

Liturgical Inculturation in the Marriage and Funeral Rites of Korean Protestants

Ho Nam. Ph. D. Drew University, Madison, NJ. 1999.

Summary

In his dissertation, *Liturgical Inculturation in the Marriage and Funeral Rites of Korean Protestants*, Dr. Ho Nam tries to find a way to harmonize two different traditions – Christian gospel and Korean religious traditions – and to develop a model of liturgical inculturation for the Korean Church. In order to do perform this task, in the first chapter, he begins his discussion by defining the meaning of ritual and symbol. In his perspective, ritual is not necessarily a bastion of social conservatism. Rather, it is a media to “transit, transcend and transform the social structure,” as Victor Turner argues that ritual holds the generating source of culture and structure.¹ By giving opportunities to act and, in a sense, live in the alternative social structure for participants, ritual challenges the hierarchy of society and liberates participants through transformative performance.

We may need to remember, however, that understanding rituals cannot be separated from understanding the dynamics of symbols – not only what they do in the ritual but also in the social structure: “symbols could be used as instruments of expression, communication, knowledge, and control.” Symbols in rituals are elements to determine how people act and how social structures are framed. Symbols attain meaning through ritual actions and give its meaning to the culture so that people can live in it. Because culture is an ordered system of meaning and of symbols and religion is a system of symbols, culture and religion, especially Christianity, can encounter each other through the common point of “a system of symbols.”² In order to relate culture and religion, the author uses inculturation theology using Christianity as the servant of

culture and seeking the on-going dialogue between faith and culture: “both the liturgy and culture are able to evolve through mutual insertion and absorption without damage to each other’s identity.”

In the second chapter, the author brings different perspectives to the liturgical inculturation of Christianity in the Korean context by dividing things changeable from things unchangeable. While the Christian message, based on the Bible and the sound tradition, is unchangeable, form of liturgy is changeable “by the principle of careful investigation in theological and liturgical dimensions.” The first perspective he brings in is the *yin-yang* thinking, which is deeply rooted in the life of East Asian people and their rites, and contrasts the Aristotelian logic of “either-or”: “*Yin* presupposes the necessity of *yang*, and *yang* cannot exist without *yin*. Thus, the *yin-yang* thinking is a “both-and” way of thinking.” Even though *yin* and *yang* are different in many ways, rest and movement, being and becoming, responsiveness and creativity, etc., they are equal in nature and quality.

The second perspective he brings in is the concept of *Li* (Rite), which refers to the rules and prescriptions governing human behavior. *Li* is the basic principle of everything as well as the prime motivating force in a great ethical system governing the conduct of individuals and in maintaining social structure. Therefore, *Li* includes the basic principles of ritual pointing the way to God and expressing communal faith. Different from western notion of holiness based upon the distinction between sacred and secular, there is no such distinction for East Asian people, especially Koreans. Therefore, Korean forms of worship are more inclusive rather than excluding one in order to include the other.

The third perspective he brings is Syncretism, which means “the uniting of religious elements and different origin, or...the fusion of various beliefs and practices.” In his point of view, syncretism is not a bad thing in the process of Christianization, because it is an inevitable process in accepting Christianity coming from a cultural context to different cultural contexts. People in a different cultural context inevitably change the symbol of Christianity into their own symbols, while they keep its essence. As Christian liturgy has been developed through the syncretism with other cultures, Korean cultural-religious tradition can also contribute to Christian liturgy and forms of Christian liturgy can take a new form in Korean context.

In chapter three, the author analyzes the religious elements in Korean culture: “In Korean’s life, different religions—shamanism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism—coexist harmoniously.” Among these religious traditions, shamanism is the most pervasive form of religious culture in Korea, because shamanism seeks the practical blessings in this world by the help of spirits. In shamanism, especially, there is no distinction between sacred and secular. The *Dan Gun* myth, which explains how Koreans came into being, shows non-duality of humans and gods. This non-dualistic world view is also found in Mahayana Buddhism which has been dominant in Korean history. Attaining Nirvana is not escaping the secular world and entering the sacred world. Rather, it is transforming the present world into Nirvana. Even though Buddhism was an alien religion at first, the process of adjustment of Buddhism into Korean culture happened through a peaceful and reciprocal interchange.

Lastly, in Korea “Confucianism has been a way of life and system of political thought since ancient times.” Rites of Confucianism have, especially, been performed in Korea since the *Koryo* dynasty (A.D. 900-1400). Under the strong emphasis on filial piety, ancestor worship takes place several times each year as a family affair in the hope of good fortunes that their ancestors may bestow on them. However, because of its opposition to ancestor worship, Christianity in Korea conflicts with Confucianism and, in a broad sense, Korean culture. In order to solve the problem the author argues that bowing down in ancestor worship is an act of respect from the perspective of Korean culture rather than idolatry. Ancestor worship should be regarded as a Korean memorial service. Dr. Jung Young Lee says “for Christians, ancestor worship can best be expressed as worship *with* ancestors rather than worship *of* ancestors.”

In the last chapter, the author tries to present a new form of the marriage rite in the Korean cultural context. Biblically, marriage is a blessing that shows a gracious covenant with God and a consecration for life to be with one’s chosen partner. In the course of history, the concept of the marital ceremony has been changed from a domestic rite to a church rite, a sacrament, a divine creation and command or means of Christian assembly, and finally a covenant. However, in Korea marriage rites have reflected the order of the universe shown in Korean traditional thoughts, such as *yin-yang*: marriage is the combination of female, *yin*, and male, *yang*. In the understanding of the Korean traditional world view, the author presents a new form of marriage service:

<The Marriage Service>

Gathering : Lighting Candles and Prayer

Word of God: Scripture Reading, The Gospel Reading, and Hymn

The Marriage: Exchange of Bows and Marriage Vows

Eucharist: The Great Thanksgiving, The Lord's Prayer, Breaking the Rice Cake, Giving the Rice
Cake and Cup, and Prayer

Declaration of Marriage: Announcement of the Marriage, Exhortation, and Bow to Parents

Dismissal with Blessing: Going Forth

Also in the last chapter, the author tries to present a new form of funeral rite in the Korean context. Historically, Christians viewed death fearfully but also with hope for future resurrection and eternal life. During the Reformation era the emphasis of the funeral rites was transferred from liturgical elements, such as singing psalms and antiphons, to the preaching of the Word. In the Modern era, paschal images and the eschatological hope of resurrection in the Christian funeral has been emphasized. On the contrary, Korean funeral rites have not only been a filial obligations but the fulfillment of social and cosmic obligation, because they have been generated on the basis of cosmic order and principles: "It is another beginning to have a relationship between ascendant and descendant in the cosmic order." In the understanding of Korean culture, the author presents a new form of funeral and committal services:

<The Funeral Service>

Opening: beating the Puk (barrel
drum) slowly three times

Burning incense

Bowing

Prayer

Hymn

Psalm

Scripture Reading

<The Committal Service>

Greeting

Hymn

Prayer

Scripture Reading

Sermon

Casting Earth

The Lord's Prayer

Hymns

Sermon
Burning Incense and Bowing
Hymn

Burning Incense, Dedication of
Wine,
and Bowing
Benediction

Evaluation

Dr. Nam's attempt to find a new form of marriage and funeral rite in the Korean context has two meaningful points which open our eyes to see Christian ritual and faith. First, ritual is a microcosm reflecting human life: what values and worldviews people have and how they act. Ritual is not just a performance taking place at a specific time and place. Rather, as he points out, it is a means to control the social structure in which people live: it has power. Symbolic acts or roles in ritual guide and lead people to live out the role assigned to them in society. For example, the symbol of cross leads people who participate in Christian worship to live a life of sacrifice and obedience to God's word in the community to which they belong. In this sense, ritual or Christian worship is not something we can change into whatever we wish for our personal favor. Rather, it is a serious business we must take seriously not only for ourselves but also for the society as a whole.

Second, Christian faith has been formed through the process of inculturation. The necessity of inculturation of Christian worship or liturgy comes not only from who we are (Korean, Indian, or American, etc.) but from who God is and how God works, as it is shown in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. As Christ humbled himself and became a human (Philippians 2:6-8), in other words inculturated himself, we, especially Protestants, need to pay attention to how we inculturate Western liturgy in a different context – the context of Korean culture. This is because “Protestant churches, by and large, have an undeveloped theology of the incarnation.”³ But, the fact of the matter is that in Korea, accepting traditional elements of Korean ritual, such as ancestor worship, has been a huge issue for controversy or conflict within Christianity as well as, needless to say, with non-Christians. Therefore, his attempt to embrace Korean traditional elements, such as beating the *Puk* (barrel drum) three times in the beginning of the funeral

service and bowing down, is to give an opportunity for readers to take the things which they have easily neglected seriously.⁴

The basis of his argument for inculturation, however, does not come from the beauty of Korean culture. Rather, it comes from how Christian faith has existed: the history of Christian mission is the history of inculturation. A David J. Bosch points out: “The Christian faith never exists except as ‘translated’ into a culture.”⁵ The question that we should deal with, therefore, is how to deliver the Christian message rather than what form it should take. As long as the Christian message, which is unchangeable, is delivered to people in a different cultural context, there should be flexibility of form, which is changeable.

However, despite his creative attempt to embrace Korean culture in Christian worship, there are two weaknesses I would like to point out. First, his rationale to accept ancestor worship can be interpreted as justification of idol worship. Even though he says that “the act of bowing down is an expression of filial piety...the ancestral tablet becomes a memorial. It is not an idol,” the issue is not our intention when we bow down before tablets of ancestors, but what meaning is received by other people, especially those who lack faith. Someone may say: “This is just a memorial. This is just a stone and wood. We are not worshipping but venerating ancestors.” But, the issue is not just how *we* feel but how *others* feel. That is why Apostle Paul is so concerned about the faithful in the church of Corinth and rebuked those who thought they had knowledge and ate food sacrificed to idols: “For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge” (1Corinthians 9:10-11). Despite the possibility of such misunderstandings, however, the author does not give satisfactory rationale to support his argument Biblically. Although he presents Mark 10:45, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many,” the primary intention of Jesus in this verse is not to accept other cultural elements in danger of misleading people but to sacrifice himself to save them. As long as there is no biblical support in accepting ancestor worship, his argument could be easily understood as justification of idol worship.

Second, in some places the author is missing the point of why a specific order of new forms of marriage, funeral, and committal service should be there. Even though he explains

different perspectives, such as *yin-yang* thinking, the *Li* concept, and Korean traditional elements, which he can bring into Christian liturgy, in some places there is no clear explanation why specific orders of worship he presents should be in the service. For example, even though the author adds the lighting of candles and Eucharist in marriage rites, there is no theological explanation of “what it means” and “what it does.” Even in the Committal Service, there is no explanation why there should be burning of incense and the dedication of wine. We can bring elements from Korean tradition, not simply because we are Korean but because there is some connection between the Christian message and Korean tradition in the symbolic act.

Assessment

Despite the weaknesses that I pointed out above, Dr. Nam’s dissertation has merit for Christians today as well as for Korean-American Christians: the Christian faith can be set up by “both-and” thinking. In the history of Korean Christianity, Korean traditional elements have in many ways been neglected, especially in the order of worship. The order of worship in Korean churches and Korean-American churches in the United States are not different from those of American churches even in the marriage and funeral services. They have nearly the same liturgy that American churches have. It seems they are saying that there should be either Western liturgy or Korean tradition, or more radically saying that, “There should be either Christ or Korean traditions.”

However, by bringing in *yin-yang* thinking and the *Li* concept, Dr. Nam helps us to open our eyes to see the other side of the picture which we have not seen before. Choosing Korean traditional elements does not mean excluding of Christianity or opposing to western Christian tradition. As *yin* and *yang* always work together, so two different traditions can work together because they are under the one principle which rules everything, like *Li*. God’s creation cannot be separated from God’s salvation, despite its corruption due to the sin of humans, because where there is no creation, there cannot be salvation.⁶ We need creation *and* salvation. We need both.

Likewise, we need the Christian message and Korean forms of worship in the context in which we live in order to find the point where the Christian message and Korean culture meet

together. This “both-and” thinking is not a way to avoid the conflict which can occur through the emergence of two different traditions, rather, it is a way to embrace the conflict to find out a better way to worship God and deliver the Christian message effectively in a given context. Opposition to accepting Korean cultural elements can be the easiest way to have worship, but it can also be the easiest way to miss the heart of the Christian message, incarnation.

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¹ Concerning Turner’s argument on potentiality of ritual to transform social structure, see Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974); *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987); *From Ritual to Theatre: The Seriousness of Human Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982); *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969); *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974)

² Clifford Geertz defines religion as “A System of symbols.” For reference, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973)

³ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 512.

⁴ Beating the *Puk* (barrel drum) three times represents the presence of the trinity and bowing down, especially the act of the pastor bowing down twice in a funeral service shows respect to the deceased, which has become *yin*:

“According to the *yin-yang* principle, the deceased and even numbers are included in *yin*.” Ho Nam, *Liturgical Inculturation in the Marriage and Funeral Rites of Korean Protestants*, 242.

⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 447.

⁶ Jung Young Lee, *The Perfect Realization of Change: Jesus Christ*, Edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Faces of Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 63: “Salvation is presupposed in creation, but creation is absolutely necessary to salvation because salvation means a return to the original creation.”