Evaluating the Influence of Shamanism
On Protestant Christian Mission and Ministry
In South Korea

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ABSTRACT—Korean shamanism, the oldest form of religion in Korea, has been the most powerful religious force dominating Koreans’ lives. It has also exerted a prominent influence on the imported religions including Protestant Christianity. It is believed that certain characteristics of Korean shamanism have played both positive and negative roles in relationship to Protestant Christian mission and ministry in South Korea. ‘Hananim,’ the concept of one supreme god over many spirits in shamanism, was helpful bridge to Protestant Christianity and helped Korean people accept the notion of Christian God. The emphasis on this-worldly wish-fulfillment of Korean shamanism has functioned as a catalyst to spread the Gospel especially in Korean charismatic mega-churches. The function of shaman, as a mediator between gods and human beings helped Koreans understand Jesus as our Mediator with ease. Traditional Korean spirituality energized Christian mission remarkably. On the other hand, Korean shamanism was a negative influence on the Protestant Christian mission. The concept of ‘Hananim’ in shamanism has no precise idea of redemption and judgment. The shaman is merely human being, thus unqualified to become the sacrifice for mankind like Jesus. Korean shamanism also tends to lead people to fatalism, and focuses on temporal pleasure and amusement. Therefore, keeping shamanism’s positive parallel concepts of Protestant church and its indigenous forms with Christian truth, we should overcome its heretical beliefs and negative elements.
I. Introduction

The folk religion of Korean shamanism has been in existence since the beginning of Korean history. Thus, most Korean people were exposed to shamanistic beliefs before the coming of all the imported religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. Shamanism—a form of belief common to all tribes ranging throughout north-east Asia, Mongolia and Siberia—became the most prominent religious force dominating Koreans' lives (Eliade, 1964, p. 461f; Clark, 1932, p. 174). As the foundation of Korean religion and culture, shamanism has focused especially on common people. Through shamanism they have dealt with their sufferings and oppressions. This is one of the primary reasons why shamanism, as the spiritual core of the Korean character, continues to be practiced by a large number of Koreans (Choi, 2006, p. 271). As Harvey Cox comments, “shamanism never dies” because “it is just too deeply lodged in the inner recess of the human psyche” (Cox, 1995, p. 255).

The worldview of shamanism is polytheism and poly-demonism, and animistic worship of spirit beings, spiritual exorcism, direct communication with the spirits and healing are the major features of shamanism (Clark, 1932, p. 173). Shamanistic beliefs and practices are focused on this-worldly wish fulfillment such as longevity, health, wealth, success in business, and male births. As a religious and cultural heritage of Korea, shamanism has also exercised a powerful influence on the imported religions. Thus, newly introduced religions had to recognize the unique characteristics of shamanism and incorporate the parallel ideas to be accepted by the Koreans. Protestant Christianity was no exception. Scholars have argued that the dramatic growth of Protestantism in South Korea was partly due to the way certain practices of the church agreed with those of the shamanistic tradition (Cox, 1995, pp. 219-255; Kim, 2000, pp. 117-133; Kim, 1999, pp. 123-139). This study assesses the influence of Korean shamanism on Protestant Christian mission and ministry.

II. Major Characteristics of Korean Shamanism
A. The Concept of Hananim

Korean shamanism developed a concept of a hierarchy of the gods. Above all the spirits stood one supreme god named Hananim. Hananim was worshiped as the celestial god of the heavenly kingdom (Palmer, 1967, p. 208). As a polytheistic religion, Korean shamanism does worship numbers of spirits, but the supreme god is Hananim. He is the highest deity in the religious culture of Korea from the primitive times and every Korean knows and believes in the existence and power of him. In Korean shamanism, Hananim is believed to govern the universe and control the lives of people through the powers entrusted to lesser gods, ranked according to their functions (Jo, 1983, pp. 94-103). Like Jehovah of the Jewish Old Testament, he is believed to have created human beings and the world. Hence, in times of adversity, Korean people prayed to Hananim for his help as well as for his power to overcome difficulties beyond the reach of their power.

B. View of Human Being

In the worldview of Korean shamanism, a human being is an integral part of the rhythm of nature (Hahm, 1988, p. 61). Under shamanistic view, a human being has a physical body, breath of life, and a soul. When one dies, it is believed that one’s physical body perishes and become extinct, but the soul departs for another world which implies the belief in the immortality of a soul. An individual has always been a part of the world even after death. Chu-kun Chang asserts that, “Man is so closely intertwined with the terrestrial forces of nature, in fact, man without nature would be impossible and nature without man inconceivably irrelevant. Man lives in and with nature, and has with it a relationship which is neither amicable nor antagonistic” (Chang, 1988, p. 51). Korean shamanism embraces all elements of difference and centers on “the condition of being fully human” in which human beings actualize their full human potential in relationship with other creatures, nature, even the dead and spiritual being (Kim, 2004, p. 72). The shamanistic ritual (gut in Korean) has acted as a harmonizing principle among all these relationship.

C. Emphasis on This-Worldly Life Affairs
Gut is an attempt to bring about reconciliation between human beings and spirit beings while exorcism is the center of this ritual (Kwon, 2004, pp. 31-45. For more elaborate study of Korean shamanistic practices, see Lee, 1981; Guisso and Yu, 1988; Kendall, 1985; idem, 1988). Many kinds of gut have been held when disasters happen, such as diseases, family problems, and natural calamities. The gut concentrated on resolving han (“wounded heart,” Park, 1993, p. 20) of the ordinary people by exorcising evil spirits and finally by proclaiming material blessings. Korean shamanism has thus catered this-worldly blessings to Koreans. As such, it focuses on this-world which is always concerned with the human beings (Hahm, 1988, p. 60). Unlike other religions which emphasize on another world beyond death, shamanism emphasizes this world in which urgent needs in life are at hand. Such an emphasis on the fulfillment of material wishes as well as providing instantaneous practical solution to one’s problems in this world are the appealing features of this folk religion.

D. Function of the Shaman (Mudang)

One dominant character of Korean shamanism is female leadership. While there are some male shamans (baksu in Korean), the majority are females (mudang in Korean). Joan Halifax, an anthropologist who observed Korean shamans, has stated that “the most numerous and spiritually powerful shamans in Korea are female possession trancers, called mudang” (Halifax, 1982, p. 84). While the main figures in other religions are mostly males, shamanism stands as the one symbol of female authority. The shaman has an important function in Korean society (cf. Ryu, 1965, pp. 15-30). The mudang has a priestly function. She is believed to have the power to mediate between human beings and a spirit-god. She is an intermediary who can link the living with the spiritual world where the dead reside, solving conflicts between the living and the dead. George Heber Jones (1867-1919), an early Protestant missionary, emphasized that Koreans were very religious because they had established an inter-communicative dimension between humans and spiritual entities. Koreans found spiritual fulfillment in “the system of spirit worship which is technically known as shamanism” (Jones, 1895, pp. 146-149; cited in Oak, 2010, p. 105).
III. Evaluation of the Influence of Korean Shamanism on Protestant Church

A. Parallel Concepts of Shamanism to Those of Christian Mission and Ministry

First of all, the concept of Hananim (one supreme god over many spirits) in Korean shamanism was a particularly helpful bridge to Protestant Christianity. The earlier Protestant missionaries perceived that “the concept of Hananim has monotheistic implications that are unique to Korean shamanism” (Pak, 2005, p. 23. See also Hulbert, 1906, p. 404; Underwood, 1910, pp. 103-111; Clark, 1932, p. 196). They appreciated Hananim as a distinctive Korean deity suited to their own image of God and identified him with the biblical God (Grayson, 1985, p. 137; Oak, 2010, p. 109). Palmer thus contended that “As a personal transcendent God, clearly the supreme deity of the Korean people, Hananim was uniquely suited to prepare the Korean people for belief in the Christian God” (Palmer, 1967, p. 16). Consequently, the term Hananim was officially adopted by Korean Protestant churches in 1912 (Chung and Oh, 2001, p. 178). This official adoption of the term was fundamentally significant in providing a point of contact between Korean religious culture and the imported faith, thereby allowing for a smooth transition from the native concept of God to that of the Christian image (Kim, 2000, p. 123). It helped Korean people to accept with little reservation the notion of Christian God and His heavenly world. Regarding the remarkable growth of Protestantism in South Korea, Ruth A. Tucker claims, “One of the reasons for this may have been the Protestants’ use of the Korean term Hananim for God” (Tucker, 1983, p. 455). Therefore, it is convincing that the concept of Hananim has functioned positively for the Protestant church’s mission and growth in South Korea.

Second, the emphasis on this-worldly practical solution jackpot aspect of Korean shamanism functioned as an advantage of Christian mission. A rapidly growing interest in both physical health and material abundance here and now, a salient undercurrent of Koreans’ religious beliefs, was also emphasized in Korean Protestantism (Kim, 2000, pp. 129-130). Following shamanism, Korean charismatic mega-church appealed to many ordinary people focusing on present material prosperity. Especially Korean Pentecostalism succeeded because it combined Christianity with what Harvey Cox calls “huge
chunks of indigenous Korean shamanism” (Cox, 1995, p. 222). Boo-Woong Yoo asks: why the ordinary people, particularly women, go to shamans? They go “because they need health, wealth, and success in their life ventures. Dr. Cho[ex-senior pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, the largest church in the world]’s preaching meets exactly those needs. . . Rev. Cho’s preaching satisfies the needs of the majority of the Korean people” (Yoo, 1985, pp. 73-74). Whether this is conscious syncretism or the influence of the “aura” of shamanism is debatable. However, Korean Pentecostal leaders deny that there is any admixture of shamanism in their Pentecostalism. Yet a senior pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, Young Hoon Lee, points out that shamanism influenced Korean Christianity and its “emphasis on the present and on material blessings” made these major concerns for Korean Christianity (Lee, 1996, 19-20, 25). By this, Protestant Christianity in South Korea shares a similarity of features with shamanism.

Third, the priestly function of the shaman as a mediator between gods and human beings helped Koreans to easily accept the idea of a Savior who came to this world to intercede between God and human beings. Likewise, when the mudang performed gut to heal and liberate people from their disease and han, Koreans could understand the parallelism that Jesus came to this world to heal and liberate the sick and the oppressed (Luke 4:18). Gut has both curative and exorcising functions, and disease-curing and exorcising of evil spirits are the most important functions of shamans. The power encounter of healing is especially “a major point of contact between shamanism and Protestantism” (Oak, 2010, p 96). Christian accounts of the miraculous power of Jesus Christ correlate well with the indigenous folk belief in the magical power. This element of enchantment proved to be eminently favorable to the spread of Christianity in South Korea (Kim, 2000, pp. 125-126). The emphasis of faith-healing in the sermons was paralleled by Korean Protestants’ widespread belief in miracles of healing. Thus, Kyoko Fuchigami maintains that the immediate cause of the rapid growth of the Korean church was “the healing activity of Korean Christian ministers” influenced by Korean shamanism (Fuchigami, 1992, p. 34).

Lastly, the shamanistic faith provided for Koreans the enthusiasm for their mission engagement. Jones understood that because Koreans had a tendency to spiritualize all natural things and had a sense of dependence on an existence superior to themselves, they were incredibly religious. He appreciated this spirituality of Korean
shamanism, which was able to pave the way for the Christian idea of
divine-human communion (Jones, 1901, pp. 37-41; 1908, p. 11; cited
Seoul National University, has provided insight into the relationship
between Korean spirituality and Christian mission. Ahn asserts that
the mission spirituality in Korean Christian draws deeply from the
spiritual roots of Korean shamanistic culture (Ahn, 2009). He claims
that traditional Korean spirituality energized Christian Korean
mission and this has now taken on Korean forms such as early
morning prayer and all-night prayer. No one can doubt the impact of
Korean mission activity globally in recent years.

B. Negative Influences on Christian Mission and Ministry

While it is true that Korean shamanism has had positive influences
on the Christian mission and ministry of Korean Protestant
Christianity, it has also exerted negative influences on Christian
ministry in Korean churches.

First of all, the concept of Hananim in Korean shamanism is not to
be identified with Christian God in Scripture. Christian God focuses
on individuals and personal relationships, while shamanic god is
impersonal. Shamanists do not seem to be much concerned with the
idea of sin or justice because Hananim does not appear to care. Thus,
they are ignorant of both the concept of sin and the relationship
between God and human being, and have no knowledge about the
plan of redemption and judgment. As Charles A. Clark observes, “As
to [the] ideas of sin and questions of morality, shamanism does not
seem to have been very much exercised” (Clark, 1932, p. 196).
Therefore, the Christian God should not be distorted as shamanic god
in order for humans to receive blessings. Instead, humans are called
to communicate with and follow God.

Second, shamanists in Korea are preoccupied with seeking simply
earthly blessing. This sheer realism brings an immediate fulfillment
of their material needs. Believers in shamanism are merely interested
in enjoying every present moment of their lives and sitting around
waiting for a stroke of good fortune, instead of planning and
preparing for the future by themselves (Choi, 2006, p. 270). In the
practice of shamanism, people cannot receive the blessings without
fear and must have mudang and gut ritual. From the Christian
perspective, however, blessings are freely given through the covenant
with God. Hiebert delineates the source of blessing as follows: “The
fertility of women, livestock, and fields was promised to those who kept God’s covenant and observed his precepts (Deut. 28:1-14)” (Hiebert, 1999, p. 136). It is believed that this biblical concept of God’s blessing of humankind became distorted within the Korean (Pentecostal) church. In non-Pentecostal circles, there has been ongoing debate on whether the Pentecostal church was influenced by Korean shamanism (For the debate, see Yoo, 1985, pp. 70-74; Son, 1983, pp. 333-337; Fuchigami, 1992, pp. 33-59; Cox, 1995, chapter 12; Hollenweger, 1997, pp. 99-105). Thus, Korean Protestantism is supposed to emphasize the blessings based on the covenant with God.

Thirdly, although some roles of a mudang as a mediator appear similar to Jesus’ role, they are substantially different. Jesus, the Son of God, offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for freeing humanity from the bondage of sin and gave people freedom from sin. The mudang, however, is only a human being and cannot offer herself as a sacrifice for anyone’s sin. She is incapable of giving or freeing anyone from sin. The priestly function of the mudang has encouraged a spirit of dependency on people. When faced with a difficulty, a person simply goes to the mudang for assistance to resolve the problem. Whereas in Christianity, Jesus will help us to resolve the problem with our free will.

Lastly, Korean shamanism tends to focus on recreational hedonism. This is evident in the entertaining function of gut (Pak, 2005, p. 31). In shamanism, one’s destiny or fate is controlled, not by one’s own decision, but by supernatural powers. This easily descends into fatalism, and such fatalism brings a focus on temporal pleasure and amusement (Ryu, 1978, pp. 345-346). Such hedonistic attitude leads people to pray for the fulfillment of earthly desires. Hence the believers in shamanism lack appropriate historical perspectives and ethics. Thus, Korean shamanism has not left much significant historical and cultural heritage.

IV. Conclusion

Shamanism is still practiced and accepted in Korean society. One of the reasons for it is that shamanism deals with the present needs of human beings. In this pluralistic religious world, people want to have direct answers to existential inquiries and future matters. Shamanism has interests in those felt-needs of people. This is one reason why shamanism has survived throughout the history of Korea. In spite of
the explicit flaws and heretical elements, Protestant Christianity should not eradicate the positive aspects of the religious function of Korean shamanism as long as positive aspects are parallel and consistent with Protestant church beliefs and values. As Hunter suggests, one cannot destroy indigenous forms, but one can put the foreign meaning of Christianity into the indigenous form (Hunter, 2003, p. 84). Christian gospel needs to be contextualized into Korean shamanistic culture and transform the culture with the transforming power of the gospel. Therefore, overcoming the negative elements of Korean shamanism, as well as keeping its positive aspects, is one of the challenges that Korean Protestant Christianity faces today to build an effective mission strategy.

References


