


A Cultural Dialogue on Foundation for Inter-Religious Dialogue in Korea Context*

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• 국문요약 •

한국의 기독교인들은 다 종교사회 문화 속에서 생활 하고 있다.기독교인들을 둘러 싸고 있는 샤머니즘신자 불교도들 그리고 유학자들과 한국의 기독교인들은 다양한 사회 문화적 방면에서 상호작용을 한다. 이들은 우리의 어버이 ,친구 친척들이며 이들과 함께 우리는 생활하고 교류한다.이 논문은 다 종교적 사회인 한국적 상황에서 기독교인들이 타종교인들과 선교적 관점에서 대화하고 교류하기 위해 어떠한 성서적, 신학적 입장으로 종교간의 대화에 임해야 하는지를 이론적인 측면 뿐만 아니라 실천적 측면에서 연구하였다.

주제어: 문화연구, 한국종교문화, 선교신학

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I. Introduction

Korean Christians live in a world that is religiously plural. We live with people of other religions. They are shamanists, Buddhists, or Confucianists. We are surrounded by them. We interact with them at many levels. They are our parents, friends, neighbors, or relatives.

How Korean Christians carry out interreligious dialogue with people of other religions in the Korean context that is religiously plural? In this paper, I attempt to answer to this question. I think it will be good to begin by considering biblical and theological basis for interreligious dialogue.

II. Biblical and Theological Basis for Inter-religious Dialogue

In its noun form dialogue is not found in the Bible. However, its verb form suggests a relationship that is active, warm and intense.¹⁾ In the Old Testament, God dealt with people and nations in relational terms. God entered into covenant relationship with Noah and Abraham. The accounts of prophets, kings, priests and judges talking with God and responding to His/Her initiatives reflect a relationship that was active, free, and mutual.²⁾

In the New Testament, one theological foundation for dialogue is the

1) Lourdino A. Yuzon, "Ecumenical Perspectives on Inter-Faith Dialogue," in *The Asia Journal of Theology*. vol. 1, no. 2 (October 1987): 536.

2) *Ibid.*, 536.

incarnation. The Word became flesh. That is, in and through Jesus Christ God became human. The incarnation is God's dialogue with human being and the world. "God has entered into relationship with people of all faiths in all places and in all ages, offering to them the good news of salvation. To be in dialogue is, therefore, to be part of God's continuing work among us and our fellow human beings.³⁾ In the temple Jesus was listening and asking questions (Luke 2:46). He had serious conversation with Nicodemus (John 3) and the Samaritan woman (John 4). The Apostle Paul argued in the synagogue at Thessalonica, explaining, proving, and persuading people about Jesus Christ (Acts 17:1-4).⁴⁾ At Corinth, he argued in the synagogue, trying to convince Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:4). In Ephesus, he discussed faith in the synagogue (Acts 18:19).

In the history of Christian mission theology, five positions of inter-religious dialogue were developed in response to religious pluralism: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, transformationist view, and liberationist view.⁵⁾ The first is an exclusivist position. Exclusivists view that Christ is unique, final, decisive, absolute, and normative as the self-revelation of God, for the salvation of the world. In Christ, by grace alone and through faith alone, people are saved. Since in Christ alone is salvation, true revelation and truth, many religions are human efforts to reach the way of God. They do not lead to truth and life.

3) Ibid., 535.

4) Calvin E. Shenk, *What Do You Say That I Am?: Christians Encounter Other Religions* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1992), 209.

5) Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and The Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 129-131.

There can be no other lord besides Jesus. Modern representatives of this position included Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Hendrick Kraemer. Barth insisted that the gospel comes by God's revelation, while other faiths are the products of religion. Brunner believed Jesus Christ both fulfills and judges other religions. For Brunner, Jesus Christ is the truth for which other religions sought in vain. Kraemer asserted the uniqueness of Christ but recognized God's presence and activity outside the revelation of Christ.⁶⁾

The strength of exclusivism is its strong conviction of salvation and its faithfulness to the gospel. Its strong conviction of salvation leads to passionate evangelism for those who have not heard the gospel. Exclusivists are criticized because people think that exclusivists do not respect other religions. However, their criticism is not right. Exclusivists do not believe that all claims of other religions are false. They do not believe that other religions are without value or that one cannot learn anything from other religions.⁷⁾ Rather, exclusivists express strong conviction that salvation is alone through Jesus Christ. They are not concern about God's activity in the history and the world. God is universal and available to all. They are neglecting the universal action of God in history.

Another criticism is: If in Jesus Christ alone is salvation, many people question the moral character of a God who allows people to be born where they have no access to the way of salvation. Is God loving, gracious, good, just, righteous if through no fault of their own most

6) Shenk, 35.

7) Ibid., 37.

of the world's people have not heard the gospel?⁸⁾ Those who criticized exclusivism see exclusivists' understanding of the missionary task as conquest, triumphalism, manipulation, and aggressiveness born of a superiority complex.⁹⁾ Without Christian love, exclusivists can too easily express hostility.

Inclusivism is a mediating position between exclusivism and pluralism. Inclusivists believe that Jesus Christ is final, definitive, and normative for salvation. But they are more willing to believe that God's salvation is accessible through non-Christian religions. That is, they believe "the divine presence in other religions but consider them insufficient for salvation apart from Christ."¹⁰⁾ They accept the possibility of salvation outside Christian faith or the church, but the agent of such salvation is Christ. Karl Rahner represents inclusivism. He as a Roman Catholic believes that God desires all to be saved. He thinks that if God really has this desire, God will act on it. Rahner views Christians should be animated by a *Heilsoptimismus*; they should "think optimistically" about the possibilities of salvation outside Christianity, no matter how much error and evil they seem to find in the world. To think "pessimistically of men" is to underestimate God's love and grace.¹¹⁾

In other religions Rahner recognizes supernatural element of grace which were given by Jesus Christ. This means that "the non-Christian

8) Ibid., 38.

9) Ibid., 41.

10) Ibid., 43.

11) Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 125.

religions can be a positive means of gaining the right relationship to God and thus for the attaining of salvation, a means which is therefore positively included in God's plan of salvation."¹²⁾ According to Shenk, Rahner "sought to preserve the morality of God by insisting that the unwillingly blind are not condemned for their blindness but are judged by the extent of their desire to see."¹³⁾

Shenk puts the weaknesses of inclusivism tries to combine two convictions-the universal will of God to save, and the unique particularity of Christ. But the boundary between Christian faith and other religions is easily blurred. Sometimes more attention is given to the universal than to the particular. Inclusivism which is too open-ended soon becomes relativistic and universalistic, down playing the objective action of God in historical revelation and salvation. When inclusivism is vague, it moves toward pluralism. Inclusivism can easily minimize the importance of making Christ known as Lord and Savior.¹⁴⁾

Pluralism does not accept the belief that Jesus Christ is the definitive, final, ultimate, absolute, and normative revelation of God for salvation. According to Hick and Knitter, pluralism is an effort to move beyond the two general models that have dominated Christian attitudes toward other religions up to the present: the "conservative" exclusivist approach, which finds salvation only in Christ and little, if any, value elsewhere; and the "liberal" inclusivist attitude, which recognizes the salvific richness of other faiths but then views this richness as the result

12) Ibid., 127.

13) Shenk, 45.

14) Ibid., 49-50.

of Christ's redemptive work and as having to be fulfilled in Christ.¹⁵⁾

In a pluralistic view, all religions are authentic manifestations of God and are equal in providing salvation. Pluralists believe that there are many ways to God. Since God is revealed to human beings in a variety of forms, and since the human response to God varies, no religion can claim supremacy.¹⁶⁾ Pluralists believe that all religions lead to the same end and touch the same Divine Reality, but they use different symbols and language systems. Shenk says According to pluralists, perception of God differ because of differing historical and cultural conditions. Each religion is a historical-cultural variation of a common authentic conviction... Pluralism implies that a whole religious vision requires a variety of approaches. Since no religion is perfect and each grasps only part of the Real, there needs to be mutual enrichment, interaction, interdependence, and reciprocal challenge of one's limited, defective, or misleading understandings.¹⁷⁾

John Hick and Paul Knitter represent pluralism. Knitter believes all religions as equally valid for salvation. He does not believe one can say there is "no other name" or "no other gospel" because there are many revelations and many saviors. Hick advocated a "Copernican revolution" in theology, a shift from Christ or Christian faith as the center of the religious universe to the realization that God is the center.¹⁸⁾ He replaced Christ-centeredness (Christocentricism) with God-centered-

15) John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), viii.

16) Shenk, 53.

17) *Ibid.*, 55.

18) *Ibid.*, 57.

ness (theocentricism). Inclusivism moved from church-centeredness to Christ-centeredness, but pluralism moves from Christ-centeredness to God-centeredness. Theocentrism provides a common denominator for all religions, so there is no privileged position for any one.¹⁹⁾ It accommodates complementary views of God. Shenk criticizes pluralism in the following way. He says Pluralism leads to a relative understanding of truth-nothing is absolutely true. Christian faith is true because some consider it true, not because it is true. The pluralist says that all religions, despite their contradictions, point to the same divine reality. But that is difficult to believe because the basic claims of the world's religions seem incompatible. If all religions are in contact with one divine reality, why are there diverse understandings of divine reality? Pluralism does not deal adequately with differences in doctrine and theological statements which occur at many levels. Theological tolerance often leads to indifference toward something that is at the heart of a particular faith. Pluralism does not take religious diversity seriously enough. We cannot believe the idea that the end of all religion is identical despite the diversity of paths. Pluralist conversations about God are vague and impersonal. God at the center is very abstract. God loses decisive meaning when the incarnation and resurrection are reduced to a myth. Pluralism minimizes the doctrine of the incarnation by suggesting that Christ represents one focus of the saving God or one vehicle of God's disclosure. The reinterpretation of Christ's incarnation as myth does not adequately explain why Christ came; it sub-

19) Ibid., 58.

verts the distinctiveness of Christ.²⁰⁾

Shenk goes on to point out the weaknesses of pluralism. According to him

Theocentrism that is not Christocentric is not a Christian theocentrism. Jesus Christ is God turned toward humankind in self-revelation; he is not God's replacement. Christocentrism and theocentrism must embrace each other; they are inseparable. Pluralism challenges the foundation and nature of truth by attempting to free us from the authority of Scripture and denying that Jesus is the unique way to God. But when we relativize Jesus, we are left with no place to stand to evaluate the truth. If one accepts relativistic pluralism, how can there be a prophetic voice? How is wrong defined? Pluralism undermines a traditional understanding of mission. If one recognizes parallel paths to the truth, there is no need to evangelize.²¹⁾ John Cobb represents transformationist position of interreligious dialogue. He believes that each religion is unique. Thus, he advocates the uniqueness of Christianity and rejects the position of the pluralist. He writes so am I affirming Christian uniqueness? Certainly and emphatically so! But I am affirming the uniqueness also of Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. With the assumption of radical pluralism, nothing else is possible. Further, the uniqueness of each includes a unique superiority, namely, the ability to achieve what by its own historic norms is most important.²²⁾

20) Ibid., 61-64.

21) Ibid., 66-71.

22) John B. Cobb, Jr. "Beyond Pluralism," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The*

While the pluralists perceive all major religions embodying the same ultimate reality, Cobb views each of them as unique and different from one another.²³⁾ His view is a form of Christocentrism. For him, Christ is a radical openness which does not exclude other religious traditions. Christianity can enrich itself through incorporating truth from other religions. Through inter religious dialogue. Cobb wants to elicit mutual transformation. Liberationist views of interreligious dialogue "are not mainly concerned with the recognition of the universal reality of religions nor with the historical relativity of religions."²⁴⁾ They are interested in removing human sufferings through interreligious dialogue. Marjorie Suchocki urges that interreligious dialogue shift its focus to the concreteness of human suffering, human welfare, and justice.²⁵⁾ Rosemary Ruether emphasizes the need for cooperation by feminists of different religions for bringing justice. They advocate liberation for the poor and the needy through interreligious dialogue.

III. Korean Christians' Attitudes toward Other Religions

Korean Christians' attitudes toward other religions have been exclusive. They believe that only the Christian faith is absolute. For them, outside Christianity there is no salvation. A Buddhist expressed

Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions. ed., Gavin D'Costa. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 91-92.

23) Park, 131.

24) Park, 131.

25) Ibid., 131.

Christianity today does not make itself open. It lacks the positive will to share in dialogue with other religions and learn from other thought. It has made its mission with dogma, which is something like saying that only the Christian dogma can save men. Such a way of mission might call great numbers of people inside of the church, but it makes them feel a kind of strange feeling and a hatred feeling. This is not really the way to unity of the nation, but the way to further division.²⁶⁾

Korean Christians' exclusive attitude toward other religions is based on biblical passages such as "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me"(John 14: 6). "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"(Acts 4:12). Korean Christians have a strong tendency to demonize and condemn other religions. The exclusive attitudes of Korean Christians toward other religions have been influenced by the first missionaries who were conservative and evangelical. Sun Hwan Pyun puts it in this way In reality the Korean church burns with a proselytistic crusading spirit which tries to conquer indigenous religions for Christ and evangelize the nation under an exclusive evangelistic slogan which was learned from missionaries, i.e., "Jesus is the kingdom of heaven (other religions are hell). Jesus is the Kingdom of heaven (other religions are hell) Especially in the Asian climate where various religions and sects coexist within an absolute tolerance, the exclusive assertion of the absoluteness of Christianity has become a vestige of the Western colonial age which only promotes dis-

26) Cited in: Sun Hwan Pyun, "Other religions and Theology," in *East Asia Journal of Theology*. vol, 3, no. 2 (October 1985), 343.

cord"²⁷⁾

M. C. Fenwick one of the first missionaries in Korea confessed the limits of the mission in Korea as the transplantation of Western Christianity. Indeed, most Western missionaries in Korea were propagandists of Western culture under the pretence of the Gospel. They were religious cultural imperialists who tried to make copies of the denominations and the dogmas of Western (American) Christianity.²⁸⁾

Form the beginning of the mission in Korea, Christianity has emphasized science, technology, modernization, and civilization. the Korean church has seen other religions as uncivilized and superstitious. For example, in the Korean church's understanding, Confucianism is an uncivilized religion because it values a hierarchical structure.

Korean Buddhism has a follower of about 25% of the Korean population. As Marcello Zago points out, "the majority of Koreans consider Buddhism to be inadequate as a religion in the modern world and incapable of meeting its challenges."²⁹⁾ Korean Christians have regarded the worship of Buddha as the sin of idolatry and the Buddhist temple as hell. They have a strong tendency to downgrade Buddhism to a mere philosophy because the Buddhist concept of the deity does not include personality. In addition, Korean Christians have seen Buddhism as a superstitious religion. In fact, from the beginning of the mission in Korea, Korean Christians have not seen Confucianism and

27) Pyun, 334 and 338.

28) Ibid., 343.

29) Marcello Zago, "Dialogue With Buddhists In Asia," in *Trends in Mission: Toward the Third Millennium*. eds. William Jenkinson, and Helene O'Sullivan. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991, 286.

Buddhism as religion.

The first missionaries regarded shamanism as a superstitious belief system. They thought that Korean people had get rid of idol worship and superstition. Today, Korean Christians' attitudes toward other religions are not different from those of the first missionaries. According to Won Gue Lee's research on the religious consciousness of Christians who live in urban areas, 77.4% of the respondents took exclusive attitude toward other religions; only 22.6% were receptive to other religions.³⁰⁾ What is clear is that Korean Christians' attitudes toward other religions are exclusive. Furthermore, Korean Christians have taken an attitude of superiority toward other religions. Their attitudes have evoked antagonistic feelings among non-Christians.

IV. How Korean Christians carry out Interreligious Dialogue in the Korean Context

In the Korean context that is religiously plural, interreligious dialogue should take place at the intellectual level. Then, it should go beyond the intellectual level. At the intellectual level, interreligious dialogue enables a participant to view his/her basic convictions through the thought-forms of other religions, reconceive them with fresh insights and communicate them to others with better understanding.³¹⁾ That is, the participant's understanding of Truth based on

30) Won-Gue Lee, *Hangukkyohoi ui Hyunsil kwa Jeonmang*, [The Reality and Prospect of the Korean Church] (Seoul, Korea: Sungseo Yeongu Sa, 1994), 272.

his/her religion may be enriched by appropriating the religious insights of others.³²⁾ Through sharing the thoughts of their religions, the participants can experience mutual information and correction.

In Korea, six major religions--Buddhism, Confucianism, Won Buddhism (a recently reformed Korean Buddhism), Chundo-Kyo, Catholicism, and Protestantism formed the Korean Conference on Religion and Peace (K.C.R.P.) in the middle of the 1960s. They attempted to solve religious conflict, work together for peace and the environment, and promote the intellectual level of interreligious dialogue. But they are still in the beginning stage of sharing their salvation experiences with each other. According to Kyoung Jae Kim, one of the reasons why the intellectual type of interreligious dialogue in Korea has not been developed to a greater extent is the lack of hermeneutic insight among the participants.³³⁾ He points out that "a hermeneutic approach is necessary to understand and explain why religious experiences are diverse and why religious symbols and doctrines have their particular characteristics."³⁴⁾ At the intellectual level of interreligious dialogue, tensions and clashes can arise. Thus, some say that dialogue on this level does not yield fruitful results and therefore should be avoided. C. S. Song describes a weakness of the intellectual type of interreligious dialogue in this way Christian mission has been very

31) Yuzon, 531.

32) Ibid., 531-532.

33) Kyoung Jae Kim, *Christianity and the Encounter of Asian Religions: Method of Correlation, Fusion of Horizons, and Paradigm Shifts in the Korean Grafting Process*. (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1994), 179.

34) Ibid., 179.

much a truth affair of Christians with the world. Truth is its noble commodity. Being a noble commodity, truth cannot mingle with less noble things. It must stand out. It must stand above. And it must stand apart. Truth is a unique vocation. Being a unique vocation, truth does not recognize other truths. It cannot have equals. It explains itself and explains others. Truth is a universal claim. Being a universal claim, it cannot tolerate other truth claims. It has no accommodation to make, much less compromise. All in all, a truth affair is a judgmental affair. It judges, and is not to be judged. It conquers, and is not to be conquered. Union of contradictions, opposites, and polarities is not its particular interest.³⁵⁾

Nevertheless, the intellectual type of interreligious dialogue should take place in the Korean context because the exclusive prejudice of Korean Christians against other religions and their ignorance of other religions are serious. The Korean Christians and people of other religions need mutual information, understanding, conceptual clarification and correction of the thoughts of the different religions. At present the intellectual type of interreligious dialogue is taking place among very limited people. Usually it happens at the scholarly and institutional level. It should include ordinary people.

The intellectual type of interreligious dialogue is important and necessary in the Korean context. Interreligious dialogue should be more than intellectual, formal, and structural. The practical type of interreligious dialogue also should occur. That is, the dialogue must take place

35) C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from An Asian Perspective*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 106.

through cooperation in practical areas of communal concerns justice, peace, eradication of poverty and creating employment opportunities, and unification. Newbiggin says our dialogue with people of other faiths must be about what is happening in the world now and about how we understand it and take our part in it. It cannot be only, or even mainly, about our destiny as individual souls after death.³⁶⁾ C. S. Song makes a similar point: Christian mission should be first and foremost a love affair. If it is a love affair, it mainly has to do with persons, not principles.³⁷⁾ Andrew Park points out that current interreligious dialogue must shift its focus from debating the truth of religions to working together to solve the problems in a context. Then he suggests that since the problem of han is shared by most religions and most religions try to solve the problem of han, han can be a significant point of contact for interreligious dialogue.³⁸⁾ He goes on to say In the collaboration of transforming the han of the oppressed, the dispute over the supremacy of a particular religion disappears. The category of supremacy comes from the idea of competition, not from the toil of cooperation. The inquiry into the ultimate reality of religions will be resolved in compassionate, humble work for suffering people. The pivotal questions of doctrine in interreligious dialogue will be fully answered when religions engage in harmonious work for removing han in the world.³⁹⁾

36) Lessie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 179.

37) C. S. Song, 107.

38) Park, 132.

39) *Ibid.*, 135.

According to Sun Hwan Pyun, the Korean Protestant church has a glorious past heritage which made a great success in praxis-centered dialogue through the March First Independence Movement in 1919 against Japanese imperial rule.⁴⁰⁾ There were 17 Protestant representatives out of 33 men who signed the Independence Declaration. There were 8 Methodists out of the 17 Protestant representatives. With the emphasis on numerical church growth, the Korean church has not considered the ten million laborers, eight million farmers, and five million poor in urban areas. Despite the existence of more than 250 urban slums, less than 200 churches are taking care of the poor.⁴¹⁾ Korean Christians should carry out interreligious dialogue with people of other religions through working together for social projects. That is, we and people of other religions must participate in the struggles of laborers, farmers, and the poor for survival.

V. Conclusion

Inter religious dialogue in the Korean context has to occur not only at the intellectual level but also through practical cooperation in solving the problems of real life situations. It needs to combine the dynamic

40) Sun Hwan Pyun, "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue Toward the Liberation of Minjung: Particularly Centering around Minjung Buddhism," in *Dialogue*. vol. XVI, no. 1-2-3 (Jan.-Dec. 1989), 87.

41) Won-Gue Lee, "Hangukyohoi Hyunsil kwa Mokhoihyunjang e daehan Sahoihakjeok Jindan ," [Sociological Diagnosis on the Reality of The Korean Church and Ministerial Context] in *Kidokgyo Sasang*, [Christian Thought] vol. 37, no. 10 (October 1993):228-229.

dialectic of interreligious orthodoxy and interreligious orthopraxis.⁴²⁾
The intellectual and practical levels of interreligious dialogue are interrelated. They are both sides of human experience which cannot be separated from each other.

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42) Park, 133.

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