

Kim Sung RAN

## *Interreligious Enrichment in Korean Culture*

*In the darkness of dawn, I wake up my body and go up the mountain behind my seminary. My watch says it is 5 o'clock. There is a Buddhist temple in the side of the mountain and there is a well. I stop and drink water from the well. The water is cold enough to wake me up. More than that, it is cold enough to break down my narrow existence. How can I have peace at the Buddhist temple? Who says "we drink living water in our own well?" I continually climb the mountain and pray. Almost all Buddhist temples have a well. The water flows under the earth, passing the roots of trees and marbles. It is purified through giving life to all creatures it meets. Now it came to me to wake me up.*

### PERSONAL GLIMPSES OF MEMORY

One day when I was seven years old. On my way home, I met a Shaman. She was performing a ritual. She was dancing on sharp straw-cutters. She seemed to be held by a strange power. People around her kept praying. It was awesome.

I heard from my grandmother that there are spirits and lives in everything: stones, trees, river, earth, house, kitchen, and bathroom. Things are not simply things, but they are beings, alive beings. Most of all, human beings are of heaven, regardless of their class, sex, or religion. God gives life to them.

My family performs ancestral worship ceremonies. Since my father is the first son, we gather together on the birthday and the day of the death of my grandparents and we remind ourselves of our grandparents' lives. We pray for their blessing and protection.

I lived in a Roman Catholic convent for three and a half years. Every morning I attended Holy Mass and received Holy Communion. I studied in a school established for Roman Catholic religious people. I was the only Protestant who graduated from that theological graduate school. I recognized who I am in the midst of other traditions. Now I am an assistant pastor in a small local church. I meet faithful church people every day. I know they also have similar religious experiences throughout their lives.

### INTERRELIGIOUS ENRICHMENT

While thinking about inter-religious enrichment I find time for reflecting my own life experiences. As an individual in Korea, I myself have experienced multiple religions and religious cultures. If we analyze the phenomenon of Korean religions, we find institutionalized religions, non-institutionalized religions and neo-religions. Institutionalized religions have structures for maintaining their own systems. They have unique religious forms of ritual, thoughts and community of people. Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam belong to this category.

On the other hand, in the non-institutionalized religions, even though they do not have certain structures and systems, they have their own influence as religions in the life of people. They might have the systematic

knowledge for their own understanding. Taoism, Shamanism, Yoga, Japanese religion, folk faiths and others belong to this category. Then since the XIX<sup>th</sup> century some neo-religious movements contributed to the transformation of modern Korean society and formed as religions.

### OUR CONFUCIAN ROOTS

Confucianism came to Korea about two thousand years ago and has been ruling as a structural norm. It has deeply influenced the entire culture. It became a rock of political thought, the ethos of human relationships. Confucianism is one of the largest influential systems for social values and inner ethics. It has religious rituals and ceremonies for ancestral worship. It is to say that the entire Korean culture and lifestyle of Korean people are rooted in Confucianism.

In the early period of Christian Protestant mission, which is the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the ancestral worships and memorial ceremonies were interpreted as being in contradiction with the monotheism of Christianity. The Christian missionaries coming from Western churches had the faith of absolute fundamentalism. After serious conflicts, Christianity nowadays has slowly begun to open its mind. The Christian missionaries suggest Christianized forms of the ceremonies. Christianity tries to reinterpret the ancestor worship under the umbrella of Christian monotheism.

On the other hand Confucianism has influenced Christianity. First of all, the idea of heaven in Confucianism, which teaches that human beings are as valuable as heaven, could easily meet with the image of God in heaven. Korean people could accept the image of God in heaven. Secondly, the father image of God in Christianity could meet with the patriarchal system of Confucianism. Besides the economic and political reasons, the Christian faith system could have the contact point with Confucian cultures.

### BUDDHISM, TAOISM AND SHAMANISM

Buddhism came to Korea about 1700 years ago. Buddhism constructs the ideas of the world of the dead, reincarnation, a reward in accordance with one's deeds. These thoughts deeply influenced the morality and the attitude of life of the Korean people. Now more than 40% of the people answer that their religion is Buddhism. Most of all, the life centrism in Buddhism became deeply rooted into the Korean culture. Many Christians also respect the life centrism in the teaching of Buddhism and deeply appreciate that value.

As non-institutionalized religions, Taoism and Shamanism are also deeply rooted in the hearts of the Korean people. The ideal world thought in Taoism goes with the movement of God's regime and with the idea of new heaven and new earth in Christianity. In fact, large numbers of progressive Christians work for the better Korean society and the democratisation of the Korean

society. They sacrificed their lives for the Kingdom of God and lived as prophets of here and now.

The unique phenomenon of the early morning prayer at 4 o'clock shows how Shamanism deeply influenced the Christian Church in Korea. For a long time, Korean women have had early morning prayer in Shamanism. It also influenced the mountain prayers and the overnight prayers. One cannot find these forms of prayer outside of Korea.

### WORKING TOGETHER

Politically alienated scholars accepted Christianity as a thought and study in the late XVIII<sup>th</sup> century. Then Roman Catholic missionaries came to Korea in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. Compared to other religions in Korea, Christianity is an infant, so to speak. But now more than 25% of Korean people say they are Christian. Analysts explain the reasons of the fast growing Church. There are socio-political and economical aspects, since Korea's modernization was also dramatically fast. On the other hand, Korean people's religious and cultural abundance could explain that phenomenon.

Talking about how Christian spirituality has been inspired by other religions in Korean situation, I realize that sometimes we do not see what is actually going on. It is undeniable that the cultures and religions are influencing each other. The judgment of good and evil is not a matter at first but we could see the phenomenon of co-

existence of many religions and cultures. I believe that only God could judge what is true.

Now in Korea the anti-USA movement is a crucial matter since US soldiers killed two students during their training. The crimes of the US army could not be judged under the law of SOFA. Religious leaders are fasting in front of the US embassy. Buddhist monks, Roman Catholic fathers, nuns and monks and Protestant pastors are gathering together to work for revising the law and peace in Korea. We are leaders of different religions but now work for one purpose of peace. Through meeting on the street we have come to know who we are once more. I believe God is beyond what we think. God will open the world that we close. I believe that the Holy Spirit is in us.

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