

Religion Helps and Religion Hinders: the Psychological Functions of Religion

Hee Sun Kim*

Abstract

In this article, I would like to see how a religion function one's mind. In order to do so, I will begin with reviewing Freud and Kohut's thoughts on religion. Although their emphasis on the function of religion would be different, it can be said that the religion affects people's minds both positively and negatively. Religious addiction can be an example of a negative side of religion; religion has a positive function in that it gives hope and comfort to human beings. Having said that, I wonder how religion would function in the psyche of Korean Christian women when facing domestic violence by their husbands; how religion would work for them in order to make some pastoral implication from Korean context and seek some alternative pastoral theological suggestions. Like the double bind functions of religion, religious concerns can become roadblocks or healing resources for those dealing with experiences of domestic

<https://doi.org/10.58302/madang.2022..38.129>

* Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Pastoral Counseling, Hanshin Theological Seminary, Seoul, Korea.

violence. If religion has both positive and negative functions for women experiencing violence, the purpose of this article is to enhance the positive functions and prevent the harmful functions by providing some alternatives. As an example, I introduce the theology of the cross. The symbol of the cross can be harmful when it could become a pressure for Christian women to endure their suffering. However, if it could show the way to the resurrection of women by overcoming violence, it could be a theology that saves many Korean Christian women suffering abuse.

• Keywords

Freud, Kohut, The functions of religion, Violence against Korean women, Functional autonomy of motivation

I. Introduction: Psychology of Religion

Why do people need a religion? How does religion work in people's mind? Most immediately, human beings strive to be happy and their behavior is determined by "pleasure principle," according to Freud. But the possibilities for happiness and pleasure are limited, and often people experience unhappiness. Therefore, people employ various strategies to avoid displeasures. Religion can be a simple path to happiness—or not.

In this article, I would like to begin with reviewing Freud and Kohut's thoughts on religion, and make some pastoral implication from Korean context in relation to the psychological functions of religion. Let's begin with Freud.

1. Freud on religion

Sigmund Freud saw religions themselves as sets of illusions, belief that characterizes the infantile or regressive stage of narcissism. For Freud, religion was a wishful illusion, the obsessional neurosis of humankind: people adhere to religious illusions because of the wishful thinking out of the omnipotence of thought. Freud's whole purpose was to unmask the illusionary nature of religious beliefs because he thought that their deeper understanding was merely projections from their own early experience of infantile helplessness. Freud asserted:

They are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the

terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization.¹

In explaining what he meant by religion as illusion, he says that illusions are not necessarily an error or delusion. For example, Columbus thought that he discovered a new sea-route to the Indies. That is illusion. The characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes.² While delusion means false or is in contrary to reality, illusions need not necessarily be false. Thus, people call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation. He claimed, “We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be.”³ He continued:

A personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father. ..Thus we recognize that the roots of the

1 Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Garden City, New York, 1927/1964), 47.

2 Ibid., 48.

3 Ibid., 49- 53.

need for religion are in the parental complex; the almighty and just God, and kindly Nature, appear to us as grand sublimations of father and mother, or rather as revivals and restorations of the young children's ideas of them.⁴

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, human beings are governed by the pleasure principle; the pleasure principle is satisfied by the instincts.⁵ Therefore, Freud argued religion helps a civilization because religion has tamed asocial instincts of human beings and created a sense of community around a shared set of beliefs.⁶ Freud stated:

But man's helplessness remains and along with it his longing for his father, and the gods. The gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcise the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common had imposed on them.⁷

Therefore, the function of the superego in society is to keep the course of social development ("civilization"), repressing the instincts of individuals. To Freud, every civilization must be built up on this coercion of the social superego toward the renunciation of instinct. Therefore, "civilization" represents the unfolding of superego demands through history that

4 Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 15.

5 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1930/1961), 21.

6 Ibid., 41-42.

7 Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 17-18.

contributes “neurosis” to social mentality. As a result, it provokes the “neurotics” to react with asocial behavior against the frustrations. The necessity of religion is “to lessen the burden of the instinctual sacrifices imposed on men, to reconcile men to those which must necessarily remain and to provide a compensation for them.”⁸

One of his main contentions is that civilization is responsible for our misery: we organize ourselves into civilized society to escape suffering. Thus, religious ideas are teaching, not products of reason or experience, according to Freud; they are illusions, wish-fulfillments that respond to the oldest, strongest of human desires and need. They answer to the terrifying sense of helplessness in childhood. Yet at the same time organized religion also demands an enormous psychological cost to the individual by making a person perpetually subordinate to the primal father figure which is embodied by God, an all-powerful and lovingly protective father. In *Future of an Illusion*, Freud lamented the common human’s preoccupation with the “enormously exalted father” embodied by God. Freud argued that our inherent fear of the dangers of life gave birth to our belief in the benevolent rule of divine Providence. For Freud, formation of the God representation happens in relation to the boy’s experiences of the father (primeval father and actual father) and through the resolution of the oedipal conflict. Freud takes for granted that all nonbelievers are mature people who have renounced their infantile wishes.⁹ Freud assigned religious experience to the repressed unconscious, seeing it as part of

8 Ibid., 13.

9 Dongki Kim, *Psychological Understanding of Religious Behavior* (Hakjisa, 2013), 468-469.

one's obsessional neurosis.

Kohut, in contrast, does not see religion as a childish and neurotic level of development. Indeed, for Self psychology, religion is a highly valuable product of one's mature and creative self. Religion is an expression of mature and transformed narcissism.¹⁰

2. Kohut on religion

The primary materials about Kohut's view on religion are provided by two authors: Charles Strozier wrote a biography entitled *Heinz Kohut*, and Robert L. Randall, a young theologian at the time, did an interview with Kohut in 1981.

In describing Kohut's view on religion, Strozier notes that Kohut had always been interested in religion, though he never wrote on the subject. Strozier gives information about Kohut's religious life. At a personal level, Kohut regularly attended the Unitarian Church in Hyde Park, near his home.¹¹ He became a friend of its minister and even at times had to chance to speak to the congregation. He read *Christian Century* for years and seemed particularly concerned with the application of his ideas to pastoral counseling.¹²

When Kohut lays out three great enterprises: science, art, and religion, he says, "Science deals with cognitive issues, with explanation. Art deals with beauty, creating beautiful things, pleasing things. And religion is neither the one nor the other."

10 Robert Randall, "The Nature of Religion within the Framework of Self Psychology," *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry*, Vol. 5 (1982), 127.

11 Charles B. Strozier, *Heinz Kohut: the Making of a Psychoanalyst* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 327.

12 Charles B. Strozier, "Heinz Kohut's Struggles with Religion, Ethnicity, and God," in *Religion, Society, and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Donald Capps and Janet L. Jacobs (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1997), 166.

Religion's unique function is to "shore up, to hold together, sustain, to make harmonious, to strengthen, [man]'s self."¹³ Religion's function is to provide the experiential chances and images for the broadening and the uplifting of one's self in this here-and-now world.

Unlike Freud, Kohut grants God and tries to appreciate psychological relation to God. Kohut recognizes that religion could serve any of the selfobject functions he had described. Religion can meet specific human needs: idealization, mirroring, and twinship. Religion supports an "idealizing self object" need. Let's imagine a baby's first encounters with the mother. That baby is frightened and fragmented. The mother is calm, big, and powerful. Uplifted, we merge into the mother's greatness and calmness. In religion, one searches for a sense of uplifting and healing from that fragmentation.

People seek religion because they think that there must be something idealizeable, something almost perfect, and something that one wants to live up to. Strozier describes it as:

Some find it soothing to go into a church and sit there. Others might experience a similar kind of healing in a more abstracted spiritual form, such as climbing to the top of a mountain or looking down into the Grand Canyon or walking in the woods. Still others find uplift in listening to beautiful music. But whatever the form, such spiritual uplift is a central part of how we understand the role of religion in our lives.¹⁴

13 Strozier, *Heinz Kohut*, 328.

14 *Ibid.*, 229.

Religion also meets mirroring needs through the idea that “there is something given to you, some innate perception of your right to be here and to assert yourself and that somebody will smile at you and will respond to you and will be in turn with your worthwhileness.”¹⁵ In this regard, Kohut’s relational structure of the psyche has much in common with a theological framework since Genesis asserts that the human being is not only created by God, but is a reflection of the Divine image. The spark of God’s own life lies at the center of our being. We are the precious delight and special concern of our creator. The original status of humans as created in the very image of God, unique and precious in God’s sight, is akin to the infants’ experience of “I am Perfect.” At the depths of our selves we find the image of God. It can also be the ultimate source of all human’s self-esteem, ambition and confidence. Through religion, we may fulfill that need of a “sense of innate greatness” mirrored back. God’s mirroring love is available for us to mirror our needs and to heal our wounds.

The third specific selfobject need being met in religion is what Kohut calls twinship. Kohut feels that we often search our “others” —as selfobjects—bearing some resemblance to us. Kohut offers the definition of a twinship selfobject as “a selfobject that will make itself available for the reassuring experience of essential likeness.”¹⁶ It is an experience of belonging, based on a feeling of likeness. Religion can meet this twinship need. Kohut feels religion satisfies this need in the church, especially in one’s participation in the congregation.

15 Ibid., 332.

16 Heinz Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?*, ed. Arnold Goldberg (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 193.

Religion is both a solitary and a communal experience. Much of what religion does in meeting idealizing and mirroring needs is solitary. But meeting twinship need is communal. Church surrounds you with worshipers like yourself who have made common faith commitments and shared familiar liturgy. You return to this place and sing the same songs and listen together to the sermons. Within the sacred place, you become more like one of the people sitting together. The human bonds deepen in this circle of reflected sameness.¹⁷

Lallene Rector articulates that the concept of incarnation is also directly related to twinship needs. God takes on a human form, becomes like, and knows what human beings experience. In each of these theologies—black theology, womanist theology, mujerista theology and Korean *minjung* theology—there is an appeal to a human messiah figure who is alike in color, race, experience, and/or gender. People in these groups may develop an enhanced sense of well-being based on the experience of likeness. They also are able to share painful feelings of being marginalized and may feel encouraged to participate in the larger religious community by virtue of this feeling of belonging.¹⁸

Through idealization, mirroring, and twinship, religion meets the deepest needs of the self within these three realms. In summary, Kohut suggests that religion may have the capacity

17 Strozier, *Heinz Kohut*, 333.

18 Lallene J. Rector, "Developmental Aspects of the Twinship Selfobject Need and Religious Experience," in *How Responsive Should We Be?: Progress in Self Psychology*, Vol. 16, ed., Arnold Goldberg (The Analytic Press, 2000), 270.

to meet our deepest needs for idealization, our needs to be both soothed and inspired. Religion meets our mirroring needs by a benevolent relationship with God and us, and it meets out twinship needs in sharing similarities through particular theologies or worship among us.

By understanding religion in this way, Kohut is also able to retain his positive orientation toward it. Kohut sees the essence of religion as assisting persons to live their lives through higher values and deeper meanings, and the goal of Christianity as helping humans broaden their empathy for others.¹⁹ Religion, therefore, is a “support” for humans, but it maybe not the means for “salvation” for Kohut. In addition, religion does not really “cure” but inspire and encourage the maintenance of “self-cohesion.”²⁰ Religion does not begin or end with God since Kohut is not inclined to understand the essence of religion as a relationship with the Absolute, but the very “self” itself. Kohut says:

I don't think I could honestly say that religion is one of my foremost preoccupations,” [but since] I'm interested in human beings and their preoccupations, in what makes them tick, what's important to them, and what's on their minds, obviously religion is a powerful force in life. It has been an essential aspect of human existence as long as there has been any knowledge of human activity at all. So naturally, I'm interested in it as a student of people.²¹

19 Randall, Robert. “The Nature of Religion Within the Framework of Self Psychology.” *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry*. Vol. 5. (1982), 122.

20 Ibid., 124.

21 Strozier, “Heinz Kohut's Struggles with Religion, Ethnicity, and God,” 166.

The higher goal for Kohut is the survival and fulfillment of humankind. In other words, Kohut's focus is essentially "self-centric" rather than "theo-centric." Religion as the uplifting of humanity focuses on the empirical and experiential level. For him, religion is a creation of human minds. It can be a mature creation, yet it comes from the human's expressive self.²²

Whether a religion is an illusion or the creation of human minds for selfobject's needs, I would go deeper how the religion work in human minds.

II. Religion and Mental Health: Negative and Positive Functions of Religion

1. Negative functions of religion

Through what process do people develop negative thoughts about religion? Various reasons may arise. One may have experienced that some wishes did not come true despite one's earnest prayers. One may have felt disappointment and anger when one saw the unethical wrongdoing of believers or clergy whose religious ideals and real life were inconsistent. Some people may have a negative impression of religion due to the influence of family members being too zealous. In addition, growing up in an environment of blind and receptive beliefs, when a conflict is difficult to be accepted rationally, people may become skeptical of religion.

Nevertheless, it should be extremely careful to distinguish between true and false beliefs. This is because individual and

22 Randall, "The Nature of Religion within the Framework of Self Psychology," 125.

group prejudices can intervene, and the following question can be asked, “Who, by whom, and for whom distinguishes between true and false beliefs?” The purpose of this article is not to judge but to introduce that religion can become pathological when it works unhealthy. Among many, as an example, I introduce religious addiction, which is excessively engrossed in religious activities.

Religion can play a pathological role for people with psychologically vulnerable structures. In this case, religion can paradoxically play a dysfunctional role that shakes the stability of an individual’s life and makes life devastating. This is because, if a person becomes obsessed with religious activities to free himself/herself from neurotic anxiety, one may engage in another strange compulsive behavior under the fear of punishment.²³ Religion can be the only refuge from personal anxiety because the core of religious addiction is an attempt to escape from the unbearable pain and anxiety of life.

Religious addiction is an attempt to escape from the pain of life by obsessively clinging to a specific religious activity. Faith takes a stubborn form and individuals tend to lose their sense of reality and immerse themselves in religion. Religious addiction is tamed by power and control based on absolute and uncritical acceptance of religious authorities.²⁴ The deeper one pays attention to religion, the more one loses one’s realistic self.

Stubborn teachings can lead to guilt and fear, which can lead to hatred and abuse. In doing so, the person becomes more and more dangerously preoccupied with the destructive religion

23 Dongki Kim, *Psychological Understanding of Religious Behavior*, 514-515.

24 Leo Booth, *When God Becomes a Drug: Understanding Religious Addiction & Religious Abuse* (Long Beach: SCP Limited, 1998), 24-25.

that controls one's life, which can harm not only oneself, but also one's family and others. The main symptoms of religious addiction are as following.²⁵

- ▶ Inability to doubt religious authority
- ▶ Black-and-white, simplistic thinking
- ▶ Magical thinking that God will fix everything
- ▶ Rigid and obsessive adherence to rules
- ▶ Non-negotiable judgmental attitude
- ▶ Obsessed with strict and compulsive religious practices
- ▶ Unrealistic financial contributions
- ▶ Believing that physical pleasures are evil
- ▶ Psychosomatic illness such as insomnia, back pain, headaches, and hypertension, etc.
- ▶ Rejection of science and medicine
- ▶ Seeking a state of religious ecstasy
- ▶ Gradual separation from the real world

When it is suspected that a person is showing symptoms of religious addiction, it is necessary to check whether the person's life is devastated by the breakdown and isolation of important human relationships.²⁶ Religious addiction is a disease that needs treatment, and like any other addiction treatment, one has to start by accepting that the person is addicted to religion and then go through the process of getting out of the addictive beliefs.

In the above, I look at religious addiction as an example of the negative functions of religion. Following comes the positive function of religion

25 Ibid., 58-81.

26 Kim, *Psychological Understanding of Religious Behavior*, 514.

2. The positive functions of religion

Gordon Allport, who studied the psychological and religious maturation of individuals, divided human religious orientation into 1)intrinsic and 2)extrinsic orientations. From the point of view of motivation toward religion, intrinsic orientation is the tendency to view religion as an end with internalized religiosity.²⁷ On the contrary, extrinsic orientation is the tendency to view religion as a means to achieve various purposes through religion. In general, religious people with intrinsic religious orientation are likely to be viewed as devout religious people by others, and those with extrinsic religious orientation are likely to be critically evaluated as having other religious activities for different purposes.²⁸ But is it possible to make a sharp distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic pursuit?

From a different angle, people with an intrinsic orientation can become obsessive about their religion and fall into dogmatism that blindly enforces only that religion. In addition, many people who lead a religious life have a rather external orientation toward peace of mind, health and blessings of wealth. In this regard, Allport's research on religious orientation may result in a religious bias that exalts the former and devalues the latter because of the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy. One thing that can be summarized from the study of these religions is that religion should not be considered as a single variable.

Rather, the most important thing in Allport's understanding of religiosity is the concept of 'functional autonomy of motivation.'

27 Gordon Allport, "The Religious Context of Prejudice," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5-3 (1966), 455.

28 Dongki Kim, *Psychological Understanding of Religious Behavior*, 508.

Motivation for human behavior begins with basic needs, but when high-level needs are reached, they are separated from the initial needs and function purely independently. A mature personality with such motive autonomy is 1) an expanded and matured self, 2) the ability to self-objectify, and 3) a unified view of life.²⁹

Allport analyzed the contribution of mature religion to the ability to view life inclusive and integrative, and argued that the sentiment of mature religion is to become ‘functionally independent’ from where it originated. If the motive of human religious life is anxiety, fear, or wishing for blessings, this becomes a basic need, but as religiosity matures, it becomes functionally free from those basic needs. Religious motives are autonomously moving towards maturity. Then, leading a mature religious life is related to whether an individual has the characteristics of functional autonomy within the religion.³⁰ In the experience of a religiously mature person, certainty and skepticism about faith do not contradict. Mature religiosity guarantees active autonomy, not fanatical or coercive, with complexity and richness.

Religion is related to a sense of satisfaction and well-being in life within an individual’s psyche. Religion acts as a positive influence on an individual’s psychology as follows. First,

29 Gordon Allport, “The Functional Autonomy of Motives,” In *Understanding human motivation*, eds., C. L. Stacey & M. DeMartino (Howard Allen Publishers, 1958), 69-81.

30 Later scholars suggest a third religious orientation in addition to Allport’s intrinsic-extrinsic religious orientation, which is the quest orientation. The quest orientation includes openness and flexibility. This is because personal religious doubts and incompleteness and uncertainty are valuable. Scholars also refer to the quest orientation as the ‘interactional orientation’ because it seeks to be more open and interactive about various possibilities. See Daniel Batson, “Religion as Prosocial: Agent or Double agent?,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 15(1)(1976):29-45; Daniel Batson, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis. *Religion and the Individual: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

religion provides meaning and purpose in life. If religion can give direction and coherence by providing meaning and purpose in life, it can inspire hope in those who have lost hope. Second, religion offers a healthy lifestyle. Most religions provide moral and ethical guidelines on what to do and not to do in daily life, and the concrete guidelines for living life give believers psychological stability.³¹ Third, religion provides a way to cope with life's pain and adversity. When an individual is faced with pain, religion may give comfort and consolation and the power to overcome it. By participating in religious practices or rituals, including prayer and meditation, believers can experience peace of mind or relieve negative emotions. Fourth, religion provides social support through community. Participating in religious ceremonies or activities and sharing fellowship and service with people of the same religious beliefs can bring satisfaction and a sense of common group identity. This provides the individual with a sense of belonging and meaning as a social existence, and has a positive function of giving well-being and satisfaction to the members to whom it belongs.³² These positive functions of religion would look similar to what Kohut has described earlier.

So far, the effect of religion on psychology was investigated through various psychological approaches to religious phenomena. To sum up, religious feelings can be an expression of a mature person's stable feelings, or they can be extreme anxiety. One can be isolated from the world, or one can share true solidarity with the people. It may manifest as schizophrenia, or it may manifest itself in appropriate language and forms of

31 Kim, *Psychological Understanding of Religious Behavior*, 56-57.

32 Ibid., 489-490

worship.

On the one hand, religion serves as an escape from the anxiety and pain of reality, and has a negative and pathological function that makes people cling to religious practices compulsively and uncritically. On the other hand, religion can promote individuals to reflect on their inner world, and in the process can promote individual psychological maturity and integration. Religiously mature human beings pursue psychological maturity, develop virtues such as love, mercy, and altruism, which are important values of religion, and practice them in their daily lives. In the end, it can be said that a mature and healthy religion plays a positive role in helping people to grow and realize their religious nature in a healthy way. I wonder how this can be applied to Korean Christian women's particular context.

III. The Korean Context: the Functions of Religion and Korean Christian Women

There are many kinds of violence against women in the world. Many women do not worry about violence on the streets, but about violence in their home. It is both tragic and appalling to note that women are more likely to be assaulted in their own homes by someone with whom they have had a trusting, caring relationship than they are to be attacked on the streets. Many women have been abused by their husbands.

Worldwide, nearly one in four women would report experiencing violence by a current or former partner at some point of her life. It can be confirmed through the statistical data

of the ‘Korean Women’s hotline’ announced in 2020. As a result of analyzing domestic violence counseling cases, various types such as emotional violence (67.6%), physical violence (53.7%), economic violence (22.7%), and sexual violence (20.6%) occurred in combination. In addition, according to a survey on domestic violence, 45.6% of cases had never reported, and 85.7% of them showed that they had never asked for outside help at the time or later.³³ The prevalence of domestic violence cannot be accurately measured without taking into consideration the fact of various cultures.

In Korean culture, Christianity and Confucianism play their role in supporting the patriarchal family system and traditional ideology. The preservation of the family structure takes precedence over the safety and well-being of individual family members. When the family is promoted as an untouchable value, “sacred” by Christians, Christian family members will want to keep all injustice and violence that occurs inside the family a secret. Therefore, the high risk exists that religion is used as a means to legitimate power imbalance and inequality in the family that can become very oppressive. If not addressed in some way, at some point, they will inevitably become roadblocks to Christian women’s efforts to resolve the crisis. The outcome depends on how they are handled.

33 Korean Women’s Hotline, http://hotline.or.kr/board_statistics/67398; 2019 Domestic Violence Statistics from Ministry of Gender Equality and Family of Korea <http://www.mogef.go.kr/kor/skin/doc.html?fn=6364a5a5238040a6a681f24d82280650.pdf&rs=/rsfiles/202212/>.

1. Abused Christian women and the psychological functions of religion

*Wife abuse. The Christian home. Two terms that should be mutually exclusive. Tragically, however, they are not.*³⁴

Religious questions in the midst of a crisis can be a primary issue because people try to make sense of what they are experiencing. When faced personally with violence, most people also experience a crisis of meaning in their lives. Basic life questions can be asked in religious terms, questions such as, “Why is this happening to me?” “Why did God let this happen?” “Is this God’s punishment for my past?” or “What meaning does this have for my life?” These questions indicate people’s efforts to make sense of their experiences of suffering.

Christian women’s theological beliefs can have a very powerful effect on their abusive relationships. Religious concerns can become roadblocks or healing resources for those dealing with experiences of domestic violence. On the one hand, many women would reflect that their faith carried them through their sufferings and religion played an important role in overcoming hard times. In this regard, it can be said that religion would play a positive role.

However, some traditional theological beliefs can be very harmful for the Christian women in an abusive relationship. Unfortunately, Christian women often hear: “Keep praying and lift the abuse to the Lord. Just accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Get closer to God through suffering. Be patient, and you will be rewarded. Go to worship services every week. Your

34 James Alsdurf and Phyllis Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989), 16.

husband can be changed by your great faith, Pray harder. Bear your cross like Jesus. Forgive your husband.” Misinterpretation and misuse of religious texts and traditions have often had a damaging effect on Christian women dealing with domestic violence.³⁵

Instead of meeting the appropriate needs of abused women, some may frequently advise the battered woman to return to the violent family in order to keep the sacred Christian family. There are some particular factors such as Christian women tend to stay longer in their abusive marriages due to their faith. In many cases, abused Korean Christian women’s religious convictions lead them to believe that they have to endure their abuse. Some messages Christian women hear at church have a negative effect on them. Women begin to struggle with those negative messages in terms of their faith.³⁶ At this point, as an example, I examine the positive and negative functions of the cross symbol, and try to suggest alternatives.

Women experiencing abuse often think of their situation in the context of a “theology of the cross.” To begin with, the cross can be a symbol of comfort, since it is a visible reminder that God identifies with those who are oppressed and those who suffer.³⁷ In this regard, the suffering God on the cross may give some women solace and hope; religious symbol has a positive function—holding and sustaining.

On the contrary, many Christian women are told that they

35 Marie M. Fortune and Salma Elkadi Abugideiri, “A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence,” in *Domestic Violence: Intersectionality and Culturally Competent Practice*, eds. Lettie Lockhart and Fran Danis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 321.

36 HeeSun Kim, “The Cross-Violence, Compassion and the Resurrection,” *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology*, vol. 23. (2015/6), 112-113.

37 Ibid., 116.

should endure suffering without complaint so they will become Christ-like. The hope is held that their cruel husbands may eventually be converted by this sweet acceptance of cruelty, which reminded them of Christ's suffering. Thus, the cross of Christ has become an exquisite tool for justifying domestic violence and advising women to endure it without complaint. In general, a theology of the cross may glorify suffering enough to convince women to remain in an abusive relationship.³⁸ Contemporary feminist theologies try to address the cross as multivalent symbols—beyond positive and negative. For example, Susan Nelson reads the cross with multiple meanings. She says that “the cross provides a wealth of meanings: –the starkness of death, the suffering of those who lived through it, a sense of abandonment and despair, an experience of comfort/solidarity, a moment of resistance where he managed to hold on to his soul (resurrection), the constant struggle to bear his memories and pain so that they may be redemptive.”³⁹ These expansive feminist interpretations of the cross can provide valuable insights for abused women in integrating their suffering and trauma. Not only from the cross, but also from their situations of abuse, many women can see its complexities and tensions and ultimately they can hope for resurrection in the midst of despair. If various

understandings of the cross can be introduced to abused women, it can be helpful for women to find their ways of

38 Ibid., 111.

39 Susan Nelson, “In Imagining the Cross, in Marit A. Trelstad, ed., *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 180.

“resurrection.”⁴⁰ The resurrection is the new possibility of a new relationship without violence.

Like the symbol of the cross examined above, some traditional values can block many women’s decision making when they are abused by their husbands. Since theological beliefs become an integral part of Christians, these beliefs can be very powerful for Christian women who are in an abusive relationship. The way one interprets the Bible will have a profound impact on how she responds to abuse. Finding new interpretations from the scriptures and challenging the traditional values can liberate women from the bondage of an abusive relationship.⁴¹ Reinterpretations about traditional “harmful” messages about suffering and the cross can be helpful for women to think through and find a way to solve their situation. To summarize, for Korean women in abusive situation, religion helped and also at the same time religion hindered. If religion has both positive and negative functions for women experiencing violence, the purpose of this article is to enhance the positive functions and prevent the harmful functions by providing some alternatives.

Due to the reasons addressed above, in many cases, abused Korean Christian women’s religious convictions lead them to believe that they have to endure their abuse. Thus, they obey,

40 For multiple meanings of the cross, see Susan Nelson, “In Imagining the Cross,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit A. Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 167-180; Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 77..

41 For many Christian women’s prayers for hope, Park argues that many biblical mothers’ prayers can become healing resources for abused women through more careful biblical reinterpretation. HyeKyung Park, “Mothers’ Prayers and Korean Feminist Minjung Theology: The Hermeneutical Encounters among Hannah, Mary, and Lee So Seon,” *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology*. vol.

37. (2022/6), 77; In a similar vein, Kim also provides a postcolonial interpretation about the gentile woman, HeeSun Kim, “The Many Faces of the Gentile Woman: a Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics of Mark 7:24-30,” *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology*. vol. 34. (2020/12).

stay, and suffer in their abusive situation with their strong faith. It seems the Christian church might not be a place for safety and healing for many abused Christian women. In order to bring justice and healing, what can churches do? In short, reexamining and analyzing those texts and traditional values, and providing alternative messages can be a great resource to support many Christian women, while confronting and challenging abuse in the family.

IV. Conclusion: Pastoral Theological Implication

Many women would say that faith helped them greatly and they would have not made it through without faith. Faith helps women sustain their lives, and later brings comfort and healing. Many Christian women shared that they experienced healing and found God's comfort from some Scriptures. In addition to receiving comfort from the Scriptures, some women received assuring messages that God would be with them; God would protect them—through some spiritual experiences. With all good and bad, faith still helped many women to make it through. These reflections resonate with what Kohut said earlier about the function of religion. Kohut said religion's unique function is to "shore up, to hold together, sustain, to make harmonious, to strengthen, [man]'s self."⁴²

Self psychology reinterprets narcissism as an ongoing development of the self and the needs of the self continue to be

42 Strozier, *Heinz Kohut*, 328.

met through selfobjects throughout one's entire life.⁴³ Therefore, to describe religion as meeting selfobjects' needs no longer implies that religious belief is a sign of immaturity (Freud) but points to the reasons for the deep resonances of the religious appeal to the experience and desires of the self. Religion, therefore, can be a "support" for humans, Kohut says.

Although Kohut says religion itself does not cure or bring salvation, as a pastoral theologian and pastoral psychotherapist, the researcher, in my very subjective opinion, wants to believe that it is selfobjects and empathy that bring healing. Empathic selfobjects—people who listen to, encourage, and support us—are what God has given to human beings for our redemption—for our whole lives. Through religion, we feel "uplifted" and it may meet some of our needs through relationship with God, but the "self" may get fragile again. The "fragmented self" meets other fragile selves. They accept, admire (mirroring) and give values (idealization) to each other in the religious community who share similar experiences (twinship)—with empathy. This can be a positive function that religion can offer to women in abuse.

From a "religious" perspective, there might be redemption in selfobjects. That is what the idea of the selfobjects is about for its use in pastoral counseling. As we get so much from others, we are supposed to pass it on. This is a powerful ethics of the self that we can get from Kohut's self psychology. God is the glue. Yes, but there are other glues. For example, there are other small glues including pastoral counselors and the people around us. Empathic selfobjects—which comes through God's grace—is

43 Allen Siegel, *Heinz Kohut and the Psychology of the Self* (Routledge, 1996), 61.

what make us keep living, fully alive and close to be the “self” — in the image of God. Even if hearing some toxic messages proclaimed at church, some women would be able to have some small glues—some healing and comforting messages from church, some consoling words, etc. Later, they reflected that their religion had some positive functions regardless.

As noted above, Freud and Kohut all see some of positive functions of religion in human psyche. Kohut acknowledge and affirm the specific contributions of “religion” and “religious experience” to human psychic balance. And some pastoral theologians try to bring some psychological terms to their own field. In this inter-disiplinary dialogue, one danger is when one believes and claims extreme and exclusive Truth. Psychology tries to eliminate the room for subjective realm of religious mystery, while religion becomes “pathological” by claiming universal truth. William Meissner also places faith experience in the third area, between a matter of “wishful hallucination” and “purely subjective implications.” It represents a realm in which the subjective and the objective interpenetrate.⁴⁴

To conclude, Meissner makes an important point in terms of the relationship between religion and psychology by saying, “psychoanalysis and religion have common interests and goals and at least reconcilable conceptions of [man]’s nature and psychic life provides a meaningful and fruitful starting point from which the project of mutual understanding and exploration can be advanced.”⁴⁵ He further explains that it is in the middle ground that “the dialectic takes on life and flourishes. The

44 William Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 178.

45 Ibid., 133.

middle ground is characterized by a tolerance for ambiguity, by a capacity to reduce the tension between the subjective and the objective, logic and meaning, objective science and inner psychic life."⁴⁶ As a conclusion, it seems like that the two disciplines still need each other. Psychoanalysis can contribute to religious "self" understanding and that religion can contribute to psychic balance. In the intermediate space, mutual dialogue is still needed while tolerating ambiguity and multiplicity. The divergence and differences must be respected; the important and enlarged areas of mutual reinforcement and dialogue should not be ignored.

Religion, viewed from a psychological point of view, performs negative or positive psychological functions within an individual. It can damage people's human relationships or psychological systems, and on the contrary, it can provide people with the resources they need and serve to strengthen their minds. In the end, it can be said that it is not the religion itself that plays a psychological function, but the individual who functions psychologically within that religion. Faith must grow and bear fruit in an individual's life and be manifested in practice. As a religious person, one must live a life that is worthy of the values of one's religion, and a life that matches the content of one's religion.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 241.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alsdurf, James, and Phyllis Alsdurf. *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989.
- Allport, Gordon W. "The Functional Autonomy of Motives." In *Understanding human motivation*. eds., C. L. Stacey & M. DeMartino. Howard Allen Publishers, 1958.
- _____. 1966. "The religious context of prejudice." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5-3 (1966).
- Baker-Fletcher, Karen and Garth Baker-Fletcher. *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk*. New York: Orbis Books, 1997.
- Batson, C. Daniel. "Religion as Prosocial: Agent or Double agent?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 15-1 (1976).
- Batson, C. Daniel, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis. *Religion and the Individual: A Social-Psychological Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Booth, Lee. *When God Becomes a Drug: Understanding Religious Addiction & Religious Abuse*. Long Beach: SCP Limited, 1998.
- Fortune, Marie M., and Salma ElkadiAbugideiri, "A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence," In *Domestic Violence: Intersectionality and Culturally Competent Practice*, eds. Lettie Lockhart and Fran Danis. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*. Garden City, New York, [1927], 1964.
- _____. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: W.W. Norton

- & Company, Inc. [1930], 1961.
- Kohut, Heinz. *How Does Analysis Cure?* ed. Arnold Goldberg. University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Kim, Dongki. *Psychological Understanding of Religious Behavior*. Hakjisa, 2013.
- Kim, HeeSun. "The Cross-Violence, Compassion and the Resurrection." *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology*. vol. 23. (2015/6).
- _____. "The Many Faces of the Gentile Woman: a Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics of Mark 7:24-30." *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology*. vol. 34. (2020/12).
- Meissner, W. W. *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Nelson, Susan. "In Imagining the Cross," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*. ed. Marit A. Trelstad. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- Park, HyeKyung. "Mothers' Prayers and Korean Feminist Minjung Theology: The Hermeneutical Encounters among Hannah, Mary, and Lee So Seon." *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology*. vol. 37. (2022/6).
- Randall, Robert. "The Nature of Religion Within the Framework of Self Psychology." *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry*. Vol. 5. (1982).
- Rector, Lallene J. "Developmental Aspects of the Twinship Selfobject Need and Religious Experience." in *How Responsive Should We Be?: Progress in Self Psychology* Vol. 16, ed. Arnold Goldberg. The Analytic Press, 2000.
- Rizzuto, Ana-Maria. *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979.

Siegel, Allen M. *Heinz Kohut and the Psychology of the Self*.
Routledge, 1996.

Strozier, Charles B. *Heinz Kohut: The Making of a Psychoanalyst*.
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

_____. "Heinz Kohut's Struggles with Religion, Ethnicity, and
God." in *Religion, Society, and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Donald
Capps and Janet L. Jacobs. San Francisco: Westview Press,
1997.

Online References

Korean Women's Hotline. [http://hotline.or.kr/board_](http://hotline.or.kr/board_statistics/67398)
[statistics/67398](http://hotline.or.kr/board_statistics/67398).

2019 Domestic Violence Statistics from Ministry of Gender
Equality and Family of Korea.

[http://www.mogef.go.kr/kor/skin/doc.html?fn=6364a5a5238040a](http://www.mogef.go.kr/kor/skin/doc.html?fn=6364a5a5238040a6a681f24d82280650.pdf&rs=/rsfiles/202212/)
[6a681f24d82280650.pdf&rs=/rsfiles/202212/](http://www.mogef.go.kr/kor/skin/doc.html?fn=6364a5a5238040a6a681f24d82280650.pdf&rs=/rsfiles/202212/).

Received 2022. 11. 30. Revised 2022. 12. 27. Accepted 2022. 12. 27.
