

Assessing the Nexus between Shamanism and Protestantism in South Korea

Ilmok Kim

Introduction

Korean shamanism, the oldest form of religion in Korea, has been the most powerful religious force dominating Koreans' lives.¹ Most Korean people were exposed to shamanistic beliefs before the coming of all the imported religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. Although shamanism did not have any written canon for its teachings and practices, it has exerted a prominent influence on the imported religions including Protestant Christianity. Shamanism has continued to survive and is currently practiced. Thus, Harvey Cox comments that "shamanism never dies" because "it is just too deeply lodged in the inner recess of the human psyche."²

Scholars have argued that the dramatic growth of Protestantism in South Korea was partly due in part to the way certain practices of the church agreed with those of the shamanistic tradition.³ As the folk religion of Korean people, shamanism is still alive and has flourished into becoming an influential religion. In present day Korea, shamans reach the young

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. William R. Trask (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), 461f.

² Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 255.

³ Andrew Eungi Kim, "Korean Religious Culture and Its Affinity to Christianity: The Rise of Protestant Christianity in South Korea," *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 61, no 2 (2000): 117-133; Dongsoo Kim, "The Healing of *Han* in Korean Pentecostalism," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 15 (October 1999): 123-139.

generations at any place, such as websites, over the telephone, and megamalls. What are the positive aspects of the religious function of shamanism which closely linked with Protestant Christianity? In assessing the nexus between shamanism and Protestantism in South Korea, worth considering is how Christians might discover the way to succeed in reaching out people in the postmodern era.

The Shamanistic Concept of God

The main belief system of Korean shamanism is a polytheism that has originated from the animistic worship of spirit beings. Direct communication with the spirits, exorcism and healing of diseases are the major features of shamanism.¹ Within Korean's shamanistic pantheon there developed a concept of a hierarchy of the gods.² Above all the spirits stood one supreme ruler named *Hananim*. *Hananim* was worshiped as the celestial god of the heavenly kingdom.³

Hananim is the highest deity in the religious culture of Korea from the primitive times and every Korean knows and believes in the existence and power of him. To Koreans, *Hananim* meant the highest and unique God. This concept communicated the image of the Christian God as a deity who govern the universe and control the lives of people through the powers entrusted to lesser gods, ranked according to their functions.⁴ Thus, recognizing that the Christian absolute God has a cultural equivalent to the concept of God which already in Korean religious culture, many Koreans accepted Christianity without difficulties of understanding the Christian God in the time of Protestant mission.⁵

The term of *Hananim* (one supreme god over many spirits) in Korean shamanism played the role of a hermeneutic bridge in understanding the traditional religious, cultural concept of God into the Christian one.⁶ *Hananim* became a point of contact between Korean religious culture and

¹ Jung Han Kim, "Christianity and Korean Culture: The Reasons for the Success of Christianity in Korea," *Exchange*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2004): 134.

² Chung Tae-wi (David Chung), "Hanguk sahoe-ui chonggyo-chok honhapchui" (Religious Syncretisms in Korean Society), *Sasanggye*, vol. 8, no. 3 (March 1960), 208.

³ Spencer J. Palmer, *Korea and Christianity: The Problem of Identification with Tradition* (Seoul: Hollym Corporation, 1967), 208.

⁴ Heung Yoon Jo, *Hangukui Mu* [Shamanism of Korea] (Seoul: Jungeumsa, 1983), 94-103.

⁵ Jung Han Kim, 143.

⁶ Robertson Scott, "Warring Mentalities in the Far East," *Asia* 20 (1920), 699; quoted in Jung Han Kim, 144.

the imported faith, thereby allowing for a smooth transition from the nature concept of God to that of the Christian image.¹ It helped Korean people to accept with little reservation the notion of Christian God and His heavenly world.

The earlier Protestant missionaries perceived that “the concept of Hananim has monotheistic implications that are unique to Korean shamanism.”² They appreciated *Hananim* as a distinctive Korean deity suited to their own image of God and identified him with the biblical God.³ Palmer contended that “As a personal transcendent God, clearly the supreme deity of the Korean people, *Hananim* was uniquely suited to prepare the Korean people for belief in the Christian God.”⁴ Consequently, the term *Hananim* was officially adopted by Korean Protestant churches in 1912.⁵

As such, the concept *Hananim*, which had its origin in Korean culture, was prominent in making a success of the communication of the Christian concept of God. Thus, regarding the remarkable growth of Protestantism in South Korea, Ruth A. Tucker claims, “One of the reasons for this may have been the Protestants’ use of the Korean term *Hananim* for God.”⁶ Hence, it is convincing that the concept of *Hananim* has functioned positively for the Protestant church’s mission and growth in South Korea.

However, the concept of *Hananim* in Korean shamanism is not to be identified with Christian God in Scripture. Christian God focuses on individuals and personal relationships, while shamanic god is impersonal. The traditional concept of *Hananim* neither contains the element of trinity, nor seems to be much concerned with the idea of sin or justice. As Charles A. Clark observes, “As to [the] ideas of sin and questions of morality, shamanism does not seem to have been very much exercised.”⁷ Whereas the shamanistic gods have no relationship with the dimension of ethics, the

¹ Andrew Eungi Kim, 123.

² Ung Kyu Pak, *Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church*. Asian Thought and Culture, v. 50 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 23.

³ James Huntley Grayson, *Early Buddhism and Christianity in Korea: A Study in the Emplantation of Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 137; Sung-Deuk Oak, “Healing and Exorcism: Christian Encounters with Shamanism in Early Modern Korea” *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 69, no. 1 (2010): 109.

⁴ Palmer, 16.

⁵ David Chung and Kang-nam Oh, *Syncretism: The Religious Context of Christian Beginnings in Korea*. SUNY Series in Korean Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 178.

⁶ Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Iran Jaya* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 455.

⁷ Charles Allen Clark, *Religions of Old Korea* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1932), 196.

Christian God emphasizes personal relationship and challenges human beings ethically.

Thus, Korean Protestant Christianity has to wash away the shamanistic residues that have remained in the concept of *Hananim*. The concept of a triune God should become indigenous in Korean culture.¹ Therefore, the Christian God should not be distorted as shamanic god in order for humans to receive blessings. Instead, humans are called to communicate with and follow God.

Search for Present Prosperity

In the worldview of Korean shamanism, a human being is an integral part of the rhythm of nature.² Chu-kun Chang asserts that, “Man is so closely intertwined with the terrestrial forces of nature, in fact, man without nature would be impossible and nature without man inconceivably irrelevant. Man lives in and with nature, and has with it a relationship which is neither amicable nor antagonistic.”³ Korean shamanism embraces all elements of difference and centers on “the condition of being fully human” in which human beings actualize their full human potential in relationship with other creatures, nature, even the dead and spiritual being.⁴

The shamanistic ritual (*gut* in Korean) has acted as a harmonizing principle among all these relationship. *Gut* is an attempt to bring about reconciliation between human beings and spirit beings while exorcism is the center of this ritual.⁵ Many kinds of *gut* have been held when disasters happen, such as diseases, family problems, and natural calamities. The *gut* concentrated on resolving *han* (“wounded heart”⁶) of the ordinary people by

¹ Jung Han Kim, 149.

² Pyong-choon Hahm, “Shamanism and the Korean World-View,” *Shamanism: The Spirit World of Korea*, ed. Richard W.I. Guisso and Chai-shin Yu (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1988), 61.

³ Chu-kun Chang, “An Introduction to Korean Shamanism,” trans. Young-sik Yoo. *Shamanism: The Spirit World of Korea*, ed. Richard W.I. Guisso and Chai-shin Yu (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1988), 51.

⁴ Jeong-sook Kim, “Humanization and Divinization: The Theological Dimension of Salvation as Revealed in Korean Shamanism,” *Asia Journal of Theology*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2004): 72.

⁵ Soo-Young Kwon, “How Do Korean Rituals Heal? Healing of Han as Cognitive Property,” *The Journal of Pastoral Theology*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 31-45.

⁶ Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 20.

exorcising evil spirits and finally by proclaiming material blessings. Thus, Korean shamanism has catered this-worldly blessings to Koreans.

As such, *gut* focuses on this-world which is always concerned with the human beings.¹ Unlike other religions which emphasize on another world beyond death, shamanism emphasizes this world in which urgent needs in life are at hand. Such an emphasis on the fulfillment of material wishes as well as providing instantaneous practical solution to one's problems in this world are the appealing features of this folk religion. The emphasis on this-worldly practical solution jackpot aspect of Korean shamanism functioned as an advantage of Christian mission. A rapidly growing interest in both physical health and material abundance here and now, a salient undercurrent of Koreans' religious beliefs, was also emphasized in Korean Protestantism.²

As like shamanism, Korean charismatic mega-church appealed to many ordinary people focusing on present material prosperity. Especially Korean Pentecostalism succeeded because it combined Christianity with what Harvey Cox calls "huge chunks of indigenous Korean shamanism."³ Boo-Woong Yoo asks, "Why the ordinary people, particularly women, go to shamans?" They go "because they need health, wealth, and success in their life ventures. Dr. Cho[ex-senior pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church]'s preaching meets exactly those needs. . . Rev. Cho's preaching satisfies the needs of the majority of the Korean people."⁴

Whether this is conscious syncretism or the influence of the "aura" of shamanism is debatable. However, Korean Pentecostal leaders deny that there is any admixture of shamanism in their Pentecostalism. Yet a senior pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, Young Hoon Lee, points out that shamanism influenced Korean Christianity and its "emphasis on the present and on material blessings" made these major concerns for Korean Christianity.⁵ One of the major points of contact between shamanism and Protestantism was a kind of power encounter in healing and exorcism.⁶ By this, Protestant Christianity in South Korea shares a similarity of features with shamanism.

However, believers in shamanism are merely interested in enjoying every present moment of their lives and sitting around waiting for a stroke of good

¹ Hahm, 60.

² Andrew Eungi Kim, 129-130.

³ Cox, 222.

⁴ Boo-Woong Yoo, "Response to Korean Shamanism by the Pentecostal Church," *International Review of Mission* 297 (1985): 73-74.

⁵ Young Hoon Lee, "The Holy Spirit Movement in Korea: Its Historical and Doctrinal Development." Ph.D. diss. (Temple University, 1996), 19-20, 25.

⁶ Oak, 96.

fortune, instead of planning and preparing for the future by themselves.¹ Shamanists in Korea are preoccupied with seeking simply earthly blessing. This sheer realism brings an immediate fulfillment of their material needs. In the practice of shamanism, people cannot receive the blessings without fear and must have *mudang* (female shaman) and *gut* ritual. In the practice of shamanism, people have to appease gods. Shamanic way to receive blessings is to meet the requirements that a shaman demands. The blessings from shamanism are temporary.

From the Christian perspective, blessings are freely given through the covenant with God. Hiebert delineates the source of blessing as follows: “The fertility of women, livestock, and fields was promised to those who kept God’s covenant and observed his precepts” (Deut. 28:1-14).² In this regard, shamanic blessing has nothing to do with the covenant of God. And it is argued that the biblical concept of God’s blessing of humankind became distorted within some Korean (Pentecostal) churches. In non-Pentecostal circles, there has been ongoing debate on whether the Pentecostal church was influenced by Korean shamanism.³

Korean shamanism tends to focus on recreational hedonism. This is evident in the entertaining function of *gut*.⁴ In shamanism, one’s destiny or fate is controlled, not by one’s own decision, but by supernatural powers. This easily descends into fatalism, and such fatalism brings a focus on temporal pleasure and amusement.⁵ Such hedonistic attitude leads people to pray for the fulfillment of earthly desires. George Heber Jones (1867-1919), an early Protestant missionary, criticized shamanism’s lack of strict morality.

¹ Yong Joon Choi, *Dialogue and Antithesis: A Philosophical Study on the Significance of Herman Dooyeweerd’s Transcendental Critique*. Hermit Kingdom Studies in History and Religion 2 (Philadelphia: The Hermit Kingdom Press, 2006), 270.

² Paul Shaw Hiebert, R. Dannel and TiTe Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 136.

³ For the debate, see Yoo, 70-74; Bong-Ho Son, “Some Dangers of Rapid Growth,” in *Korean Church Growth Explosion: Centennial of the Protestant Church (1884-1984)*, eds. Ro and Nelson (Seoul: Word of Life Press, 1983), 333-337; Kyoko Fuchigami, “Faith Healing in Korean Christianity: The Christian Church in Korea and Shamanism,” *Bulletin of Nanzan Institute* 16 (1992): 33-59; Cox, 1995, chapter 12; Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 99-105.

⁴ Pak, 31.

⁵ Dong Shik Ryu, *Han’guk Mukyoui Yoksawa Gujo [The History and Structure of Korean Shamanism]*, 2d ed (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1978), 345-346.

He indicated that Buddhism accepted Confucian ethics and while absorbing shamanism. In turn, shamanism freely accepted the transcendental objects of Confucianism and Buddhism. What was lacking in shamanism was the ethical dimension.¹ Thus, Korean shamanism has not left much significant historical and cultural heritage. Therefore, Korean Protestantism is supposed to emphasize the blessings based on the covenant with God.

Healing and Exorcism

One dominant character of Korean shamanism is female leadership. While the main figures in other religions are mostly males, shamanism stands as the one symbol of female authority. Joan Halifax, an anthropologist who observed Korean shamans, has stated that “the most numerous and spiritually powerful shamans in Korea are female possession trancers, called *mudang*.”² The *mudang* has a priestly function in Korean society.³ She is believed to have the power to mediate between human beings and a spirit-god. She is an intermediary who can link the living with the spiritual world where the dead reside, solving conflicts between the living and the dead.

The priestly function of the shaman as a mediator between gods and human beings helped Koreans to easily accept the idea of a Savior who came to this world to intercede between God and human beings. When the *mudang* performed *gut* to heal and liberate people from their disease and *han*, Koreans could understand the parallelism that Jesus came to this world to heal and liberate the sick and the oppressed (Luke 4:18). *Gut* has both curative and exorcising functions. And disease-curing and exorcising of evil spirits are the most important functions of *mudangs*.

Christian accounts of the miraculous power of Jesus Christ correlate well with the indigenous folk belief in the magical power. This element of enchantment proved to be eminently favorable to the spread of Christianity in South Korea.⁴ The emphasis of faith-healing in the sermons was paralleled by Korean Protestants’ widespread belief in miracles of healing. Thus, Kyoko Fuchigami maintains that the immediate cause of the rapid growth of the Korean church was “the healing activity of Korean Christian ministers” influenced by Korean shamanism.⁵

¹ Oak, 105.

² Joan Halifax, *The Wounded Healer Shaman* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 84.

³ Cf. Dong Shik Ryu, *Han’guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity]* (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea 1965), 15-30.

⁴ Andrew Eungi Kim, 125-126.

⁵ Fuchigami, 34.

Although some roles of a *mudang* as a mediator appear similar to Jesus' role, they are substantially different. Jesus, the Son of God, offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for freeing humanity from the bondage of sin and gave people freedom from sin. The *mudangs*, however, cannot crucify themselves for other's sins. They are incapable of providing eternal life. Thus, they need to meet the true Mediator, Jesus Christ, who intervenes between God and humans. Jesus the Mediator pays the debts for human sins against God and leads humans to reconciliation with God.¹ Therefore, Christians need to help shamanists be informed that Jesus is the Shaman (the Mediator) for our sins, salvation and blessing.

Shamanistic Faith

The shamanistic faith, as a religious-cultural basis, played a role in the pre-understanding of Koreans so that they easily believed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought by Protestantism. Also, shamanistic faith exercised the most powerful religious power on suffering Koreans due to foreign invasion, poverty and diseases, making efforts to fulfill secular wishes such as real desire, escaping misfortune, longevity, health, giving birth to a boy.²

Especially the shamanistic faith provided for Korean Christians the enthusiasm for their mission engagement. Jones understood that because Koreans had a tendency to spiritualize all natural things and had a sense of dependence on an existence superior to themselves, they were incredibly religious. Jones appreciated this spirituality of Korean shamanism, which was able to pave the way for the Christian idea of divine-human communion.³

Shin Ahn, professor of religious studies at Seoul National University, has provided insight into the relationship between Korean spirituality and Christian mission. Ahn argues that the mission spirituality in Korean Christian draws deeply from the spiritual roots of Korean shamanistic culture. He claims that traditional Korean spirituality energized Christian Korean mission and this has now taken on Korean forms such as early morning

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1998), 50.

² Keith Howard (ed.), *Korea Shamanism: Revivals, Survivals and Change* (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 1998).

³ George Herber Jones, "The spirit worship of the Koreans," *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2 (1901), 37-41; idem., "The native religions," *Korea Mission Field*, 4 (January 1908), 11; cited in Oak, 105.

prayer and all-night prayer. No one can doubt the impact of Korean mission activity globally in recent years.¹

It is true that shamanistic faith provided Koreans with the important pre-understanding to help the Gospel to be communicated easily into the mind of Koreans. However, Protestant Christianity needs to understand that the shamanistic faith has lacked the concrete practice in overcoming affliction, suffering and disasters. Thus, Korean Christianity has to transform the shamanistic faith into a mature, Christian one. Mature faith is to believe in God alike of adversity and prosperity. In the postmodern era we need a spirit of sharing with those who have less, and need a spirit of giving and of serving others.²

Conclusion

After one century of missions, the membership of the Protestant Christianity in South Korea constitutes 20% of the population of the country. Considering that there are only 2% Christians among the population of Asia, the success story with growth of Korean Protestant Christianity is remarkable. One of the reasons for the success of Korean Church is that the Church has adjusted to traditional religious-cultural circumstances and transformed the culture through moderation and adaption, though having also certain conflicts with it.³

Korean society faces religious pluralism and postmodernism, in addition to facing an invisible force of shamanistic influence on future generation. Thus, positive aspects of the religious function of shamanism should be reevaluated and reemphasized. Instead of standing against shamanism, Protestant Christianity needs to have tolerant spirit towards the role of the traditional religions. We have to engage in fellowship with them and practice the Great Commandment (John 13:34, 35). In spite of the explicit flaws and heretical elements, we should adopt its positive parallel aspects of Protestant Church and keep shamanism's indigenous forms with Christian truth. As Hunter suggests, one cannot destroy indigenous forms, but one can put the foreign meaning of Christianity into the indigenous form.⁴ Therefore, overcoming the negative elements of Korean shamanism, as well as keeping its positive aspects, is one of the challenges that Korean Protestant Christianity faces today to build an effective mission strategy.

¹ Ahn, Shin. (2009). "Korean Spirituality: Christian Presence Among World Religions," Paper submitted to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 9, available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

² Jung Han Kim, 149.

³ Ibid., 132.

⁴ George Hunter, *Radical Outreach* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 84.

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ABSTRACT—Korean shamanism has been in existence since the beginning of Korean history. Shamanism--a form of belief common to all tribes ranging throughout north-east Asia, Mongolia and Siberia--became the most prominent religious force dominating Koreans' lives. It is believed that certain characteristics of Korean shamanism have played both positive and negative roles in relationship to Protestant Christian mission and ministry in South Korea. The shamanistic concept of God, *Hananim* was helpful bridge to Protestant Christianity and helped Korean people accept the notion of Christian God. The search for present prosperity of Korean shamanism has functioned as a catalyst to spread the Gospel especially in Korean charismatic mega-churches. The function of shaman, as a mediator between gods and human beings helped Koreans understand Jesus as our Mediator with ease. Also, traditional shamanistic faith energized Christian mission remarkably. On the other hand, the concept of god in shamanism has no precise idea of trinity and redemption. The shaman is merely human being, thus needs to know the true Shaman (the Mediator) Jesus Christ. Korean shamanism also tends to lead people to fatalism, and focuses on temporal pleasure and amusement. Shamanistic faith should be transformed into a Christian one. Thus, keeping shamanism's positive parallel concepts of Protestant church and its indigenous forms with Christian truth, we should overcome its heretical beliefs and negative elements. Christian gospel needs to be contextualized into Korean shamanistic culture and transform the culture with the transforming power of the gospel.

Keywords: Shamanism, Hananim, gut, mudang, Korean Protestantism