki*, relating her/himself to its own future, a future of its own transformation toward the holistic organism of every dimension of life in socio-political and ecological worlds.

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❖ ABSTRACT

The Comparative Process of the Embodiment of God: From an Organic Perspective in East and West

Eun Hee Shin

The purpose of this paper is to engage in an inter-cultural dialogue over the concept of God's embodiment between Western and Eastern tradition within the category of pantheistic hermeneutics. The idea of pantheism as a functional philosophical vehicle of integration of the East and West that pursues the organic way of thinking as a heuristic device for suggesting a new way of conceiving God's relation to the world. The major aim of this organic model of God's embodiment is to recognize the importance of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all existences in this life-destroying context where the divine intimacy with the world is far more required.

The pantheistic model of God's embodiment emphasizes the radical immanence of God as embodied spirit or *ki*, with a focus on the relational aspect of God and the world. The core idea of this also follows along the lines of the definition of pantheism: God is in all things and all things are in God. God's involvement with the world is assumed to be realized by its bodies, that is, human and ecological communities. God's action in the world is supposed to be realized through these; in other words, it is analogous to the way human beings move their bodies in accordance with their minds. This perspective denotes the traditional interpretation of anthropomorphism which views the human being as the prototype for divine action. e

Therefore, the idea of God's embodiment reflects a sensitive awareness of the inadequacy of classical concept of God which alienates

God from the world. The comprehensive philosophical articulation of a global search for a new spirituality and a more holistic way of looking at the intimate relation between God and the world are highly relevant and significant contributions for our time. The revision of God's embodiment is believed to be suited to the postmodern situation. In order to achieve these religio-philosophical tasks, using panentheistic hermeneutics, I shall develop the idea of God's embodiment in a dialogical way between Western and Eastern (Korean in particular) understanding of the Ultimate reality. I shall then bring together the two streams of thought, affirming the organic way of God's transcendent and immanent spirit or *ki* as 'beyond and yet within' nature which has been drawn out the soteriological and ecological implication for both human and cosmic order.

Key Words

God, Spirit, Panentheism, Embodiment, Organic, Inter-cultural Dialogue

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