

# **Beyond the Korean Blessing-oriented Faith with the Help of H. Richard Niebuhr's Perspective**

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본 논문은 H. 리처드 니버의 신학과 윤리학의 도움을 받아 한국교회의 축복-일변도의 신앙을 비판적으로 다루고자 한다. 이 목적을 위해 본 논문은 다음의 몇 가지 점을 논의한다. 첫째, 본 논문은 먼저 니버의 신학과 윤리학의 근본적인 논점들을 분석한다. (1) 니버에게 신앙은 사회적이다. 왜냐하면 신앙은 항상 자아와 타자, 그리고 하나님 사이의 관계에 존재하기 때문이다. (2) 참된 신앙은 유일신론의 신앙이다. 이 신앙은 하나님만이 유일자이며, 유일자이신 하나님 안에 존재하기 때문에 모든 것은 존재하는 한 선하다고 선언한다. (3) 참된 유일신의 신앙은 보편적인 책임과 사랑의 윤리를 포함한다. 둘째, 본 논문은 한국교회의 축복-일변도의 신앙의 특징을 비판적으로 논의한다. 축복신앙은 현재의 물질적 성공을 강조하고, 그에 따라서 이중적인 가치체계를 갖는다. 즉 축복신앙은 성공은 하나님의 축복이지만, 실패는 하나님의 저주라고 가르친다. 니버의 관점에서 볼 때, 이러한 축복중심의 신앙은 개인화된 신앙과 사회 책임적 신앙을 불가능하게 한다. 마지막으로 본 논문은 한국교회의 축복-일변도의 신앙에 대한 대안으로 “우리” 형식의 신앙을 제안한다. 특히 본 논문에서는 사회적 삼위일체론에 기초한 “우리” 형식의 신앙을 구성해본다. 이 신앙의 기본적 생각은 삼위 하나님이 “우리” 공동체를 형성하고 있으며, “우리” 공동체로 존재하시는 하나님은 항상 “우리” 안에, “우리”와 함께, 그리고 “우리”를 위해 존재하신다. 결론적으로 삼위일체적 “우리” 신앙은 다음과 같은 내용의 신앙을 고백한다. (1) 삼위 하나님은 생명의 하나님이다. (2) 삼위는 자기를 나누고, 남을 배려하며, 공동체를 구성하는 사랑의 “우리” 공동체를 형성한다. (3) 삼위 하나님은 세상에 임재하시어, 모든 피조물을 삼위 하나님의 “우리” 공동체로 초대한다. (4) 삼위일체적 “우리” 신앙은 삼위 하나님이 세상의 정의와 평화를 이루시는 하나님이시기 때문에 사회 책임적 신앙을 견지한다.

**주제어:** H. 리처드 니버, 축복-일변도의 신앙, “우리” 형태의 신앙, 삼위일체

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## I. Introduction

These days, there appears the so-called revival syndrome in the Korean churches. Since the mid 90's, the term "revival" has been prevalent in the Korean church. The fact that a book, *Buheung* [Revival].Com, published in the mid 90's, is still one of the bestsellers is a good example to reveal this "revival" syndrome. Paradoxically, this syndrome shows us that the contemporary Korean church faces a serious difficulty. Entering to the 1990's, the rate of growth of the Korean church members is remarkably down. According to Won Gyu Lee, the rate of growth is 412.4% in the 60's, 56.7% in the 70's, and 29.7% in the 80's. However, it is 1.2% in the 90's.<sup>1)</sup> In recent days, unfortunately, the number of the Korean church members has been slightly decreased. To make matters worse, the Korean church has kept losing its social attractiveness among Korean people. According to Gallup research in 1998, the rate of secession from the church is 67%, which is the highest among the religions in Korean society. The same research reports that the preference of Korean non-religious people for the religion is 22% for Protestantism, 40% for Catholic, and 37% for Buddhism.<sup>2)</sup> This shows that Protestantism is the least attractive among the main religions in Korean society. Many Korean non-Christians say that the Korean

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1) Won Gyu Lee, *What is the Problems of the Korean Church?* (Seoul: Gamrigyo Shinhak Daehak Chulpanbu, 1988), 169.

2) See Kyoung Jae Kim, "21st Korean Society and Korean Protestantism," <http://soombat.org/wwwb/CrazyWWWBoard.cgi?db=article&mode=read&num=50&page=1&ftype=6&fval=&backdepth=1>

Protestant churches are not interested in the service to the public, while are indulged in the denominational group egoism.

What causes this situation in the Korean [Protestant] churches? To my mind, one of main causes is what I call ‘the blessing-oriented faith,’ or ‘the theology of success,’ or ‘the capitalistic faith.’ My purpose in this paper is to reflect this Korean blessing-oriented faith critically by the help of H. Richard Niebuhr’s description of faith and ethics. To this end, I will first explore Niebuhr’s basic themes on faith, which will be a controlling idea for my following discussion. Then, I will analyze some features of what I call the Korean blessing-oriented faith. Last, I will suggest an alternative to this blessing-centered faith: a modified ‘woori’ form of faith. For my work, I will talk about two Korean women’s suffering stories which I experienced during my pastoral work. The reason is that they show well the features of two forms of faith I will describe. Let me first inquire into Niebuhr’s some insights about faith and ethics.

## II. H. R. Niebuhr’s Description of Faith and Ethics

### 1. Faith and its Triadic Structure

H. Richard Niebuhr sees that faith influences deeply our actual life and practice because faith makes life worth living and meaningful.<sup>3)</sup> Thus, we must continually reflect our faith and its ethical relevance in order to maintain the integrity of our faith in the actual life and practice.

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3) See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2006), 77ff.

Niebuhr does not see faith as an assent to dogmatic propositions because belief in propositions tends to be dead faith,<sup>4)</sup> Instead, Niebuhr defines faith in terms of value language:

This [Faith] is the attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the sources of value and the objects of loyalty. This personal attitude is ambivalent; it involves reference to the value that attaches to the self and to the value toward which the self is directed. On the one hand it is trust in that which gives value to the self; on the other hand it is loyalty to what the self values.<sup>5)</sup>

Faith here involves two moments: trust in and loyalty to the value-center. Trust is the passive side of faith in that on the source of value the self “depends not only for his own meaning but for the worth of everything else he encounters.”<sup>6)</sup> On the other hand, loyalty is the active side of faith because “it values the center and seeks to enhance its power and glory. It makes that center its cause for which to live and labor.”<sup>7)</sup> Ethically it is very important to note the fact that, insofar as the object of faith is the center of value, rightness and wrongness depend on it.<sup>8)</sup>

More importantly, our faith as dependence on and loyalty to a val-

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4) H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), 6-7.

5) H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960), 16.

6) *Ibid.*, 17.

7) *Ibid.*, 18.

8) *Ibid.*, 17.

ue-center is social and relational. According to Niebuhr, our faith has a triadic structure of the self, community and cause. Here, the basic structure is the interaction of the self and other persons. Following Martin Buber and Herbert Mead, Niebuhr thinks that the self has a social character. In the act of faith, the “I” acknowledges the presence of “Thou.” One can know oneself only when one knows another knower who knows the self.<sup>9)</sup> Also, we can describe the faith relationship between I and Thou as “the reciprocal action of I and Thou in which an I trusts a Thou and so acknowledges the latter as a person – one who has the fidelity-infidelity of moral personality.”<sup>10)</sup> This view of human being and faith corresponds to Niebuhr’s affirmation that the self exists in relations to companions as the form of I-Thou existence.

However, further observation leads us to see the presence of the third, of It, in the relation between I and Thou. We know each other and ourselves only insofar as we have this common third. Following Josiah Royce, Niebuhr calls this common object “a cause.”<sup>11)</sup> As the object of trust and loyalty, this cause is “that for the sake of which the community exists, for the sake of which all these I’s and Thou’s are united.”<sup>12)</sup> Therefore, Niebuhr argues, “we cannot live without a cause, without some object of devotion, some center of worth, something on which we rely for our meaning.”<sup>13)</sup>

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9) Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 47.

10) *Ibid.*

11) H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 83ff.

12) Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 51.

13) Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 118.

According to Niebuhr, faith must be understood only in this triadic relationship because it is present in the relations among I, Thou, and It. Thus, from the perspective of the self, faith is “the attitude of the self in its existence toward all the existences that surround it.”<sup>14)</sup> In other words, faith is the relations of selves to each other and to a common cause.

## 2. Radical Monotheism

Furthermore, Niebuhr argues: “To be a self is to have a god.”<sup>15)</sup> This corresponds to the statement that to have a cause is to have a god. In other words, Niebuhr sees that ‘god,’ ‘value-center,’ and ‘cause’ are identical: “when we speak of gods, we mean the gods of faith, namely, such value-centers and causes.”<sup>16)</sup> Hence, to have a faith and to have a god is one and the same thing. Accordingly, Niebuhr argues that “the important question for religion is not the question, whether a god exists, but rather, what being or beings have the value deity.”<sup>17)</sup> A focus must be on the kind of god to which we are faithful and loyal. Now, there are three types of faith according to the sort of cause: polytheism, henotheism, and radical monotheism.<sup>18)</sup>

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14) Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 118.

15) Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 80.

16) Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 16.

17) *Ibid.*, 24.

18) As C. David Grant points out, Niebuhr's distinction of faith comes from “four possible combinations of two sets of polar alternatives: One-many and finite-infinite.” Polytheism is the combination of “finite and many,” henotheism of “finite and one,” and radical monotheism of “infinite and one.” For Niebuhr,

First, polytheism is pluralism in faith. This form of faith has multiple centers of value and thus many causes to which trust and loyalty are given. These centers of value and causes have many different forms of existence: natural events, the self, other persons, ideas and so on. However, none of them can be the object of universal faith because they are all finite in time and space. When we have a polytheistic faith, “we are divided within ourselves and socially by our religion, and that our gods are unable to save us from the ultimate frustration of meaningless existence.”<sup>19)</sup> Therefore, there is no unity in the self because there is no unity among the self’s gods.

Second, henotheism trusts in and devotes to one god, which is a finite reality among others. Niebuhr sees henotheism as ‘social faith’ because social realities like the state and the church is usually taken to be god.<sup>20)</sup> Thus, even though the conflict, which happens within the self who has polytheistic faith, dissipates within henotheism, a new form of conflict comes up. Since different people have different social realities as their gods, conflict among them happens. Furthermore, since it has a finite god, henotheism cannot guarantee meaning to our life in the world except for a time.

According to Niebuhr, the integrity of the self and the community can be achieved only in monotheistic faith.<sup>21)</sup> So he defines: “Radical

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the gods as finite and many are logically inconceivable. See *God The Center of Value: Value Theory in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984), 50ff.

19) Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 120.

20) *Ibid.*, 25ff.

21) Niebuhr observes: “Without a single faith there is no real unity of the self or



monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are: 'I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me' and 'Whatever is, is good.'<sup>22)</sup> Here are two affirmations: of the One God and of the Augustinian goodness of all beings. These affirmations mean that none is absolute save God and that the absolutizing of anything finite is ruinous to the finite itself.

This radical monotheism contends that the value-center is "the One beyond the many," which is "the principle of being itself." On the one hand, as faith, this radical monotheism is "reliance on the source of all being for the significance of the self and of all that exists."<sup>23)</sup> Whatever is, is good because all have their being in the One. The principle of being is also the principle of value. In this sense, radical monotheism is the "value relation to the One to whom all being is related."<sup>24)</sup> On the other hand, as faith loyalty, radical monotheism is "directed toward the principle and the realm of being as the cause for the sake of which it lives."<sup>25)</sup> It is crucial for Niebuhr that such loyalty is universal because the One is the universal cause. In radical monotheism, such loyalty is the loyalty to all existents, namely, whatever is. More importantly, Niebuhr believes that the different scopes of universality in

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of a community, therefore no unified inner history but only a multiplicity of memories and destinies. Inner history and inner faith belong together, as the existence of self and an object of devotion for the sake of which the self lives are inseparable." *The Meaning of Revelation*, 78.

22) Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 37.

23) *Ibid.*

24) *Ibid.*

25) *Ibid.*, 33.

loyalty take the different forms of morality because such loyalty gives form to morality. He writes:

Love of the neighbor is required in every morality formed by faith; but in polytheistic faith my neighbor is defined as the one who is near me in my interest group, when he is near me in that passing association. In henotheistic social faith my neighbor is my fellow in the closed society. Hence in both instances the counterpart of the law of neighbor-love is the requirement to hate the enemy. But in radical monotheism my neighbor is my companion in being; though he is my enemy in some less than universal context the requirement is to love him.<sup>26)</sup>

Radical monotheism embraces even enemies within the scope of the neighbor while polytheism and henotheism love only intimate companions. In this context, radical monotheism brings about a radically universal responsible ethic and practice. Let us explore this point further.

### **3. Radical Monotheism and the Responsible Ethic**

Niebuhr's monotheism ultimately makes sense only as the framework of reflection on human responsibility. According to Libertus A. Hodemaker, themes of monotheism as faith and transformation as responsible practice are the pivotal principles in Niebuhr's theology and ethics: "Monotheism - a consistent concentration on the one God - im-

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26) *Ibid.*, 34.

plies transformation: all human thought and social expression must engage itself in a constant process of redirection toward the one God.”<sup>27)</sup> For Niebuhr, this transformation is directed toward the ethic of response. This presupposes Niebuhr's view of human being as “man-the-answerer.” This means that the human engage in the dialogues with others and then act in response to action upon them. To say that I am I is “the acknowledgement of my existence as the counterpart of another self.”<sup>28)</sup> As in faith relationship, human existence must be understood only in interaction among selves who are responsible.

First of all, Niebuhr's responsible ethic implies the concept of universal community since monotheism is the faith in the One who is present in every being, every place, and every event. Niebuhr describes:

The radical faith becomes incarnate insofar as every reaction to every event becomes a response in loyalty and confidence to the One who is present in all such events. The First Person encountered in the temple is also the First Person encountered in the political arena, or in the market place, or among the hungry and plague-ridden. Not action directed toward human companions or toward other nations or toward animals but is also directed toward the One who is their creator and savior.<sup>29)</sup>

Here come up two points. First, since the One is present in every reality, all realities is closely related to each other so that they are one.

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27) Libertus A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 45.

28) Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 71.

29) Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 48.

The universal community is “the total community of being.”<sup>30)</sup> Second, this concept of universal responsible community accompanies the basic moral principle: we must respond to every reality as we respond to the One God because we respond to them “in the presence of the One beyond the many”: “Responsibility affirms: ‘God is acting in all action upon you. So respond to all actions upon as to respond to his action.’”<sup>31)</sup> Therefore, our response to every particular action takes “the form of responses also to the One that is active in it.”<sup>32)</sup>

This universal response implies “the universal love of all beings in the One.” Niebuhr argues that the moral consequence of monotheism requires the universal love of all being in God: “But this is its requirement: that all beings, not only our friends but also our enemies, not only men but also animals and the inanimate, be met with reverence, for all are friends in the friendship of the one to whom we are reconciled in faith.”<sup>33)</sup> The love of all realities is interrelated with the love of God as the ultimate person, the ultimate cause, the center of universal community. Niebuhr describes this universal love beautifully:

Reconciliation to God is reconciliation to life itself; love to the Creator is love of being, rejoicing in existence, in its source, totality and particularity. Love to God is more than that, however, great as this demand and promise are. It is loyalty to the idea of God when the actuality of God is mystery; it is the affirmation of a universe and the devoted will

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30) Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 87.

31) *Ibid.*, 126.

32) *Ibid.*, 122-3.

33) Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 126.

to maintain a universal community at whatever cost to the self. It is the patriotism of the universal commonwealth, the kingdom of God, as a commonwealth of justice and love, the reality of which is sure to become evident.<sup>34)</sup>

For the following discussion, let me summarize Niebuhr's basic points I have explored: (1) As trust in and loyalty to a value-center, faith is social. Faith is present in the relations between the self, others, and God as cause. (2) A true faith is monotheistic. It affirms that God is the One beyond the many and whatever is, is good because all have their being in the One God. (3) A true monotheistic faith implies the universal ethic of responsibility. Monotheistic faith implies the concept of universal community and the universal love because all realities are one in the One God. In the following discussion, I will use these three points as a controlling tool for evaluating the Korean blessing-oriented faith and suggesting the *woori* form of faith as an alternative.

### III. The Korean Blessing-oriented Faith

#### 1. A's Story

A was a woman dying of cancer. She had been fighting against the torture of cancer for several years. She had three operations and had radiation therapy several times. However, she had relapsed into cancer and was in critical condition. Because I was her pastor, I visited her

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34) H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 37.

to comfort her. On the way to the hospital, a member of our church told me about her current frame of mind. “Nowadays, she feels so uneasy. She thinks that she is going to die. The last few months, she has been going to a prayer house. I heard that a pastor in the prayer house tell her that you could be healed only by prayer. Now she seems to have become desperate. She is reluctant to meet people because she is ashamed.”

When we arrived at her ward, she was lying down with pain evident on her face. I read Psalms 147: 2-3 to her, “The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounded.” After reading the Bible, I preached briefly, “Pray to Jesus Christ. He heals you.” Then, I prayed to God in the name of Jesus earnestly for her. The prayer, “O Jesus, heal this woman. Eliminate her suffering.” She responded to my preaching and prayer with “Amen.” I finished my prayer, and was content that she found peace.

However, after praying, she asked me, “Pastor! How long on earth?” I could not understand her question and asked her, “What do you mean?” Her face filled with pain, she replied, “How long will my suffering last? I am totally exhausted.” I was embarrassed and I could tell her only these words, “Be comforted, Jesus is with you.”

At the moment, I came to realize that my preaching and prayer did not really help her. I thought that something was wrong about the teaching of the Korean church about faith and its pastoral practice.

## 2. A Description of the Korean Blessing-oriented faith

The above story shows well some features of what I call the Korean blessing-oriented faith. There appear two words which express the characteristic of this faith: 'prayer house' and 'ashamed.' What is the prayer house? Prayer house, which is usually distanced from the actual world, is the place in which the power of God is to be thought present. This presupposes a kind of radical dualism: God is spirit while the world is material body. God is good while the world is bad. How is this gap mediated? Blessing! Material/physical blessing is a sign of salvation. Prosperity is a witness of God's grace. On the other hand, suffering means the symbol of God's abandonment. A person who suffers from illness and bad luck tends to believe "I am a sinner." The result is the shame and guilt feeling on the part of the suffering, and then they tend to become a recluse. Think about the response of A to her critical situation. Facing her illness, A was ashamed, and was reluctant to meet others. Why? Because she thought that her illness was the curse of God. It was the judgment of God. This is the negative outcome of the blessing-oriented faith, Moon-Jang Lee, a Korean theologian, articulates:

The blessing-oriented faith means literally that which petitions for blessing. In other words, one's wish to gain blessing is at the center of faith, and the end of faith life is to get blessing. Accordingly, blessing takes priority in the value-system of those who have faith, and there appears in the church the mood which sees the thing which is not blessing as negative. Moreover, it comes to the following extreme conclusion: success

is blessing, and failure is curse. Being in good health is blessing while disease is curse. Wealth is blessing while poverty is curse. Being well is blessing while suffering is curse. Therefore, there is a clear distinction between good and ill luck or fortune or misfortune, and there appears the consciousness which seeks for good luck and fortune while avoid bad luck and misfortune as possible as one can.<sup>35)</sup>

Blessing-centered faith places its focus on the material blessing since it is the sign of God's election. Then, it forms a dualistic and Manichaeian value-system: material success is God's blessing while suffering is God's curse. God is where is blessing while God is not where is curse. The result is in failing to acknowledge the universal presence of God. Of course, blessing-centered attitude is always not a bad idea because human being naturally desires blessing. In this respect, we need to differentiate between blessing-centered-ity and blessing-centered-ism. Another Korean theologian, Jong-Gi Min clarifies this point:

[But] when the blessing-centered-ity of faith is transformed to blessing-centered-ism, the problem starts. Blessing-centered-ism is the corrupted religiosity that the blessing-centered element of faith is not sublimed into the personal relationship with God, but degenerated into the solipsistic fulfillment of individual wishes. It is the faith act which pays attention to the incidental gift of God rather than the relationship with God. Blessing-oriented consciousness is one of fundamental elements of religion, but bless-

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35) Moon-Jang Lee, "How do we think about the blessing-oriented attitude of Koreans?," *Mokhoe-wa-Shinhak [Ministry and Theology]* (December 1999): 55.



ing-oriented-ism the loss of balance which reduces the rich world of religion only to material, money, good health, success in life, and individual flourish and prosperity. This is the idolatry which leaves God and clings to the creature. Therefore, blessing-ism makes the absoluteness of God the relative instrument for my success, and makes the nature and grace of God the greedy instrument for realizing the human wishes such as good health, longevity, wealth and prosperity.<sup>36)</sup>

The real problem of the Korean blessing-oriented faith is its tendency of 'blessing-centered-ism' in which God is considered the instrument to fulfill individual and material wishes. As a result, the Korean blessing-centered faith loses its personal and social element that Niebuhr has developed, and then becomes a kind of solipsism.

Now, where does this form of faith come from? To my mind, this specific form of faith is related to Korean traditional religious culture: Shamanism. Shamanism, the oldest indigenous cultural heritage, has pervaded throughout a long history of Korea either as an explicit form of religion and also as an implicit form of a pervasive religious syncretistic basis for the world view of Korean and even for the beliefs of the Korean major religions.<sup>37)</sup> This religious culture also has deeply influenced the teaching and practice of the Korean church. Andrew E. Kim, a Korean sociologist, points to two main influences of Shamanism on Korean Protestant Christianity: an emphasis on this-worldly life and

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36) Jong-Gi Min, "Liquidate the blessing-oriented faith in the church," *Mokhoe-wa-Shinhak [Ministry and Theology]* (December 1999): 68.

37) Cf. Hyun-young Cho, "Cultural Interbreeding between Korean Shamanism and Imported Religions," *Diogenes* 47 (March 1999): 50-61.

the primacy of faith-healing.<sup>38)</sup>

According to Kim, the most striking characteristic of shamanism is its preoccupation with the fulfillment of material wishes. Its basic purpose is to fulfill practical needs such as longevity, health, and wealth. In this way, shamanism has created the this-worldly, materialistic, and utilitarian tendency of Korean people. This tendency has been so powerful that, in order to be accepted by Koreans, newly introduced religions had to compromise with shamanism. Protestant church was no exception. Shamanized, Korean protestant churches “selectively stressed Christian doctrines that are similar to shamanistic beliefs and incorporated many aspects of shamanistic rituals.” Take some examples: Korean Christianity has become a magical religion by preaching the God who improves living conditions by his magical potency. In addition, themes of sermon have been mainly composed of God’s material blessings. Yong-Gi Cho’s threefold blessing, i.e., health, prosperity, and salvation is the very example. In the case of offering, it has been thought an instrument which ensures the continuation of God’s blessing. In this way, the Korean Christianity has been a shamanistic this worldly blessing-oriented religion.

Next, the Korean church has emphasized faith-healing ministry in the church. Disease-curing and exorcising of evil spirits are two most important functions of shamans in Korean shamanism. Kim observes that the Korean church’s emphasis on the miraculous power of Jesus Christ

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38) Andrew E. Kim, “Korean Religious Culture and its Affinity to Christianity: The Rise of Protestant Christianity in South Korea,” *Sociology of Religion* 61,2 (2000): 117-33.

correlates well with the indigenous folk belief in the magical power of shamans. Many Korean Christians, accustomed to the exorcising and healing power of shamans, easily accepted the Scripture's description of faith-healing and casting out demonic spirits. In addition, Korean clergy has predominantly preached the themes of faith-healing, while they left socio-ethical themes untouched. Moreover, they have used faith-healing stories as an evidence of many this-worldly rewards which one can receive when one converts to Christianity. In this context, it is not surprising that the pastors of many leading churches who performed faith-healing were considered modern-day shamans with a magical power. A's story and my pastoral practice show well how prevalent the emphasis on faith-healing is in the Korean church. This tendency has made God *Deus ex machina* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's term and shame-oriented ethos on the part of the suffering in the church.

To summarize: the main characteristics of the shamanized Korean blessing-oriented faith is the emphasis on this-worldly material success and the dualistic value-system. From Niebuhr's perspective, the result is the individualized faith, and the church's indifference in its social responsibility. Moreover, the blessing-centered faith has become the church-centered henotheism Niebuhr describes since the church and its pastor have been authorized as the medium of God's blessing. As I pointed out, these tendencies have become the source of the difficulties the contemporary Korean church faces. How can the Korean church overcome this crisis? For this end, what forms of faith do the Korean church need? My suggestion is that the *woori* form of faith can be an

option for this purpose.

## IV. An Alternative: “Woori” Model of Faith

### 1. B's Story

B had experienced serious suffering. Betrayed by a close friend, her family was almost bankrupt. Like A, at first, B became a recluse. She avoided meeting others to hide her shameful suffering. By the way, many church members were surprised by the outcome of her suffering. After months, they heard that she was cooking for the aged and the poor. At first, nobody helped her. She alone did the work. She pitched a tent on a small lot so that the people ate together. Later, this opened opportunities for other church members to serve with her. I was invited to pray for this work. I wondered how she decided to do this service. However, Korean culture would not permit me, as her pastor, to ask her. One day, I prayed for this work, and came back to the church with her. On the way, she first said, “Pastor, did you know the reason for my suffering?” “Yes, I did.” “Some months, I could not eat and sleep. I kept bearing a grudge against my friend and even God,” she said, looking back on the past. “By the way, how did you start to do this work?” “One day, while praying to God for my suffering, I came to realize that what God suffered for me on the cross of Jesus Christ means is that God suffers for and with me even now. I realized that Jesus Christ was already and is always in me, not just in heaven. After that time, I could understand my own suffering in a different way. It was vague, but I felt that the best way to help myself was to suffer with

others, as our Lord did. So I started to do this work.”

A few days later, B called and asked me, “Pastor, an aged man is sick. Now he is in the hospital. Can you visit him with me?” I went to the hospital with her. As usual, I preached briefly, and prayed to God for him. While I preached and prayed, his face got stiff. Then, I saw something that surprised me. As I finished my service, he saw B and started to laugh like a child. B kept massaging his shoulder and listening to him. She was talking to him with body-talk, while I talked to him with words. It seemed as though I was not even present in the room. “It seems to me that B is an angel from the heaven.” He told me. “Please, do not say so.” B said.

At that time, my eyes were opened. B was building on a *woori* faith community in her own way, namely, through love [Jeong] and a Body [Mom]-Practice. I thought that this type of faith could be an alternative for the Korean Church.

## 2. A Cultural and Theological Description of *Woori* Faith

### 1) A Cultural Description of *Woori* Form of faith

There are two expressions in the above story which manifest the characteristics of what I call *woori*-faith: “God suffers for and with me,” and “... suffer with others.” This is an affirmation of God’s radical immanence in the world, and of a communitarian form of faith. Both correspond to Niebuhr’s affirmation of God’s presence in the world and the social character of faith. B in the above story sees the Jesus Christ who is already in her suffering. Thus she confesses that through Christ,

God suffers with her and is in her now and forever. Therefore, for her, suffering is not simply the curse of God. Rather, it may be an invitation to enter into a deeper relationship with God and others in Christ. In addition, this realization makes B able to create a *woori* community of love, because it opens her eyes to others. To describe this point more in detail, let me introduce what I call *woori*-community.

The idea of *woori* is the cultural tradition of Korean society. *Woori* means “we” in English. Korean people do not say ‘my parent,’ ‘my son or my daughter’ and ‘my house,’ but ‘our parent,’ ‘our son or our daughter’ and ‘our house.’ They even say ‘our wife/husband,’ not ‘my wife/husband.’ In this way, Korean people think that a human being can only have significance in a network of social relationships. *Woori* is a linguistic symbol that helps Korean people know that they are connected to one another. In this sense, Korean culture as a whole can be viewed as the “relationship culture.” *Woori* is the linguistic symbol, which expresses this kind of cultural ethos.

The presence of *woori* community depends on two elements: *shim-jeong* [love of mind] and practice by *mom* [Body]. The love or *shim-jeong* plays a crucial role in binding the members of *woori* community together. According to Sang-Chin Choi and Chung-Woon Kim, this affection of mind is concerned with the inter-subjective state of feeling which can only be understood within a certain construction of “we-ness [*woori*].”<sup>39)</sup> In a “woori” relationship, one person has to always

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39) Sang-Chin Choi and Chung-Woon Kim, “Does the Multiple Self need an Identity?: Concerning Alternative Constructions of the Self.”  
<http://cau.ac.kr/~choi/non.htm> I obtained the relationship of Shim-Jeong -

respect the *shim-jeong* of the other. This love obliges the partners to confirm the 'we-ness' from the perspective of mutual responsibility. Thus the question, "Who am I?" is best translated into the Korean context as "Who am I for the other?" whereby this is not concerned with cognitive reflectivity but rather with an inter-subjective quality of feeling.<sup>40)</sup> This mutually responsible love for the other forms the emotional basis of *woori* community.

Whereas *shim-jeong* operates as a functional link between the persons in the *woori* community, mom [Body or Physicality] constitutes the basis for the processes of the meaning construction. In the *woori* community, the formation of interrelationship does not come from word language, but from body language. This reflects the Confucian claim that writing is not able to fully represent speech and speech is not capable of fully expressing meaning. Accordingly, in the *woori* community 'action-language' is used as an alternative to word-language in the construction of meanings. According to Choi and Kim, "The presence of virtue, emotion, and intentionality is only confirmed through the inter-subjective view of the physical sign. Therefore one could describe the process as inter-physicality in the sense of a mutual experience of being."<sup>41)</sup> Theologically, this mom language seems to be consistent with the life, cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

From the above description, let me characterize the *woori* form of faith in three ways. First of all, God is always in, with, and for *woori*

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Woori - Mom from this article.

40) *Ibid.*

41) *Ibid.*

or us. This means that a triune God is always immanent in all creatures. B tells us that God in Christ suffers for and with her and Christ is always in her. This trust in the presence of God is the main characteristic of the *woori* image of faith. The second is love for others. Love is at the center of *woori* type of faith. Like *shim-jeong*, the love in this faith focuses on the other, and claims mutual responsibility. Realizing the presence of God in her, B comes to loving others. This is the love which holds *woori* faith community together. Last, *woori* faith leads us to orthopraxis. This practice is accomplished by the *mom* talk that I described. By *mom* talk, I mean that we make and sustain a community by means of our material body. Compared to the word-talk, the body-talk has one peculiarity. It takes a “showing strategy.” For example, to teach the love of Jesus, word-talk tells us of a ‘love-act’ of Jesus. The body-talk, on the other hand, shows us the love of Jesus through real actions. In this regard, this reflects Jesus words: “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:19). B’s service for the old aged belongs to the body talk. Through this, members of this community learn how to live together.

This description shares Niebuhr’s monotheistic faith in some points: its emphasis on God’s radical immanence in the world, its social character of faith, and its orientation toward the ethic of love. Nonetheless, I need to modify a possibly negative side of *woori* faith from H. Richard Niebuhr’s perspective. The scope of *woori* communitarian faith needs to be expanded by Niebuhr’s universal inclusiveness. The reason is that



the *woori* community tends to limit its *jeong* to its members. Sang Chin Choi and Soo-Hyang Choi give four categorical conditions for the occurrence of *jeong*: (1) long term we-ness experience; (2) understanding, acceptance, and help; (3) sharing joys and sorrows; (4) similarities. For my concern, let me quote the explanation of similarity.

“Similarity” seems to be an important condition at the earlier stage of *jeong* formation. When people identify the other as we-members in terms of family background, geographical connection, school link, personality, behavior or physical characteristics, there is a much higher possibility to forge favorable impressions about them. Just as the experiences of sharing joys and sorrows instigate We-ness feelings, the mutual resemblances play the same role, functioning to bind the participants within the same socio-psychological boundary. Since those resemblances are routinely recognized through the participating individuals' daily life, they in fact constitute the actual substance that sustains an established *jeong* among the participants.<sup>42)</sup>

*Jeong* tends to occur easily among those who are the same in family, school, geographical place and so on. It is difficult for a stranger to be welcomed to an existing *jeong* community. This exclusivity of *jeong* is often linked to nepotism in which favoritism is shown only to family members, relatives, or friends in conferring offices and various interests. This means that a *woori* faith community is apt to be a closed society. In this sense, the *woori* form of faith can be henotheistic in Niebuhr's

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42) Sang Chin Choi & Soo-Hyang Choi, “Cheong: The Socio-Emotional Grammar of Koreans,” <http://cau.ac.kr/~choi/non.htm>

term. In order to avoid this danger, the *woori* faith needs to be controlled by the Niebuhrian consciousness that love in Christian faith embraces the others universally.

## 2) A Trinitarian Theological Description of *Woori* Form of Faith

In this section, I will examine the Trinity as a theological basis for what I call *woori* faith. In my mind, three persons in the Trinity form a divine *woori* community in its perfect sense. My description of the Trinity is the interpretation of the following biblical passage: Since “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30), “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). This mentions that in the Trinity God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell in each other. This Trinitarian description of faith starts from the fact that God is life.

Life is the highest and richest good in the world. Simply put, a Triune God is purely the living One. Thus God is the supreme good for the human. The highest end of a human being is to share with the eternal life of God. In the Bible, God is adored as the Lord who lives and as the source of life. Since God is life itself, God says to us, “I am who I am.” (Ex. 3:14) God the Father creates everything that has life because he himself is life. In Niebuhr’s term, God is the principle and the cause of all beings. God freely gives life to all creatures. So the Old Testament says that everything was born from the “womb” of God: “From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?” (Job 38:29) In this sense, God the Father is God the Mother. Elizabeth A. Johnson writes: “her [God the Mother]

creative, maternal love is the generating matrix of the universe, matter, spirit, and embodied spirit alike.”<sup>43)</sup> The creation of life is the starting point of the interrelationship between God and the world.

Jesus, God the Son, proclaims that he himself is the way of life. “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26) His mission is to bring us life and bring it abundantly (John 10:10). Therefore, anyone who shares his life partakes of a new and eternal life.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of life. The bible says the Holy Spirit is the life-giving Spirit of God because She is Yahweh's *ruach*. The New Testament says the indwelling of the Spirit awakens all our senses, permeates the unconscious, and quickens the body, giving it new life (1 Corinth 6:19ff). The Holy Spirit is the energy of life. Therefore, “the full and unreserved ‘yes’ to life, and the full and unreserved love for the living, are the first experiences of God's Spirit, which is not for nothing called *fons vitae*, ‘the well of life.’”<sup>44)</sup> Leonardo Boff defines a Triune God as the absolute living:

God remains in life in an eternal process of irruption, overflowing, self-communication and pure living. So God is best represented as a living, and action eternally “producing” the divine reality, making it manifest, with no need to reply to the question: why live? God lives to live, in absolute

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43) Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 179.

44) Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 97.

spontaneity, in the self-evident meaning of light that shines to shine, clear spring water that gushes to gush, the bird that sings to sing. God is measure that God is eternally living, that is, in an eternal process of self-realization. Eternal life belongs to God.<sup>45)</sup>

God is only one God because God is “Be-ing” itself. Since God is life, God creates all living things. Because God is living, God loves all creatures. Because God is eternal life, God seeks peace and justice. Accordingly, without reference to life, we cannot talk about God. When we long for God, we seek the One who lives forever and ever (Revelation 4:9). On this account, my Trinitarian description of faith starts from the belief that a Triune God is the living One.

Now, three persons in the Trinity are three distinct Livings, and thus each person has his/her own identity. Nonetheless, communion is at the center of divine living, because living is always living with, living for and living through others. The living God is not “a solitary God but a communion in love marked by overflowing life.”<sup>46)</sup> That is, the essential characteristic of each Person is “to be for the others, through the others, with the others and in the others. They do not exist in themselves for themselves: the ‘in themselves’ is ‘for the others.’”<sup>47)</sup> Thus, we can say, “Relationality is the principle that at once constitutes each Trinitarian person as unique and distinguishes one from another.”<sup>48)</sup>

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45) Leonardo Boff, “Trinitarian Community and Social Liberation,” *Cross Currents* 38,3 (Fall 1988) : 292.

46) Johnson, *She Who Is*, 222.

47) Boff, “Trinitarian Community and Social Liberation,” 292.

48) Johnson, *She Who Is*, 216.

We can explain the relationship that forms the Trinitarian communion in terms of “perichoresis.” This term has been used to express “mutual indwelling,” “eternal co-existence,” and “interpenetration” of the divine persons. In the New Testament, Jesus proclaims this fact: “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30); “the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:38). Accordingly, the divine persons exist in each other: the Son in the Father, the Father in the Son, the Spirit in the Father and in the Son. Boff delineates this perichoretic indwelling as follows:

Each person is for the others, with the others and in the others. The everlasting love that pervades them and forms them unites them in a current of life so infinite and complex as to constitute the unity between them. Unity in the Trinity, as been remarked before, is always a union of Persons; it is not something that comes after them, but is simultaneous with them, since they are always one with the others and in the others. The Persons are not the product of the relation of their nature to itself, but are at the origin of the divine nature, being co-eternal and co-equal.<sup>49)</sup>

This perichoretic indwelling points to the fact that three persons are in eternal communion always united and interpenetrating one another. Three beings form the perichoretic communion, and perichoretic communion underlies three persons. As LaCugna summarizes rightly, “neither division nor inequality nor hierarchy in the trinity; the highest possible expression of love and freedom; divine life characterized by self-giving and self-receiving; dynamic and fecund.”<sup>50)</sup> This perichoretic

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49) Boff, “Trinitarian Community and Social Liberation,” 301.

communion is an example of divine “woori” community.

What does the perichoretic community mean to us? Jesus prays to God, “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). This means that our Christ wants us to form a perichoretic community, a woori community, because Christian community, LaCugna argues, is supposed to be “an icon of God’s triune life.”<sup>51)</sup> How is this kind of community possible? By jeong [love] and practicing jeong by mom [body]. Why? “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16). For whoever loves others can abide in love in communion with the Triune God.

From the above description, a Trinitarian *woori* faith confesses: (1) a Triune God is the living One. (2) Three persons in the Trinity forms communion in terms of “self-sharing, other-regarding, community-forming love.”<sup>52)</sup> (3) A triune God is presence in the world, and invites all creatures into God’s life and communion of love. (4) This kind of Trinitarian *woori* faith is socially responsible since a triune God engages with seeking justice and peace in the world from the perspective of life and love. Paradoxically speaking, my Trinitarian description of *woori* faith can be called a Trinitarian monotheism. This is monotheism

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50) Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us: The Trinity,” Ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993), 106.

51) *Ibid.*

52) Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 64.

in that it shares Niebuhr's affirmation of the One beyond many, and also Trinitarian because it sees the One in the form of the Trinity.<sup>53)</sup> I believe that a Trinitarian *woori* faith I have described can be an alternate faith to the Koran blessing-oriented faith.

## V. Concluding Remarks

Kyoung-Jae Kim, a Korean Presbyterian theologian, analyzes four essential problems that the contemporary Korean church has faced:<sup>54)</sup> (1) the Korean Christianity has been a Baalism, which is a religion that seeks fecundity, power, abundance, and prosperity. Like Baalism, the Korean church has sided with the logic of capitalism while it has lost its social accountability. (2) The Korean Christianity has become a temple religion, which consecrates the Church as the holy temple, and then incarcerates God the Holy One in the temple. (3) The Korean Christianity has become an ascent religion which directs only toward the heaven, while denies body, nature, time, worldliness, and historicity. (4) The Korean Christianity has become the idolized religion

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53) I think that Niebuhr's radical monotheism implies a kind of Trinitarian perspective. In "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," he argues that for the ecumenical movement of the church, we need to formulate an inclusive doctrine of the Trinity. Niebuhr writes: "A doctrine of the Trinity, so formulated, will never please any one part of the Church but it will be an ecumenical doctrine providing not for the exclusion of heretics but for their inclusion in the body on which they are actually dependent." H. Richard Niebuhr, ed. William Stacy Johnson, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996), 62.

54) Kyoung-Jae Kim, "The Present Situation of the Korean Christianity and the Civilization of the Northeastern Asia." <http://soombat.org/www/CrazyWWWBoard.cgi?db=article&mode=read&num=92&page=1&ftype=6&fval=&backdepth=1>

which indulges in the eternal presence in “here and now.”

Then, Kim suggests four alternate directions for which the Korean Christianity should head for the future: (1) Korean Christianity should be a prophetic religion, which tries to realize the shalom community in which justice and love go together. (2) The Korean Christianity must direct toward a cosmic open religion, which sees the human body as the temple of God. This is based on Paul’s preaching in Athens: “The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands... though indeed he [God] is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being...” (Acts18:22-8). (3) The Korean Christianity must be a descent religion, which reflects the incarnation of the divine. This implies the creative self-transcendence by which the divine, the eternal, and the spiritual both take and transcend the human, the temporal, and the material. (4) The Korean Christianity must be a reformative community, which sees a new heaven and a new earth and then gives the world hope, while reveals the disparities of here and now.

Kim’s analysis and suggestion correspond to my discussion about two forms of faith. The blessing-centered faith has a capitalistic, church-centered, ascendant, and presence-oriented character. On the other hand, the woori faith has a prophetic, cosmic, ascendant, and future-oriented character. I think that the Korean church needs to turn from its capitalistic blessing-centered faith to the alternative like a Trinitarian woori faith. Now is the time for the Korean church to listen to the Reformed tradition: “*Reformata Reformandum!*”



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• ABSTRACT •

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## Beyond the Korean Blessing-oriented Faith with the Help of H. Richard Niebuhr's Perspective

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This paper aims to critically deal with the Korean blessing-centered faith with the help of H. Richard Niebuhr's theology and ethics. To this end, it discusses the following points. First, the paper analyses the basic points of Niebuhr's theology and ethics, (1) For Niebuhr, faith is social because faith is present in the relations between the self, others, and God, (2) A true faith is a monotheistic faith which affirms that God is the One beyond the many and whatever is, is good because all have their being in the One God, (3) A true monotheistic faith implies the universal ethic of responsibility and love. Second, the paper critically describes the characteristics of the Korean blessing-oriented faith. The Korean blessing-centered faith emphasizes this-worldly material success and the dualistic value-system. It comes to the following extreme conclusion: success is blessing, and failure is curse. From Niebuhr's perspective, its result is the individualized faith, and the church's indifference in its social responsibility. Last, the paper suggests the *woori* form of faith as an alternative to the Korean blessing-oriented faith. Specifically, the paper constructs the *woori* form of faith based on the social theory of the trinity. The basic idea is that three persons in the Trinity forms the community of *woori*, and a triune God is always in, with, and for *woori* or us. To conclude, the Trinitarian *woori* form of faith confesses: (1) a Triune God is the living One. (2) Three persons in the Trinity forms communion in terms of "self-sharing, other-regarding, community-forming love." (3) A triune God is presence in the world, and invites all creatures into God's life and communion of love. (4) Trinitarian *woori* faith is socially responsible because a triune God engages with seeking justice and peace in the world from the perspective of life and love.

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**Key words:** H, Richard Niebuhr, Blessing-oriented faith, *Woori* form of faith,  
Trinity

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