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# A Study on Kim Chai Choon's Understanding of Religion

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to examine Kim Chai Choon's understanding of religion. His perspective on religion challenged the dogmatic and imperialistic approach of Western missionaries, who often failed to grasp the unique religio-cultural context of Korea. Kim's missional approach significantly influenced the formation of *minjung* theology, a Korean contextual theology shaped by Korean people's socio-political and religio-cultural realities. *Minjung* theology contributed to social transformation by advocating for restoring the human rights of the *minjung*, whose dignity had been sacrificed under the military dictatorship's policies of economic prioritization. Notably, Kim sought to improve the rights of the *minjung* even before the emergence of *minjung* theologians.

Kim's study of religion highlights the social dynamic of religious individuals within the interplay of religion and history, emphasizing concepts such as the "human being as religious and self-transcendent" and "history propelled through the subjective participation of human beings as agents." His understanding of religious humanity laid the groundwork for key concepts in *minjung* theology, including "*minjung* as self-transcendent beings" and "*minjung* as subjects of history." Furthermore, I think that Kim's openness and inclusive understanding of religion can offer valuable insight for missionary work in non-Christian Asian countries, where indigenous religions are deeply rooted. His perspective will also provide a religio-cultural foundation for global coexistence, fostering international peace and transformation in today's context, where the focus of Christian missions is shifting from Western to non-Western regions.

### **Keywords**

Kim Chai Choon, Religion, Social transformation, Inter-religious dialogue

## 1. Introduction

Kim Chai Choon's understanding of religion was shaped through his effort to find appropriate methods of Christian mission based on prophetic spirit that pursued universal values such as justice, love, peace, and life. This was within religio-culturally pluralistic and politically dictatorial context of Korea. Accordingly, his religious understanding and practice contributed to shaping discourses and creating social space for interreligious peace and democratic development. Kim's profound understanding of Korean religio-culture also became a driving force for peaceful interreligious cooperation aimed at social transformation. His perspective challenged Western missionaries' dogmatic and imperialistic approaches, who often lacked an understanding of Korea's unique religio-cultural context. Kim's missional approach significantly influenced the formation of *minjung* theology, a Korean religious theology shaped by Korean people's sociopolitical and religio-cultural realities. The direction Kim pursued through his study of religion closely aligns with themes addressed by the theology of religions.



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The term "theology of religions" originates from attempts to understand and articulate Christian self-identity in relation to religious others in today's religiously pluralistic global context. "Theology of religions" wrestles with the question of Christianity's uniqueness in a world where many religions claim truth. Its goal is not only to learn about religious "others" but also to find common ground for practical cooperation in areas such as global justice, peace, liberation, and the integrity of creation. It promotes mutual understanding through dialogue while maintaining interrelationships with other religions.

Kim's practical theological vision aligned with this approach. While he did not develop a systematic theology of religion, he maintained religious and cultural openness, continuously responding to the demands of the times with Christian faith. He strove for what he called "the pan-universal community of love" in an ever-changing context. This posture facilitated interreligious dialogue and practical cooperation, as he pursued universal human values such as justice, peace, and love within Korea's religiously pluralistic society, particularly in an undemocratic political environment and an exclusive Christian atmosphere regarding other religions. Kim's understanding of religion was thus expressed through an inclusive attitude, seeking social transformation toward a democratic society, while engaging in continuous self-renewal through interreligious dialogue and maintaining a Christo-centric perspective. His approach was grounded in a spirit of peaceful and authentic interreligious engagement, seeking common ground for the realization of universal love.

# 2. Kim Chai Choon's General Understanding of Religion

As noted in the introduction, Kim Chai Choon's understanding of religion aligns with the direction pursued by the theology of religion. He aimed to comprehend diverse religious phenomena, promote interreligious dialogue, and foster practical cooperation for peaceful global coexistence. This study, therefore, examines Kim's thought through this religiotheological lens. The primary reason for studying Kim's understanding of religion is his critical stance toward the incomprehension and exclusivism Western missionaries exhibited toward traditional Korean religions. In particular, his understanding of these religions is essential for exploring his efforts to develop a Korean contextual theology. Kim strove to embody the essence of the Gospel by shedding layers of Western culture, ideology, ritualism, and materialism that he considered extraneous to the core truth of Christianity. In this sense, Kim's understanding of religion became a crucial rite of passage in his theological journey.

Kim Chai Choon acknowledged the difficulty of defining religion. For Kim, "real religions (higher religions) seek a life of wholeness in which human beings recognize their relationship with the transcendent being, discover the meaning through mutual interaction, grounded independence and responsibility, and pursue the fulfillment of life." He saw religion as the union of the

<sup>1</sup> Paul F. Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions (Orbis Books, 2004), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Chai Choon, "Human Life and Religion" in Kim's Collection, Vol.2, ed. The Faculty of Theology Department in

transcendent spiritual realm with the secular world, functioning as a creative force that enables people to overcome the limitations they face in the secular world. Religion is linked to self-transcendent consciousness, and also represents a movement toward the recovery of intrinsic life. Ultimately, religion aims to achieve human wholeness. Kim stated:

"Religion is humanity's response to the divine movement of life, through which God lead creation toward great harmony for the salvation of individual, history, and the cosmos. Religion should neither be reversed nor separated from the realities of human life; rather, it must serve as the motivation and driving force for managing real life by guiding human beings into the very center of existence. In doing so, life itself should be propelled toward the cosmic finale." 5

Based on this understanding of religions, Kim asserted that religion not only holds a central place in the spiritual movement of human beings but also serves as the highest value guiding human civilization. It plays a pivotal role in shaping a nation's culture, climate and value system. From this perspective, Kim views Korea, where diverse religions coexist as a non-Christian country, as having a culturally rich heritage. He acknowledged the positive functions of religion in fostering social stability, harmony, and order. Kim stated.:

"Religion normalizes social relationships among human beings. Its ultimate goal is to achieve happiness through harmony among God, people, and nature."

In his later years, Kim envisioned a peaceful world sustained by interreligious harmony, recognizing the shared core values among various traditions.

"Each religion has its own tradition, ritual, architectural style, and historical precedents. Although externally distinct, they share a common origin. The compassion of Buddhism, the love of Christianity, the benevolence of Confucianism, and the principle of *Human is Heaven* (人 乃天) of *Chenodo-gyo* (the Religion of the Heavenly Way) all emphasize respect, love, salvation, and the pursuit of truth. Higher religions demand a high ethical standard....... Korea is a religiously blessed country. There co-exist diverse religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Chenodo-gyo, and Shamanism. If the love instilled within us remains alive, all of these religions can communicate as on body. In such a world, everything would appear lovely."

Kim envisioned a cosmic community of being grounded in peace, love, and the dignity of human life. For Kim, God is not an object of intellectual investigation or static meditation. He did not pursue a philosophical or metaphysical approach. He emphasized a theistic way of life lived in response to the divine challenge, marked by openness to the transcendent. This means life responding to this divine challenge by acknowledging our intellectual and ethical limitations. It has little to do with reducing God to an intellectual concept or confining the divine within rational boundaries. Kim described this way of life as *saengwhal sinang* (living faith) or

Hanshin University (Hanshin University Press, 1992), 334.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>6</sup> Kim, "Culture Construction and Guiding Principle," in Kim's Collection, Vol.1, 237.

<sup>7</sup> Kim, "Human Life and Religion" in Kim's Collection, Vol.2, 341.

<sup>8</sup> Kim, "The Heart of the Freedom," in Kim's Collection, Vol.18, 474.

<sup>9</sup> Kim, "Intellect and Religious," in Kim's Collection, Vol.4, 214.

saengwhal jonggyo (living religion). This stands in contrast to a religious life inclined toward formalism and detached from the realities of everyday life. Kim stated:

"Life is the living movement of the body in which spirit and flesh are united. This cannot be abstractly separated. A whole life lived with this body is religious. When religion is embodied in the body united with the spirit, it becomes living religion."

For Kim, religion is inseparable from the realities of human life. Living religion embodies the truth pursued by each religious tradition within the concrete context of human society and history. Religion aims at social transformation through individual transformation, as people participate in society as its members. According to Kim, Christianity does not advocate a dualistic life that separates the sacred from the secular; rather, it contributes to social transformation.

"Christianity does not separate human beings into dichotomies but approaches them as whole persons. Accordingly, life itself is not divided between the sacred and the secular. The secular becomes sacred when approached with the right mindset. If this principle were followed, politics would be democratic, international relations would be grounded in peace and understanding, society would become a community of mutual care, and education would be a human-building process that recovers human nature."

Drawing upon this inclusive understanding and practical aim, Kim encouraged the encounter between traditional religions and Christianity. These traditional religions play a significant role in shaping the inner religiosity of the Korean people. Kim examined the characteristics and positive elements of each religion in order to find common ground for the realization of truth in relation to Christianity, pursuing holistic human emancipation grounded in universal love. Through this religio-theological approach, Kim aimed to overcome exclusivism and adopt a tolerant and inclusive attitude toward other religions. Furthermore, he sought to embrace the Korean nation and its cultural heritage with the wide and deep loving heart that the message of the Gospel embodies.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.1. Kim's Understanding of Korean Religio-Culture

For Kim, the culture was not merely an external adornment or a neutral background but a historical and national force that shapes and informs the practice of faith.<sup>13</sup> His understanding of Korean religio-culture thus developed into a practical discourse opposing imperialist ideology. For Kim, forming a subjective and creative culture was a central concern in mission, especially within the religio-cultural and political contexts of Korea. The Korean socio-political environment during Kim's activity had been marked by religious pluralism, political colonization, authoritarianism, and economic underdevelopment. In this contextual reality, a subjective culture on which Kim emphasized did not imply a narrow focus on particularism characterized

<sup>10</sup> Kim, "Renewal of Church aiming Living Religions," in Kim's Collection, Vol. 7, 334.

<sup>11</sup> Kim, "Christianity and Culture," in Kim's Collection, Vol. 7, 406.

<sup>12</sup> Ryu Dong-Sik, a theologian of culture, estimated that Kim Chai Choon called "a minister of nation" attempting creative grafting between Christian thought and Korean thought. Ryu, Dong-Sik, *Vein of Korean Theology* (Dasan Kul Bang, 1998), 165-176.

<sup>13</sup> Kim, "Foreign Culture and Independency of National Culture," in Kim's Collection, Vol. 7, 104-109.

by self-complacency, isolation, and backwardness.<sup>14</sup> Rather, subjective culture should contribute to the construction of a universal culture grounded in universal values, pursuing the recovery of human dignity through peace, justice, and love in the world. This endeavor needed to involve constructive critique to create a new third synthesis that preserves each cultural distinct characteristic while fostering mutual solidarity through theological dialogue and a spirit of fellowship with the global church from a transnational perspective. The success of such a creative culture, Kim argued, would be possible through the robust recovery of national subjectivity by developing excellent contents rooted in traditional native cultures, while also adopting and integrating good values from foreign cultures through international engagement.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, Kim paid significant attention to the encounter between Christianity and traditional religions, which remain deeply embedded in Korean religious life. The resonance between Christianity and traditional religiosity, both having shaped the inner world of ordinary Koreans, allowed Christianity to take root and become contextualized in Korean soil. Kim said:

"Since accepting foreign religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism, Koreans have, for a history of about fifteen hundred years, succeeded in integrating these into their lives. It is a fact that these religious elements have shaped the constitution of Koreans and created paradigms for their social life. A contact point must be found in the religio-cultural context to establish communication between the givers and receivers of the Gospel. This contact point is not materialistic—it signifies an encounter between persons and an integration of minds. Such an encounter is impossible if the door of the mind remains closed. I think that the early Western missionaries who came into Korea had an aggressive attitude in this manner." 17

For Kim, reconciliation among human beings was the priority in genuine interreligious dialogue. Love, therefore, must be the foundation for mutual understanding. From a Christian perspective, Kim saw Jesus Christ as the mediator of this reconciliation and love, achieved through the reconciliation between God and humanity and among human beings on the cross. Kim asserted that the core doctrines of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, opening the space for mutual dialogue from a Christian standpoint. The redemptive love of Jesus Christ on the cross, he believed, fulfilled the benevolence (仁愛) of Confucianism and the compassion (慈悲) of Buddhism. Furthermore, the "nothingness" (無) of Daoism, seen as the source of all things and beyond human conceptualization, aligns with the Christian understanding of divinity, which transcends objectification and definition. According to Kim, the influence of Daoism is reflected in the Korean psyche's informal nature and longing for an idyllic life in harmony with nature, which is a trait that harmonizes with inner peace and joy by dwelling on the Holy Spirit. As a result, the goal of interreligious dialogue, for Kim, was

Kim, "The Subjectivity and Responsible Society," in Kim's Collection, Vol. 9, 269-275.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, "Foreign Culture and Independency of National Culture," in Kim's Collection, Vol. 7, 104-109.

<sup>16</sup> Kim, "Missionary and Social Vocation of Korean Church," in Kim's Collection, Vol.11, 131-144.

<sup>17</sup> Kim, "An Understanding of Non-Christian Religion," in Kim's Collection, Vol.7, 343.

<sup>18</sup> Kim, "The Reason That I come" in Kim's Collection, Vol.3, 90. This was a sermon preached in Christmas season.

<sup>19</sup> Kim, "Nothingness" in Kim's Collection, Vol.15, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Kim, "An Understanding of Non-Christian Religions," in The Life and Theology of Changgong, Kim Chai Choon, ed.

the realization of universal love and peace on earth. While Kim maintained an inclusive stance grounded in a Christocentric perspective, he engaged in interreligious dialogue with a spirit of openness, without any hidden agenda of conversion or presumption of Christian superiority. He acknowledged the possibility of mutual transformation among religions. Kim said:

"Our aggressive attitude in trying to convert people of other religions is nothing but a repetition of those early missionaries' religious invasion, jumping on the bandwagon of Western imperialism. We must first transform Christianity from a religion of 'control' into a religion of love and service.' The attitude of humility, love, and service must precede any dialogue with other religions."<sup>21</sup>

According to Park Jae Soon, Kim's theology of indigenization is neither religious syncretism nor organic indigenization, where the seed of the Gospel bears fruits by merely rooting itself in national culture. It is also not mere inclusivism or a fulfillment theory. Rather, Kim pursued a dynamic indigenization-mutual transformation between Korean national culture and the seed of the Gospel. Christianity, Kim emphasized, was accepted by the Korean people themselves, who voluntarily pursued the truth, even before the arrival of Western missionaries. This attitude remained consistent throughout his theological development, particularly during the undemocratic and inhumane context of military dictatorship. From this position, Kim explored the possibility of interreligious dialogue with a progressive vision, aiming for an open society where dynamic, free, and mutual communication could take place, overcoming all forms of human alienation and oppression.

### 2.2. Kim's Comparative Study of Christianity and Other Religions

Aiming for "the pan-universal community of love" in his heart, Kim Chai Choon tried to compare study with traditional religions placed on mainstream religion in Korean history. Confucianism became Kim's key dialogue partner in developing his theology of historical participation and political theology. He integrated the positive elements of Confucianism while critically engaging with its limitations, aligning this dialogue with his theological vision of contextualizing Christianity within the Korean setting. A primary positive aspect that Kim identified in Confucianism was its strong emphasis on family ethics. He regarded Confucianism as a religion founded on the principle of filial piety toward one's parents.<sup>23</sup> In Confucian society, the family serves as the starting point and center of all social structures. Genuine filial piety becomes the first step in realizing benevolence within society, expanding into relationships with neighbors, thus forming a broader social ethic. In this view, building a sound political system based on extending familial love to society through benevolence is one of Confucianism's

Hwang Sung Kyu, and trans. Lee Young Mee (Hanshin University Press, 2005), 248.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>22</sup> Park Jae Soon, "Korean Nation and Theological Subjectivity of Kim Chai Choon," in Changgong Kim Chai Choon's Theology World, ed. The Memorial Enterprise of Changgong Kim Chai Choon, (Hanshin University Press, 2006), 187-188

<sup>23</sup> Kim, "Christian Family," in Kim's Collection, Vol.16, 20.

significant goals.<sup>24</sup> However, Kim also clarified that filial piety in Confucianism should not be equated with blind obedience or unconditional imitation.<sup>25</sup> He rejected exclusive familism rooted in familial selfishness.<sup>26</sup> During the Chosun dynasty, when Neo-Confucianism dominated the religious and ideological landscape, there was little space for individual expression on social or political matters that diverged from the official line. This was due to the thorough integration of religion and societal order, leaving no distinction between the religious and the socio-political realms.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, Kim pointed out the tendency for women's rights to be ignored as one of the negative factors in Confucianism. In other words, the Confucian family ethic could produce a hierarchical ethic based on a patriarchal and androcentric system.<sup>28</sup> This distorted hierarchical principle became deeply entrenched in Korean society, where Confucian culture was dominant. Kim observed that this influence extended into many conservative churches in Korea, where it shaped a form of fundamentalist theology. Kim described the similarity of characteristics between Confucianism and the conservative church in Korea based on fundamental theology:

"The reactionary nature of Confucianism is linked to the conservatism of orthodox theology. To reject new ideas, Confucianism politically persecuted those who opposed its academic tradition. Similarly, conservative churches used ecclesiastical authority to condemn dissenters as heretics. As Confucianism degenerated into formalism and literalism, the traditionalist church became overly protective of its dogma and rules—focusing solely on theoretical systems, detached from the movement of real life."<sup>29</sup>

Also, because an excessively hierarchical system gave rise to a formalistic and passive way of life, creativity grounded in critical spirit could not be expected. Kim especially believed that neo-Confucianism exacerbated these tendencies in Korea. He described these negative aspects as follows:

"Original Confucianism sought to renew lifestyles through morality and to revere heaven (天) with religious passion. This Confucianism, when revived as Neo-Confucianism, became the state religion of the Chosun dynasty. However, Neo-Confucianism interpreted heaven philosophically, confining it within the framework of reason. Its ethics leaned excessively toward formalism. This Confucian 'Pharisaism' became the state religion... Thus, Confucianism permeated every aspect of life—individual, familial, social, and national. Confucianism contributed to the Chosun dynasty's downfall because it lost its vitality by becoming fixated on literalism and the preservation of the status quo."<sup>30</sup>

Kim criticized Confucianism's exclusivist and conservative principles, especially Neo-

<sup>24</sup> Han Moon Duk, "Confucian Factors in Kim Chai Choon's Theological Thought," in Changong Kim Chai Choon's Theology World, ed. The Memorial Enterprise of Changgong Kim Chai Choon (Hanshin University Press, 2006), 261.

<sup>25</sup> Kim, "5.16 in Korea History," in Kim's Collection, Vol.12, 318.

<sup>26</sup> Kim, "The Tradition of Korean Family and Democracy," in Kim's Collection, Vol. 8, 54-55.

<sup>27</sup> Chung Chai-sik, "Confucian Tradition and National Ideology," in *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*, ed. Kenneth M. Wells (University of Hawai'l Press, 1995), 63.

<sup>28</sup> Kim, "The Tradition of Korean Family and Democracy," in Kim's Collection, Vol. 8, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Kim, "Foreign Religion of Korea and Christ," in Kim's Collection, Vol. 4, 510-511.

<sup>30</sup> Kim, "Human Imagination of Korea Christian," in Kim's Collection, Vol.8, 216.

Confucianism, by reflecting upon democratic values such as freedom and equality grounded in human dignity. However, he did not reject Confucian principles unconditionally. Rather, Kim embraced the positive elements, ethical values, and virtues of its humanistic orientation and filial piety, which he saw as compatible with the Christian ethic of love grounded in redemptive grace. Ultimately, Kim assessed the virtues of Confucianism in relation to Christianity:

"Confucianism is a collection of ethical teachings. While Confucius himself may have become a saint through his discipline, no one else fully realized the ethical ideals of Confucianism. Christ, on the other hand, fulfilled benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and sincerity (仁義 禮智信) in his redemptive love."<sup>31</sup>

For Kim, the Confucian virtue of benevolence means that "a benevolent person cherishes principle and takes the mind of the universe (heaven) as the virtue of human beings." He integrated this virtue into Christ's universal love, described as "the fountain of life springing from the believer's heart." Similarly, Kim affirmed that "the Buddhist teaching on the practice of mercy and the Christian teaching on the fruit of the Holy Spirit are compatible truths."<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Kim found compatibility between the Protestant principle that "only God is absolute, and nothing else should be absolutized" and the Daoist notion of nothingness. He acknowledged the linguistic limitations in speaking of God, noting that human language cannot fully capture ultimate reality. Hence, God in Christianity cannot be objectively proven or fully defined. Kim wrote:

"Nothingness is deep and vast. It represents a religiosity that transcends the limitations and contradictions of language, which must always be relativized. Because it is absolute beyond calculation or definition, it cannot be grasped. Christianity replaces nothingness with God—who likewise cannot be objectified or defined."<sup>33</sup>

Kim reflected further:

"If we imagine human beings who combine the insights of Daoism and Christianity, I believe a new form of humanity could emerge... I envision a sincere person (眞人) who embodies the cultural modes of both East and West in one body."<sup>34</sup>

For Kim, this sincere person is one united with Christ. The encounter between human beings and the divine implies the death of the self in Christ and the rebirth of a new being. This new being lives with and in Christ, as expressed in St. Paul's confession: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Kim emphasized the social dimension of this transformation over its inner religious dimension, advocating for interreligious dialogue as a means of bringing about amendable human change and forming a mature civil society. Thus, the primary principle for interreligious dialogue was an ethical life rooted in

<sup>31</sup> Kim, "Message Following Church Calendar," in Kim's Collection, Vol.8, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Kim, "An Understanding of Non-Christian Religions," in The Life and Theology Changgong, Kim Chai Choon, 248.

<sup>33</sup> Kim, "Nothingness" in Kim's Collection, Vol.15, 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> Kim, "Nature is Big House of Human Beings," in Kim's Collection, Vol.15, 132.

mutual respect, the recognition of human dignity, and a self-sacrificial spirit.<sup>35</sup>

From the perspective of mutual relationships and points of contact between Christianity and other religions in the Korean context, Kim Chai Choon examined the practical foundations and goals of interreligious dialogue aimed at cooperation for social diakonia and peace. Dialogue, for Kim, entails the potential for mutual understanding and decision-making. In the process of sharing each other's truth, dialogue partners may discover common ground and simultaneously recognize new challenges for mutual fulfillment.<sup>36</sup> Kim's comparative study of religions was grounded in the process of finding common ground for social diakonia and peace. This process also deeply engages with his political, history, and ethics perspective. Therefore, in chapter three, I will examine how Kim's socially engaged understanding of religion is interwoven with these three areas.

# 3. Kim's Perspective of Politics, History and Ethics as Practical Areas of Religious Life

After his conversion to Christianity, Kim Chai Choon envisioned a futuristic hope for an independent Korean nation, recognizing the reality of national suffering under Japanese colonization as a form of self-suffering. For Kim, Christianity, as a historical religion, became a socially transformative power. Furthermore, he recognized the Bible as a Christian scripture and as a witness to divine action that led to socio-historical transformation by revealing God within human history. The ultimate goal of this transformation is the reformation of social structures that violate human dignity and freedom and the restoration of the inherent values and characteristics of the created order, in which each unique being coexists harmoniously and peacefully, especially for the sake of the poor, the distressed, and the oppressed. Kim imagined "the pan-universal community of love" in which love, peace, and justice are holistically realized on earth. Based on this Kim's Christian faith, this chapter will explore Kim's religious perspective in relation to three categories: politics, history, and ethics, which became critical factors in socially engaged Kim's theology.

Based on his pursuit of cultural subjectivity, Kim viewed politics as practical engagement in resolving and mediating conflicts, particularly when individuals' or nations' intrinsic nature or subjectivity had been invaded and lost.<sup>38</sup> For Kim, thus, politics becomes a subjective action of human beings leading to historical transformation. Kim Chai Choon confessed that history was the divine action of God forwarding toward the futuristic world where God's whole reign, marked by peace among all living creatures, would be fulfilled. Thus, believers are those who

<sup>35</sup> Kim, "An Understanding of Non-Christian Religions" in *The Life and Theology Changgong, Kim Chai Choon*, 254.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>37</sup> Kim, "Christian Theology and Its Participation in the Social Historical Realm" in *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium: Theology of Minjung in Fourth-Eye Formation*, Trans in English by Paul S. Chung. eds. Paul S. Chung, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, Kim Kyung-Jae (Pickwick Publication, 2007), 17-22. This article is a representative work that reflects Kim Chai Choon's socially engaged theological thought.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

participate in this divine history.<sup>39</sup> Ethics, then, are the actions that cultivate a harmonious human relationship in society, aiming to realize the political purpose and historical fulfillment directed toward preserving the inherent humanity of each person.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, for Kim, these three areas, politics, history, and ethics, are not only central to the life of faith, but also provides a critical foundation for as core factors shaping the lives of believers and enabling constructive dialogue with other religions. Considering the importance of his perspective on each area related to socially engaged Kim's understanding of religion, I will elaborate on his perspective as it relates to politics in the following section

# 3.1 The Relationship between Religion and Politics in Kim's Perspective

For Kim, inter-religious dialogue serves as a political activity that builds a resilient nation. In pursuit of this dialogical attitude, Kim emphasized that all religions should cooperate to participate in nation-building by seeking national subjectivity that transcends religious differences. Maintaining peace becomes the ultimate goal of religion, as well as the primary reason and motivation for both domestic and international political engagement.

"Korea is not a Christian country, but it is a unified nation-state with religious diversity. Thus, religions must lead the way in cooperation and participation for national affairs, the future, and nation-building."

This does not suggest an exclusive nationalism rooted in national self-interest. Rather, it points to national subjectivity realized through cooperative individuals in a mutually dependent relationship, oriented toward universal values such as justice, peace, and love. This is grounded in God's sovereignty, which relativizes all human authority. In Kim's view, national subjectivity aims for harmony within an organic relationship between the individual and the collective, accompanied by rights and responsibilities in a global context. He stated:

"Totalitarians know only the whole but not individual subjectivity. Anarchists know only individual freedom but ignore the reality of the whole. The individual and the whole are perfected through a Trinitarian relationship and the governance of freedom, justice, and order." <sup>43</sup>

For Kim, as a Christian, establishing a robust national subjectivity means seeking a direction that contributes to international peace by addressing urgent issues of ethnic and national conflicts, especially those arising from cases where the gospel has been conflated with ideologies of national superiority, leading to religious and cultural tensions. According to Kim, most religions tend to idolize themselves, absolutizing their doctrines, scriptures, and institutions. This self-absolutization leads to hostility toward other religious traditions:

"Even though every religion seeks to break down the barrier between human beings and the divine, religious adherents have often rebuilt these walls in the name of religion or under the pretense of absolute truth. They refuse to cross the front lines of other faiths. In our time,

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 22. In this part, Kim refers to "ethics as formation" of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

<sup>41</sup> Kim, "Nothingness" in Kim's Collection, Vol.15, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Kim, "Foreign Ethos and Subjectivity of Nation Culture," in Kim's Collection, Vol. 7, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Kim, "Subjectivity and Responsible Society," in Kim's Collection, Vol.9, 273.

religious wars are among the most terrible and ruthless of all conflicts. We witness war being absolutized in the name of absolute religion."

Thus, Kim Chai Choon presents a path toward a renewed understanding of Christianity to find common ground for interfaith dialogue. First of all, dogmatic disputes were not effective in addressing interreligious matters. Rather than promoting authentic dialogue, such disputes often became obstacles, inciting mutual conflict. This approach tends toward coercion. The problem becomes even more evident in attempts to align religion with the state. For Kim, Shintoism serves as a representative example of this problematic alignment. He viewed it as a totalitarian ideology that justified holy war under the guise of religious ritual. In the early 1970s, Kim published an important article on the issue of Shintoism. According to him, Shintoism was essentially an imperial ideology masked in religious ceremony:

"The shrine represents Japan's indigenous religion. Because the structure and rituals of Shinto have essentially religious characteristics, claiming that it is not a religion is nonsense. The religious imagery of state power constitutes the gravest form of idolatry. Since the government directly engages with and manages Shinto as a religion, it violates the principle of separation between religion and state, and thus infringes upon religious freedom. The shrine was a religious center that sanctified aggressive militarism—a place where the state worshipped the deified spirits of those who died in war, thereby mythologizing them as guardian gods of the nation."

Attempts by Christians to engage with people of other faiths through external force have historically failed, as seen in events such as the Crusades and Christian anti-Semitism. Therefore, Kim insisted that Christians must not adopt attitudes of self-righteousness or divine self-glorification. He advocated for a humble approach marked by spiritual poverty and deep respect for the uniqueness of other religions. He wrote:

"As each religion remains humble before its own ultimate divine reality, it must also remain humble before other religions. This humility is not cowardice. On the contrary, spiritual poverty bears witness to one's own faith while simultaneously respecting the uniqueness of others."

Because human achievements are always relative, Kim encouraged a cooperative and fraternal attitude that abandons religious egoism and the sense of antagonistic superiority. He emphasized the need to acknowledge each other's limitations during interfaith encounters. In this spirit, Kim praised the March First Independence Movement (March  $1^{\rm st}$ , 1919) in Korea as a powerful example of interreligious partnership and cooperation, which embodied social diakonia and the pursuit of justice for human liberation. It also served as a model for the inculturation of Christianity into a subjective and creative culture. <sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Kim, "Is Dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity Possible?" in *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium: Theology of Minjung in Fourth-Eye Formation*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>46</sup> Kim, "The National Legislation of Shinto Shrine of Japan and Concern of Korean Church," in *Kim's Collections*, *Vol.* 9, 452-455

<sup>47</sup> Kim, "Is Dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity Possible?" in *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium: Theology of Minjung in Fourth-Eye Formation*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 29-31.

For Kim, social diakonia, tied to the prophetic spirit, is deeply connected to both religious practice and political engagement. Diakonia is the wellspring of love that flows from God's nature. Therefore, promoting social welfare, especially for the vulnerable, becomes a critical religious practice and political commitment.<sup>49</sup> While Kim upheld the principle of separating religion and politics to protect religious freedom, he also affirmed that political participation rooted in God's justice is an essential dimension of holistic human liberation. The proper religious attitude toward politics is prophetic: discerning and embodying God's will to restore human life wherever it has been dehumanized. Since political sovereignty ultimately belongs to God, the role of religion in politics is to establish higher ethical standards and listen to the voice of conscience.<sup>50</sup> The ultimate aim of such political engagement is to pursue truth as the foundation of human freedom and complete emancipation. According to Kim, religions provide the belief that human beings possess the will to pursue goodness. They emphasize the inherent dignity of humanity and offer the foundation for democratic values rooted in this belief. Therefore, a robust democracy, built on human rights and responsibilities, must serve the common good. This goal can be achieved more fully through mutual cooperation among religions.51

## 3.2 The Relationship between Religion and History in Kim's Perspective

Kim explored how religion should reflect on its relationship with history. Genuine human freedom cannot be reduced to historical determinism. A deterministic view of history presents human beings as impersonal and passive subjects who lack the power to act freely. True freedom, for Kim, is the freedom to choose, a creative vitality that transcends mere adaptation to natural law. As free and creative agents, human beings are not "ready-made" but "co-creators of history." Drawing upon human beings as subjective beings in history, historical factors materialized are recognized as actions creating history through personal determination in social realms. These actions follow any higher order in space and time of human beings. Thus, history recognized by human beings is embodied in human society through expressions of will materialized by the goals and decisions of humans.

If we regard history solely as a dialectical process unfolding independently of human will, we risk overlooking individuals' personal agency and moral responsibility. For Kim, self-reflection on the human condition is only possible when we stand before the Absolute. In that moment, we see ourselves as historical beings shaped by our decisions and ethical responses to the world. As a result, the question of history inevitably connects with religious questions. According to Kim, religion embodies visible expressions of the invisible power that propels human history alongside human participation. From the perspective of the synergism for holistic human emancipation, Kim estimated that most religions tend to be ahistorical due to their associations with historical determinism (Brahman), fatalism (Islam), and naturalism (Hellenistic thought).

<sup>49</sup> Kim, "The Faithful Meaning of Diakonia," in *Kim's Collection, Vol.3*, 297-298.

<sup>50</sup> Kim, "The Relation between Religions and Politics" in Kim's Collection, Vol.1, 181.

<sup>51</sup> Kim, "Life and Religion" in Kim's Collection, Vol.2, 295.

As a result, such views limit personal voice and rights, and block the creative power that makes history. These religions, therefore, showed limitations in contributing to historical and social transformation toward human emancipation because of the tendency of its historical determinism and fatalism.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast, Christianity is a movement to realize God's will within human history. The Bible records specific events that embody God's covenant with humans, including their belief and volitional response. Christianity is thus a historical religion that seeks social transformation, particularly through the prophetic spirit. Its historicity based on covenantal thought is its unique trait. Christianity creates history through personal determination in response to God's calling. According to Kim, "Christianity is a religion creating history combined with God's will." God's will refers to the benevolent intention to restore fallen humanity through righteousness and the love of God revealed in Christ. For this reason, his understanding of history is closely tied to an ethical life grounded in obedience to God's benevolent will. For Kim, thus, ethics is a life of faith response and historical participation following God's will.

## 3.3. The Relationship between Religion and Ethics in Kim's Perspective

Kim observed that religion provides a unified worldview and a philosophy of life oriented toward the absolute being. Mystically, it fosters intimacy with eternity; ethically, it inspires loyalty, courage, and commitment to ultimate norms. Kim distinguished positive and negative mystical experiences. He warned against Gnostic mysticism, which emphasizes direct union with God while ignoring historical and ethical realities. Genuine mystical experience does not seek mysticism as an end, but provides ethical inspiration and fruits of the Holy Spirit. Such inspiration empowers individuals to do goodness in freedom. <sup>55</sup> Socially, religion realizes peace by establishing justice. Religion functions through dynamic polarities between individual and society, activity and rest, this world and the next, permanence and change, faith and action, inertia and self-reliance, predestination and freedom. Thus, religion is a life-giving force bringing cosmic salvation and harmony, restoring the right relationships in all areas of life. Religion motivates and empowers humans to recover their innate vitality and dignity, recognizing all individuals as equal before God. <sup>56</sup> Hence, religions should be promoted toward the movement of recovering innate humanity by preserving and respecting human dignity since each individual as God's creature equals in front of God.

Therefore, Kim did not claim absoluteness of salvation from sin through only Jesus Christ based on the total corruption of humans. Kim focused on the recovery of human goodness based on the universal love of Christ rather than stressing about human sinfulness. Kim aimed for holistic human emancipation by overcoming structural contradictions in society through the realization of goodwill, not merely focusing on individual salvation from sin. From his

<sup>52</sup> Kim, "Religion and History" in Kim's Collection, Vol.2, 247

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 246-247.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>55</sup> Kim, "Historical Christianity and Mystical Experience," in Kim's Collection, Vol.4, 36.

<sup>56</sup> Kim, "Life and Religion" in Kim's Collection, Vol.2, 289-290.

soteriological perspective, the ethical commitment to improving social structures is a significant act. This ethical attention involves responsible engagement and choice. The Kim's commitment to ethical responsibility as his faith is demonstrated through his attitude toward recognizing other religions.

For Kim, recognizing traditional religions was not an act of disbelief in Christianity but an opening for dialogue aimed at integrating the order of creation and renewing innate human life in relation to divine reality. Thus, for Kim, other religions are fragmentary expressions of God's word through the Holy Spirit. These fragmentary truths are completed in Christ, whose sacrificial love on the cross embodies that completion. The Holy Spirit makes humans aware of God's image in themselves. Thus, other religions are expressions of universal love (agape) completed in Christ.<sup>57</sup> Kim examined three Christian attitudes toward other religions. First, the exclusive attitude holds that only Christianity is true while others are false. This was dominant during the missionary period in Korea, dismissing other religions as evil and equating Christianity with Western culture. They dealt with traditional Korean religio-cultural heritages like one vacuum.<sup>58</sup> This attitude was based on the mentality of cultural superiority that identified Christianity with Western culture. Thus, the Christian mission became a tool of Western imperial expansion, imposing Western culture. The second is the transcendent attitude. This attitude emphasizes the discontinuity and otherness between Christianity and other religions and denies the possibility of dialogue and cooperation. This position claimed the qualitative difference between God and human beings. It denied the possibility of human goodness. However, this attitude does not amount to an absolutization of Christianity. The third is the inclusive and achieving attitude. This attitude is not exclusive but inclusive, and it means that fragmented truths in other religions coexist. Since such fragment truths are neither perfect nor the best, Christianity completes them. Given this, Christianity embodies the achievement of truth. 59 According to Kim, all of those are based on biblical lessons. Therefore, after reviewing three attitudes of Christianity about other religions, Kim sought out a biblical foundation for each attitude. The first attitude is based on the Yahwistic religion of the Old Testament, aiming for exclusive monotheism. The second attitude pursued discontinuity with Jewish tradition as shown in Paul's case. The third showed that Christ completes Judaism through sacrificial love on the cross. Kim said:

"Christ, who so loved this world that he died on the cross as a sacrifice, must not exclude non-believers from that love. Jesus showed a generous attitude toward the Samaritan religion and its people—an attitude that applies to all the world's religions and peoples." <sup>60</sup>

Finally, Kim concluded as follows:

"Thus, whichever attitude we take among these three, one cannot accuse it of being unbiblical. However, since we cannot hold all three attitudes simultaneously, we have the freedom to

<sup>57</sup> Kim, "Power of Spirit," in Kim's Collection, Vol.3, 322.

<sup>58</sup> Kim, "An Understanding of Non-Christian Religions" in *The Life and Theology Changgong, Kim Chai Choon*, 244-245.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 245.

choose one based on each historical context."61

We can see here his theological characteristics. Kim's theology was based on the biblical faith but did not absolutize the Bible. He emphasized contextual reality and the human capacity for free choice. He showed an attitude open through mutual interaction, responding dynamically to ever-changing contexts by not adhering to any fixed determinism such as dogmatism, ecclesiasticism, and biblical literalism in the everlasting love of Jesus Christ. This open attitude created a dynamic space for mutual transformation among religions through interreligious dialogue in terms of unfolding his understanding of religion.

### 4. Conclusion

In pursuing his understanding of religion, Kim Chai Choon acknowledged the uniqueness and historicity of Christianity, which was grounded in faith in the divine action of God as witnessed in human history through the Bible and Jesus Christ. Furthermore, he anticipated the possibility and realization of socio-political transformation brought about through this unique historicity and historical activities of Christianity. Because the assertion of such uniqueness had historical precedents and had, at times, led to tragic outcomes, particularly when entangled with specific ideologies in different regions and historical contexts, Kim Chai Choon proposed a new, alternative perspective for interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence through critical reflection on that history. According to Kim, Christianity should adopt an inclusive, tolerant, and transformative posture that opens the possibility for mutual dialogue and the realization of more advanced universal human values while respecting each religion's uniqueness. Such an attitude, he argued, accords with the truth disclosed in the crucifixion, which stands as a theological locus of Christian uniqueness. Furthermore, the mutual dialogue with other religions seeks practical cooperation for social diakonia, by aiming "the pan-universal community of love" on earth. Therefore, Kim's understanding of religions not pursued a metaphysical and theoretical search for a common ground of divinity but aimed a practical and realistic common goal for social transformation through political, historical, and ethical realization. Kim's socially engaged missional approach to religions also influenced minjung theology, which contributed to advancing the rights of the socially marginalized minjung, and to the democratization of Korea society.

Although Kim's socially engaged understanding of religions contributed to social transformation, particularly in the areas of democratization and the promotion of human rights, an ambiguity regarding the self-identity of Christianity emerged. This ambiguity tended to diminish enthusiasm for active participation in evangelical mission work and in the institutional growth and organization of the Church. While these critical issues remain, I think that Kim's openness and inclusive understanding of religion can offer valuable insights for mission work in non-Christian Asian countries, where indigenous religions are deeply rooted and socio-political and economic conditions are often challenging. Furthermore, I expect that his perspective will

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 246.

provide religio-cultural insight into global mutual coexistence, fostering international peaceful transformation in today's context, where the focus of Christian mission is shifted from Western areas to non-Western regions.

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