
Worship as a Cosmic Event of Communion and Union: Christian Worship from an East Asian Perspective

Kee-Yeon Cho. Ph. D. Drew University, Madison, NJ. 1996.

Summary

Different from the Western twofold understanding of worship as the event between God and humankind, in his dissertation, *Worship as a Cosmic Event of Communion and Union: Christian Worship from an East Asian Perspective*, Dr. Kee-Yeon Cho presents a threefold understanding of worship from an East Asian perspective. Throughout Western Christian tradition, there have been two emphases in the understanding Christian worship. First, there is the twofold movement between God and humankind in worship. For example, Peter Brunner, the Lutheran theologian, describes worship as “a service of God to the congregation” and “the congregation’s service before God.” The Roman Catholic Church also describes worship as a twofold movement: “the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity.” Second, Christian worship has an emphasis on Christology: “Jesus Christ stands between human beings and God. Jesus reveals God to humankind, through Him, human beings make their response.” However, we have been so concerned about the God-human relationship that we miss the importance of nature and have come to face our current ecological crisis such as global warming.

Problems like the ecological crisis from Cho’s perspective can be solved through a new understanding of Christian worship because Christian worship has, in and of itself, a positive attitude toward nature. In worship, nature participates through the bread and wine of the Eucharist. The communion and union taken place in the Eucharist are events that occur not only between God and humans, rather, it is between God, humankind, and nature. Furthermore, a call to the Eastern threefold understanding of Christian worship is needed not only for the restoration

of nature but also for a better understanding of Christian worship for East Asian people because it is an interpretive lens through which Asians have viewed their culture, history, and traditions.

In the first chapter, the author brings up a Chinese book, the *Book of Changes*, which has hugely influenced on the cosmology and worldview of the East Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Korea. The author points out two basic concepts in the *Book of Changes*: change and *yin-yang*. Change is the ultimate principle affecting all existing things: “all things in the natural world are constantly experiencing change: the sun rises from the east and falls to the west...” *Yin-yang* is the principle that represents two opposite concepts yet includes them simultaneously much like males and females fulfill each other in marriage. Through the cosmic principle, *Yin-yang*, and through its movement everything is transformed and ordered.

By the *yin-yang* principle, three entities have been created in the universe: heaven, earth, and humankind. However, they are not separate entities. Rather, they are the cosmic trinity interconnected with each other as an organic whole as father (heaven), mother (earth), and children (humankind) are interconnected in the family. Heaven is the origin of all things and through its interaction with earth all things are produced. Humankind receives the mandate from heaven and follows the mandate. The mandate is *changing* caused by the interaction of *yin* and *yang*. Heaven, earth, and humankind are in the constant process of communion and union so to speak.

Furthermore, this process of communion and union of the three entities goes beyond the limit of space and time. The universe and its space do not stay still but continue changing through production and reproduction. Therefore, if one knows the law of change, he or she can predict the change and in so doing he or she can transcend time by understanding the past and the future simultaneously. Therefore, Christian worship can be understood from the East Asian perspective because communion and union of heaven (God), earth (nature), and humankind and the transcendence of space and time take place in worship especially in the Eucharist.

In the second chapter, the author brings the topic of cosmology from the Bible to the table as a discussion on Christian worship and tries to find a connection with East Asian cosmology. Even though in Genesis God creates nature and humans, without nature and humans, the universe is not constituted. As the universe works in this cosmic trinity, so in Christian worship do these three entities work together. God is the initiator of worship and nature is the

bearer of divine quality. Humankind is a worshiper who has the vocation of bringing nature back to God with them. In this sense, Christian worship has “a function of the recovering wholeness within the cosmic trinity.”

This original wholeness of the cosmic trinity is restored through the Eucharist: “humankind (participants) and nature (bread and wine) come to God. God (Christ in the Holy Spirit) descends on and is present in the bread and wine which are accepted by the participants who are devoted to God again.” In the process of making the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ, spaces of each entity are broken down and the union between God and humankind, among human beings, and between humankind and nature take place.

Furthermore, in this process of breaking the space of three entities, three aspects of time: past, present, and future also break their barriers and are merged into the present. First, the past participates in the present. By remembering Christ in the Eucharist, the Last Supper of Jesus Christ in the past is not only recalled but re-experienced in the present. Second, the future participates in the present. By participating in the Eucharist, participants experience the kingdom meal to come.

For the next step, the author goes from the tradition of the Bible to the tradition of the early church in the third chapter. He differentiates five elements of the Eucharistic prayer from the perspective of union and communion from Eucharistic prayers of five traditions of the early church: 1) *incorporation with Christ*, 2) *Eucharist and community*, 3) *Eucharist and creation*, 4) *the past participating in the present*, 5) *the future participating in the present*.

First, Eucharistic prayers in Alexandrian traditions illustrate the element of incorporation with Christ by the participation in the sanctified bread and wine. Communion and union of the living and the dead are asked in the prayer and future transformation of nature is foretasted by the transformation of the bread and wine. With this prayer, they re-experience the sacrificial work of Christ in the present and in setting an offering on the altar, they await the Lord’s second coming.

Second, Eucharistic prayers in the Roman Tradition also display the theme of incorporation of Christ by asking for the forgiveness of sins. Union in the community is affirmed by the common acceptance of the Eucharistic gifts and the charity practiced among the community members. Creation is also affirmed by the transformation of the bread and wine into

the body and blood of Christ. The past is brought into the present through the memorial of Jesus' passion and the future is brought into the present through communicants' participation in the heavenly banquet to come.

Third, in Eucharistic prayers of West Syrian traditions, the theme of incorporation with Christ is supported by its emphasis on "the propitiation of God, forgiveness of sins, sanctification of people...and...the realization of salvation."¹ People are reconciled and united with each other through the Eucharist and creation is affirmed by sacramental gifts that are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The past participates in the present by reciting the event of the exodus and the future participates in the present by uniting the second coming of Jesus with his passion.

Fourth, in Eucharistic prayers in the Byzantine tradition, communicants are incorporated with Christ by receiving "sobriety, remission of sins, communion of the Holy Spirit, the fullness of the kingdom and an easy approach to God."² The community's unity is affirmed by the common participation of the sanctified Eucharistic gifts and God's creation is praised and by the praise and appreciation of God's creation. The sacrifice which Christ offered in the past is made real through the power of anamnesis. Communicants are lifted up to God's kingdom in which they will dwell in the future.

Fifth, in Eucharistic prayers in East Syrian traditions, people are incorporated into Christ by participating in the blessed and sanctified bread and wine. All people on earth, as one community, are offered up to God through petition and all creation in heaven and on earth declare God's glory. God's pledge of salvation in the past is re-presented in the present and the hope of the future resurrection comes alive with new life in the kingdom of heaven. In short, in these five traditions, communicants experience unity with each other, God, and nature and participate in the past and the future through the Eucharist.

In the final chapter, the author finally reaches the Eucharistic prayers of the modern churches and points out five common elements which he observed in the tradition of the early church. First, in a Eucharistic prayer of the Roman Catholic Church incorporation with Christ is revealed by addressing the gathering and union of all people to Christ, forgiveness of sin, and reception of communion. Through the prayer all saints who are living and dead are called to be united and the entire world is offered up. God's work of sanctification is expanded to all creation.

The past events of Christ participate in the present by being recalled and re-experienced and the future participates in the present in communicants' recall of the second coming of Christ.

Second, in a Eucharistic prayer of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America communicants are incorporated with Christ through forgiveness of sin. The community which joins in the Eucharist is expanded to the fellowship of all humanity and the whole church. And God's gift of creation is acknowledged as a means of God's blessing. The past and the future are brought into the present by recalling Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and anticipating "the great and promised feast."

Third, in a Eucharistic prayer of the Episcopal Church communicants participate in Christ's sacrifice by eating the bread and drinking the wine and through the Eucharist the unity of the Church becomes real. Furthermore, this unity goes further and is expanded to the unity of all of creation and the whole congregation of heaven and earth. The past events of Christ's salvific work and the future reality of the kingdom of God are joined together.

Fourth, in a Eucharistic prayer of the United Methodist Church communicants are incorporated with Christ through the Holy Spirit. All people on earth and the company of heaven are united by forming the body of Christ and nature is anticipated to be transformed and restored into the divine quality: the body of Christ. The saving work of the past is represented and re-experienced and God's final victory and heavenly banquet in the future are foretasted in the Eucharist.

Fifth, in a Eucharistic prayer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) communicants affirm their willingness to enter into communion with Christ and with one another by receiving Communion. Bread and wine are taken as a representation of creation. The salvation events of Christ in the past are brought to the present by looking back while the second coming is brought to the present by looking forward. Lastly, the author briefly points out that there are differences between Eucharistic prayers of the five churches even though they have these five common elements.

In conclusion, Dr. Cho goes back to the definition of Christian worship with which he began in the beginning of his work: "Christian worship...is basically the matter of these relationships among the cosmic trinity." God, nature, and humankind all participate in worship and are united. There is cosmic union and communion between these three entities in Christian

worship. In the Eucharistic prayers of early churches and modern churches we can find five common elements: incorporation with Christ, Eucharist and community, Eucharist and creation; the past participating in the present; and the future participating in the present.

Evaluation

The new perspective on Christian worship that Dr. Kee-Yeon Cho highlights in his work has two strengths in helping us understand worship more fully. First, nature is brought back to the relationship that God had intended at the beginning of creation. The Western twofold understanding of worship, seeing Christian worship as an event only between God and human, caused serious ecological problems, such as pollution and the green house effect which we are currently facing. Even though everything God created was good in God's eyes, humans degraded the value of nature and used it for their convenience and pleasure without care.³ Dr. Cho restores the position of nature in creation and worship by bringing a threefold understanding of cosmos. Nature which is represented in the Eucharist through the bread and wine is not just something humans can use carelessly. Rather, nature is something they should respect as a mother that produced humans through its interaction with God and heaven since God created humans from nature, "the dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7)

Similar to Dr. Cho there are western scholars trying to emphasize the importance of nature in the God-human relationship. For example, Theodore Lunyon argues that earth is God's original sacrament: "In the hands of Christ the sacrament is presented to us as *the earth in its original and eschatological form*. He (sic) takes the bread and wine, which are products of the earth and our ordinary world...and turns them into signs of his kingdom of justice and love."⁴ Nature is made divine not only after being consecrated in the Eucharist but also before the consecration because nature was, from its beginning, the channel of God's grace given to all human beings. James F. White also does not miss the importance of nature, as a means of God's gracious giving. In his understanding of sacraments as God's self giving: "Three conditions for self giving can be recognized: the self that is capable of giving, the recipient, and the means of giving."⁵ In other words, nature participating in the Eucharist through the bread and wine is not merely a medium helping to build a relationship between God and humans, rather, it is a crucial

part without which God's self giving cannot be made complete. Likewise, Dr. Cho upholds the importance of nature through an East Asian perspective of threefold cosmology and in doing so restores the role of nature making cosmic union possible in Christian worship.

Second, Dr. Cho's work calls for the necessity of worship as a human response to God for the cosmic union and communion. As he points out, the initiator of worship is God since the relationship between humans and God started with God's creation. Without God's action revealing God's self to humans, worship cannot take place. But without a human response to God's calling, worship cannot take place either. But when it is said that worship cannot take place, it does not just mean that a worship service does not take place but that, according to Dr. Cho, cosmic union and communion does not take place.

Even though nature is an important entity becoming something divine in the Eucharist, nature cannot bring itself to worship. It should be brought into worship by the hands of human beings. Therefore, a human response to God's call is necessary for cosmic union. In other words, a human act of worship goes ahead of nature's divinization. Only when humans respond to and worship God with nature can the union of the cosmic trinity take place and the joy that God had in the last day of creation, "It was *very good*" (Genesis 1:31) be complete.

However, Dr. Cho's work has a serious weakness even though there are strengths that we found in his work. The weakness is that from an Asian perspective, the threefold understanding of the cosmos which he brings up from the *Book of Changes* is unfamiliar to Asian people living today. The basic premise that he holds to support his argument is that we need an Asian perspective because "the traditional concept of worship is not relevant to the East Asian world with its different cosmology and culture."⁶ In other words, Christian worship should be understood through a threefold worldview in order that Asian people can understand Christian worship better.

But the problem is that this premise cannot be a solid foundation of his argument because one cannot say that the culture and worldview of Asian people in our time are more familiar to the threefold worldview from the *Book of Changes*. For example, Korean culture in our time is different from the culture of our ancestors 200 or 300 years ago. They might have had a threefold cosmology, but today's Asians, especially Korean Christians, do not have threefold cosmology. Their culture and worldview are hugely influenced by Western culture.

However, we do not argue that it is appropriate to define Asian culture as Western culture or that we need to get rid of the Eastern perspective in understanding Christian worship. Rather, we need to admit that the culture or worldview of Asians, including Koreans, is so called “Eastern-western culture or worldview.” Koreans for example, in many cases, do not know the *yin-yang* mechanism while they know about Newtonian physics quite well. Nature is exploited more in East Asian countries, such as Korea and China, because the traditional threefold worldview does not work in the life of Asian people. Therefore, Dr. Cho’s attempt to draw a conclusion for a new understanding of Christian worship for today from “traditional East Asian culture” does not have a solid foundation from its beginning per se.

Assessment

Despite an anachronistic approach to East Asian culture and an attempt to understand Christian worship through the culture, which has already been dismissed, Dr. Cho’s work can serve a meaningful role for today. It reminds its readers of their vocation: We are called to protect and care for nature. As the author constantly points out, nature is not a lower entity than humans. Rather, from an East Asian perspective it has a higher entity than humans because in the filial understanding the earth is a mother whom the children humankind should respect. We need to protect and care for nature, as we respect the mother in our family. Destroying nature is not just an act of destroying nature but an act of destroying the cosmic trinity which God had intended in the beginning of the cosmos.

Humans are called to be in a relationship with nature. If there had been only humans, God would not have said on the sixth day that “It’s very good to see,” because God was not pleased to see Adam alone. In other words, we are created in a relationship with other creatures as well as other human beings. This relationship with nature is crucial, because through nature we come to have a relationship with God. For example, the relationship we have with nature in the Eucharist is not ordinary but divine because nature represented through the bread and wine in the Eucharist comes to have a divine quality and becomes a means by which God communicates: “no matter how much of a mess God’s creatures make of things, God, the maker of all, still seeks to communicate through creation itself.”⁷ In this sense, destroying nature prevents God from

reaching humans and breaks the channel of God's communication to humans. Humans should protect and care for nature so that the world may reveal God's glory and goodness.⁸ When the union with God, humankind, and nature is restored through worship, God's joy in creation will be restored again.

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¹ Kee-Yeon Cho, *Worship as a Cosmic Event of Communion and Union: Christian Worship from an East Asian Perspective*, 114.

² *Ibid.*, 127

³ John Wesley points out that even killing animals without necessity is a problem: "The lion, the tiger, the shark, give them pain from mere necessity, in order to prolong their own life; and put them out of their pain at once. But the human shark, without any such necessity, torments them of his free choice." John Wesley, *The General Deliverance*. Recited from John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace & Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 53-54.

⁴ Theodor Runyon, *The Earth as the Original Sacrament* (TEOLOGIE FÜR DIE PRAXIS, 31. January 2005, Number 1-2), 19.

⁵ James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 16.

⁶ Kee-Yeon Cho, *Worship as a Cosmic Event of Communion and Union: Christian Worship from an East Asian Perspective*, 198.

⁷ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ's Feast With the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15: "[the world's]its intended foundational function is to reveal the goodness and love of God."