

# The failings of success

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS MEANING IN MODERN KOREAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

*A truly religious person does not rashly hope in the world, but religiously wants success and failure to signify equally much, that is, equally little, and does not want the religious to have significance by way of or along with something else, but wants it to have absolute meaning in itself. (Søren Kierkegaard)<sup>1</sup>*

In 1987, Ahmad Aijaz was moved to take issue with Fred-eric Jameson's assertion that there was a category called Third World Literature that had to be defined exclusively in terms of "the experience of colonialism and imperialism."<sup>2</sup> There was no such thing as Third World Literature, he countered, and the definition provided for this imagined category was a sheer imposition.

*If this 'Third World' is constituted by the singular 'experience of colonialism and imperialism,' and if the only possible response is a nationalist one, then what else is there that is more urgent to narrate than this 'experience'? In fact, there is nothing else to narrate. For...if the motivating force for history here is neither class formation and class struggle nor...conflicts based upon class, gender, nation, race, region, and so on, but the unitary 'experience' of national oppression...then what else can one narrate but that national oppression?<sup>3</sup>*

We could, in the case of Korean history writing, relate this to the move that some of us have engaged in to break away from an exclusively political representation of Korea's recent history, but I want to apply the sharp edge of Aijaz Ahmed's argument more specifically to the continued subscription to prescriptive political categories in modern Korean historiography that allows no independent narrative for religion as a historically relevant agent of change. For modern Korean historiography is largely a story of the politization<sup>4</sup> of Korean history, whereby the extraordinary richness of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century especially is forced into a procrustean bed of predominantly post-colonial categories and terminology. Even though some of the most recent studies of Korea's modern history offer some variety of approach, there is a question whether this variety itself does not stem from an attempt to conquer the richness of the historical experiences of the time.<sup>5</sup> Partly by considering Korea as a partner in the debates

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Two ages: The age of revolution and the present age* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 13.

2 Aijaz Ahmed, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'," in *Social Text* 17 (1987), reprinted in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 78.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

4 I am using this word, "politization," in the sense often used to refer to the habit of relating human phenomena to political frameworks, whereby it is presumed that their real meaning is illuminated. A good analysis of this habit is found in Marjun Anttonen, "The Politization of the Concepts of Culture and Ethnicity: an Example from Northern Norway," in *Anthropology Today* 14.1 (1998): pp. 7–15. But the term is itself of older lineage, and its use and elaboration in the early 1960s by the "religious" sociologist, Jacques Ellul, underlines a central point in this paper, that we need to recover a language through which to express the perspectives, motivations and objectives of religious figures and movements in history.

that occupied the peoples of all Northeast Asia at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, Andre Schmid has made a good start on rectifying the thinness of the terms used in modern Korean history writing,<sup>6</sup> but there is scope for much more effort in this direction.

Indeed, a new challenge has arisen in the form of a virulently politizing application of the doctrine of post-colonialism, one that locates the history of Christianity in Korea within the political objectives of western nations, and thereby ensures not only that these nations and not Korea remain in the centre of the stage but also that the western academies that champion such political theories can perpetuate their presumption of being the academic metropole for knowledge and understanding of the supposedly post- but still-colonized world. As much as this post-colonial doctrine might appear supportive of nationalistic complaints and accusations made by members of this other world,<sup>7</sup> it is in fact one of the more serious forms of cultural imperialism to issue from the contemporary western academic environment. In the spirit of Ahmad Aijaz and with as much justification, we should demand to know on whose authority the experience of Koreans and of Korean Christianity from the 1870s to the present day must be subsumed under the category of the post-colonial, and question this imposition on Korean history of a scheme whereby its chief agents are non-Koreans and historians can narrate only a single, unitary political determinant. We need to question further why contemporary Korean academics' understanding of the thought, perspectives and culture of the people who live on the Korean peninsula must follow the modernist and post-modernist paths prescribed by academics elsewhere in order to gain recognition, and why the narrative of their own recent history must and can only follow a progression from pre-colonial to colonial to postcolonial.

To say that all the strands in Korea's modern history are necessarily conditioned by the political forces of imperialism, nationalism, and neo-colonialism is to say, in effect, that any experience or movement operating within

that historical space that is not relatable to these political contexts is either not real or is an instance of false consciousness. Even if, for the sake of argument, we were to concede that they must therefore be categorized as false consciousness, that would not dispose of the question whether false consciousness ever has crucial effects on historical outcomes. But false consciousness is no longer a category that is fashionable, and the common position is simply that they are not relevant to historical outcomes, or in other words they are not historically real, except in so far as they are adjuncts to political power.

The politization of history enjoys a wide provenance and has determined historical understanding of the relation between religion and history, even where the formative role of religion is recognized. For such recognition is only up to a point, a point where the religious is given its true worth through a political consummation. A case in point is the religious-political connection espoused in the pioneering work on women's history in Europe carried out by Gerder Lerner in the early 1990s.

*The insight that religion was the primary arena on which women fought for hundreds of years for feminist consciousness was not one I had previously had.... I listened to the voices of forgotten women and accepted what they told me.... Women's striving for emancipation was acted out in the arena of religion long before women could conceive of political solutions for their situation.<sup>8</sup>*

What is germane here is not only Lerner's recognition that religion had historical agency, but also that it did so only in default of political options, which are presumed to be on a higher and historically much more important level.<sup>9</sup> This we might term the politization of the modern historian's consciousness.

Given how extensively this politized consciousness pervades modern historiography, it is not surprising that it informs mainstream historical writings on modern

5 Cf. Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 12ff.

6 Andre Schmid, *Korea Between Empires: 1895-1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

7 As an example of such an approach, see Ryu Taeyöng 유대영, *Kaehwagi Chosön-gwa weguk sön'gyosa* 개화기 조선과 외국 선교사, (Seoul 서울: Han'guk Kidokkyo yöksa yön'gusa 한국기독교역사연구소, 2004), in which, ironically, the author claims that western scholars are unable to appreciate the truth of the post-colonial approach to Korea. A more balanced use of the theory is found in a recent work by Choi Hyeaweol, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea: New Women, Old Ways* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), although the idea that the application of the postcolonial theory to Korean Christian experience represents some kind of breakthrough is strongly evident, and does lead to some procrustean passages. To be sure, a postcolonial approach does provide a different perspective, but that cannot be its own justification.

8 Gerder Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. vii-viii.

Korea. One could argue that in the case of Korea, this consciousness is more pronounced, and is possibly required by the nature of Korea's modern history itself. The literary scholar Kim Uchang, for instance, has pointed out that although in East Asian tradition culture is supposed to work from the inside as a civilizing agent that determines the outer, material world, including state policy, this ideal order "has been completely reversed in the actual historical unfolding of events in modern Korea," so that the consequent wholesale yielding of cultural activity, including scholarship, to politics has itself become "part of the dynamics of culture."<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, the idea that religions suggested ideas and directions of change to significant numbers of Koreans, that they inspired whole programs of social reform and that they motivated national leaders and their followers to take decisive action in relation to the challenges of their times—in short, that religious beliefs determined key positions historical figures held and acted upon—goes against most interpretations of modern Korean history. Instead, religion is viewed as a matter of personal idiosyncrasy rather than as a body of beliefs and observances structuring its adherents' conceptual world and providing them with the metaphors by which they lived and sought to change their society. Even when some historical agency is admitted for ideas, these ideas are almost entirely political or ideological. And where religions have been allowed, belatedly, some historical significance, they possess this significance only by way of or along with something else, which is to say that religions have no particular agenda of their own, or are admitted meaning primarily in relation to agendas that originate elsewhere.

The most outstanding problem with this dominant view of the relation of religion to history in modern Korea is the judgment that precisely where Christian religious movements and their members succeeded in terms of their own agendas, they were failures in terms of the nation's history. Having succeeded in transmitting to a reasonably large minority of fellow Koreans the basic premises of Christianity, its impartial inclusion of all peoples, its

timeless call for individual and communal holiness, and the relation of all temporal objectives to the eternal destiny of each human being, they were accused of becoming distracted and useless, even at times fifth columnists.

Perhaps the most outstanding contributive element in this judgment is the lack of language with which to express religion in history. Behind this lack of terms and categories to represent in historical terms the inspirations, motivations and immediate and final objectives of the religious, lies a number of developments in societies around the globe, of which I will briefly mention only two: the substitution of materialist for spiritual worldviews, and the actual rise of secular societies and related theories of secularisation.

The Russian Vekhi group of intellectual activists, led by Chestov, Berdyaev, and the like, had viewed the changes sweeping their world from the mid-nineteenth century in religious terms and had developed a language that accorded with this worldview.<sup>11</sup> But they lost the language battle to Lenin, under whom the Bolsheviks realised they had to change the religious terminology, not only of the Vekhi of course but of the whole established Russian Orthodox edifice, and replace it consciously with historical-materialist terminology. Such became the central thrust of the USSR education system.<sup>12</sup>

The rise of secularism, or at least of the secularisation thesis of secular society's inexorable replacement of the failing sacred orders of civilization around the globe, has played a large part in the loss of language to express the religious in history. The secularisation thesis has a long and involved history, and has recently undergone a flurry of revisions, and so I will not go into such a huge topic here except to note a couple of conclusions drawn from the thesis that appear to be *non-sequiturs*. In those areas of the world where religious belief declined, religion did in fact lose agency in a general sense as well as politically. However, it does not follow that the point of view of those who used to or still do hold religious beliefs—that is, that religious beliefs did determine the shape of societies and histories—was itself mistaken. Yet not believing religion is

9 Which is very interesting, given that for some time now it has been recognized that education and employment have been more effective than political franchise in achieving progress on women's livelihood issues. Religion was, after all, the sphere of education and extra-familial employment for women over many centuries, and remains so.

10 Uchang Kim, "The Agony of Cultural Construction: Politics and Culture in Modern Korea," in *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, edited by Hagen Koo (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 166 & 194.

11 See Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1936 [Trans. George Reavey]), and Christopher Read, *Religion, Revolution and the Russian Intelligentsia, 1900-1912* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

12 See my chapter, "The Place of Religion in North Korean Ideology," in *Korea: The Past and the Present*, edited by Susan Pares and J. E. Hoare (Folkstone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2008), p. 249.

true and believing religious beliefs have not shaped history continues to be a common conflation.

From this conflation has issued a lack of interest in the content of religious belief<sup>13</sup> and a focus on what we might call the non-religious, social reasons for religious movements, a focus that is encouraged by the belief that religious doctrines in and of themselves are not the motivating forces of history. When looking at the social activities of religious movements, sociologists and historians almost invariably analyse these movements as if these social activities were the religious movements' cause. This *non sequitur* in turn has led to a misreading of religious leaders' inspirations, motivations and objectives. The consequence of this misreading is a serious misunderstanding of the relation between religion and social change. Put another way, it sets aside as of no account the conceptual nature of religion when examining its relation to history and society.

One element in this tendency to ignore the nature and content of religious systems seems certainly to stem from what Terry Eagleton has termed the appalling ignorance of theology among his intellectual peers.<sup>14</sup> Partly, I believe his complaint issues from his own Catholic background—and he does typify the journey a number of Jesuit scholars have taken from a transcendent moral cosmology to an immanent moral ideology. But he attributes to this ignorance the now common failure to appreciate that theologies and their equivalents have been the frameworks through which life in all its dimensions has been grasped and grappled with, and have thereby played a dominant role in the development of human culture, thought and civilization.

For the big, basic questions that religions addressed did not disappear with the rise of materialist interpretations of history or of the secular state. Recognition of the sacred and saintly kept re-emerging even in the representations Marxist ideology made of its own role and value, as it had to, for the moral fervour of the ideology was prophetic and inspirational. It required and constantly referred to exem-

plars, and once the ideology took an active historical form, a hagiographic movement began to move ever closer to its centre. For certainly one big question could not disappear from view: Does one support the liberation of the oppressed classes because science proves history is going that way or because oppression is humanly and morally unacceptable? If the former, becoming anti-Marxist, or fascist, or neo-conservative when what Marx anticipated failed to materialise and when these seemed now to have history on their side, is hardly inconsistent with the logic of becoming a Marxist revolutionary in the first place. In the face of mounting uncertainties, it became necessary to make the Marxist creed even more religious: the withering away of the state had to rank alongside the second coming of Christ. Far more than nationalism, *pace* Benedict Anderson, ideology became *ersatz* religion. Indeed, there was something millenarian about Marxism from the outset. It was to sweep away the old order and replace it with an entirely new vocabulary and grammar. One could say that Marxism was a sacral idea, and certainly became so as a movement. In Korea, too, the Korean Marxists positioned themselves in relation to the meaning of history in a more than mundane manner.<sup>15</sup>

In the twentieth century, Chestov and Berdyaev were followed in western nations by, among others, Simone Weil, Georges Bataille, and some of the surrealists, and later Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jacques Maritain, Karl Barth, Jacques Ellul, the Niebuhr brothers, Herbert Butterfield, Harvey Cox and Peter Berger, who have striven to restore religious language and metaphors to discourse about history and society. But the positions forwarded by some of these were taken as rather offbeat, idiosyncratic: Trotsky could only respond to Weil by suggesting she was a little insane.<sup>16</sup> But what they did was to give intellectual form and favour to the religious impulses and perceptions of ordinary people who were committed to a conception of society as a spiritual structure. In some sense this paralleled Marx's economic structure of society, in relation to which he claimed a scientific language for the everyday

13 I am aware that religion is hardly a matter only or even chiefly of beliefs, and recognize the legitimacy of those such as Donald Lopez who point out that ritual is in many cases far more important (Donald S. Lopez Jr., "Belief," in *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, edited by M.C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Chapter 1). But I include rituals in the content of religion and am, moreover, referring to the debate in relation to Protestant Christianity, for which beliefs are at a premium.

14 "Love, death and the big issues," an interview of Terry Eagleton by Christina Patterson of *The Independent*, reprinted in *The Canberra Times*, 11 October 2003.

15 Because of post-1945 developments it is mostly forgotten that leftist ideologies in Korea were initially introduced and led almost exclusively by Protestants. How far they viewed socialism religiously is another question that has not been studied to date.

16 Francine Du Plessis Gray, *Simone Weil* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), pp. 68ff. This occurred in 1933, before Weil became openly religious, but was occasioned by changes in her perspective on violence and revolution at the onset of her search for a new language that honoured human sanctity and her realization that religious language fitted the bill. Indeed, Trotsky was already accusing her of being a Salvation Army follower.

experiences and impulses of the ordinary person. But in western scholarship since the mid-twentieth-century, one finds very little further development of this line, so that we still we suffer from a lack of terms and methods to analyse religion in history.

When we find few pointers in contemporary scholarship or thought, perhaps the best way forward is to go back to a time when writers had not yet abandoned the conception of a spiritual structure of society and history, and while not taking up the issue whether their beliefs were true, learn from them how to engage in a systematic study of the religious in history, and thereby rediscover a language that copes with the relation of religion to history. Edith Wyschogrod considers contemporary theory has come to an impasse because of postmodernism's glaring inability to lay any consistent basis for addressing present matters of undeniably moral hugeness. While remaining within the postmodernist tradition, Wyschogrod proposes it needs to take a radically new approach, that is, an approach both ancient and postmodern, one that avoids the amnesia of nostalgia yet reinstates the saintly tradition of fashioning "lives of compassion and generosity".<sup>17</sup> This approach entails life narratives, analogous to the lives of saints, "defined in terms that both overlap and overturn traditional normative stipulations and that defy the normative structure of moral theory."<sup>18</sup> Life narratives show what moral living means, without getting sidetracked by the "procedural and linguistic disputes in which modern ethics has become entrapped." Saints offer "not airy discourse but their own flesh," and enact beliefs in real-life situations, not through abstractions.<sup>19</sup>

Alexander Irwin has followed this suggestion up by forwarding the thesis that one way religion relates to history is its "political mobilisation of the category of the sacred."<sup>20</sup> The sacred can be mobilised politically by self-sacrifice, and so two thinkers as contrasting in their values and worldviews as Georges Bataille and Simone Weil "believed a positive renewal of political forms... depended on a transformation for which the language of religion provided the least inappropriate vocabulary."<sup>21</sup> For their own reasons, European right-wing forces of

the time believed the same, but only instrumentally. Bataille and Weil's positions were highly critical, rejected all orthodoxies, religious and political, and believed in self-transformation as individuals in the most exacting manner: enactment in their own lives of all they wrote. For writing is communicating, but living one's writing is *real* communication. Weil meant her *self* to be read. Weil shaped her life and death as acts of communication: her death was to be a metaphor "for the courage, devotion to the supernatural good, and pure sacrificial love she believed were the qualities required not only of the Christian, but of the loyal citizen of a country in the throes of affliction."<sup>22</sup>

If we turn our attention at this point to the ongoing debate over the merits and demerits of two protestant figures in early twentieth-century Korea, namely Kim Kyoshin 金教臣 and Yun Ch'ihō 尹致昊, one might detect in that debate a serious distortion of both men's positions by imposing on them the shackles of the normative structure of nationalist moral theory, and condemning them where they overturn these normative stipulations: condemning Yun at least for doing so and missing the fact that Kim does so even more fundamentally. Similar issues arise in relation to the life narratives of two leading Protestant women of the same period: Kim Maria 金瑪利亞 and Kim Hwallan 金活蘭.

But there is more at issue here. If one engages in life narratives, it becomes apparent very quickly that the search for consistency in a life of tense engagement with a flesh and blood world is an illusory quest. In my own research, I cannot find internal consistency in the details of the opinions and judgments about how to understand or act in Korea's world in the diaries of Yun Ch'ihō, Kim Kyoshin and An Ch'angho 安昌浩, and nor should I expect to. Moreover, I cannot put much credence in the measured consistency that I do find in the autobiographies of Kim Hwallan, Park Indök 朴仁德, and others, and do not ignore for a moment the fact that in looking back they are changing the pasts of themselves and of others. But what I do find in all these writings, both diaries and autobiographies, is that they share a surprising degree of consistency in their perceptions of

17 Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 257.

18 Quoted in Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. xx.

19 *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

20 *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

21 *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

22 *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

existence, its meaning and significance, and of what is success and what is failure; and this consistency is of paramount importance. For although autobiography is not honest, it is not dishonestly written.<sup>23</sup>

Much of the inconsistency one finds in the lives of such people may be attributed to Wyschogrod's insight that "saints" cannot wait for completion of a search for some elusive common theoretical stance among possibly irreconcilably divided camps holding self-righteously to one militant and usually reductionist position or another. They live in the present and that means in the flesh, existentially, where theoretical coherence is not something to begin with and perhaps need never be achieved. For them, the focus is "the-time-that-is-left in which to alleviate suffering before it is too late."<sup>24</sup> In this light, the requirement by their critics of consistency in the Korean Christian leaders' positions has prevented a grasp of their actual defining differences with other definitions of and approaches to the critical issues in Korea at the time. Every worldview lays claim to a solution and is defined and recognised by the solution it claims. If one begins with a spiritual premise, one cannot end with an exclusively secular solution. It is consistency in this regard that needs to be sought in order to understand a religious view of life.

Ironically, failure to apprehend this kind of consistency leads observers to judge religious actors' positions and actions as inconsistent chiefly because they follow a system of objectives and values the observer either doesn't hold or cannot understand. Thus contemporary activists whose view of the world was "normal," at times regarded Korea's Protestant activists as valuable comrades and at other times as major hindrances to their causes.<sup>25</sup> Where agreement on ends or course of action did occur, it was usually coincidental and temporary. Wherever ends or actions did not coincide, what the Protestant Korean considered the merit of the enterprise, the "normal" counterpart regarded as wholly beside the point.

It is at this point that a historian needs at least to consider the possibility, and imagine what it might mean,

that adherents to a religious system hold a reasonably coherent view of life and society and history according to which success in certain finite, temporal goals is of only relative importance and may even be regarded as a distraction. Further, the fact that the success of the Korean Protestants even before but more acutely after 1920 to distinguish the spiritual meaning and purpose of their lives and aspirations from the political conceptions of life that surrounded them and to separate their motives in engaging in social movements from the general material objectives of the time has been judged a withdrawal from historical relevance, ought to prompt us to reconsider this kind of politization of historical meaning.

The Protestant activists in early twentieth-century Korea regarded matters such as oppression and liberty as real categories, but more than that, as essentially spiritual categories. Oppression was the outworking of sin, reconciliation the outworking of repentance and forgiveness, self-sacrifice the outworking of divine love. At bottom was an epistemology: faith as a structure that not only fits experience in this world but replicates the way we have to live in it and therefore the way we have to think about and conceptualise it. Faith, therefore, was the path to knowledge of one's own or the human condition, and applying that knowledge was the outworking of faith. It is in this context that we need to place the series of speeches and writings of An Ch'angho on repentance, love, and the contrast between heartless and compassionate societies. In these speeches but evidently more concretely in his own life, An radically challenged both the prevailing norms of social hierarchy, language protocol, interpersonal deference rules, and regional discrimination, and the mainstream solutions for the times.

Herein, in short, lies the consistency of the sacred/profane distinction, with Wyschogrod's "saints" endeavouring to embrace the whole of lived experience within the sacred. The category of the sacred is that which derives from outside of this world, in contra-distinction and often in opposition to the profane, which derives only from within the world.<sup>26</sup> Thus bread is bread, needed for

23 Yi Kwangsu's 李光洙 confessions, his *Na-ūi kobaek* 나의 告白, is somewhat exceptional: I do not think I have ever read an account of this kind that is so honest. At the other end of the scale, there are of course autobiographies, sections of which one has to think were dishonestly written, such as Yim Louise's *My Forty-Year Fight for Freedom*, and although I am sure this is not a popular position to take, I would also place Kim Ku's 金九 *Paekpōm ilchi* 白凡逸志 at this end of the scale.

24 Wyschogrod, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

25 Likewise even a seasoned historian decries or praises actions of religious groups or individuals in Korea in accordance with his own and certainly not their view of what they are or should be about.

26 In this regard, Jacques Maritain's idea of a superimposition of sacred history over the mundane relates well to the life narratives of Yun Ch'ihō and Kim Hwallan, and underlines the pietistic tendency of Kim Kyoshin's. See Jacques Maritain, *On the Philosophy of History* (New York: Scribner, 1957).

biological existence, but it does not of itself belong to the sacred or the profane. Action, motivation, objective, intention, and response in relation to the conditions of biological existence are divisible in this way. The sacred is a category of existence and encompasses both the destructive and the liberating. Hate and love both emanate from the realm of the sacred and all human bondage is at bottom spiritual.<sup>27</sup>

I will now turn to two quite different areas in the early twentieth-century Korean historical experience where the perspectives on and solutions to pressing national issues require us to consider the relation between religion and Korean history: women's and other social reform; and death in the course of participation in national affairs. In the first case I will look in some detail at the life narrative of Kim Hwallan, whose record has become entangled in the politization of modern Korean history, and very briefly at the approach to social action of Kim Kyoshin, whose reasons and objectives have been largely misunderstood. In the second case, I will look at the literary solution sought by Chŏn Yŏngt'aek 田榮澤 for the death of his infant daughter as a result of his wife's incarceration for participating in the 1919 March First Movement.

### PROTESTANT WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN COLONIAL KOREA

Let me begin *in medias res*. In 1928, Kim Hwallan, founder in 1922 of the Korean YWCA, and some years before that of the Korean Patriotic Women's Association, was elected a lay delegate to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, held in Kansas city, Missouri, at which conference she single-handedly thwarted an attempt to place Korea and the Philippines under one joint bishopric, and ensured Korea's fully independent status in the world body. Being recognised in this way and travelling far afield on the international stage was becoming a habit. In 1922 she had represented Korea in Beijing at a Conference of the Student Christian Federation. In 1927 she had served as a delegate to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations in Honolulu. There she spoke, and I cite her own records, on behalf of the "preservation and encouragement of the cultural and racial identity of the Korean people along with others over whom aliens

of stronger nations were ruling."<sup>28</sup> In Honolulu, she met Syngman Rhee, renowned nationalist and later first president of the Republic of Korea, and not surprisingly, was blacklisted by the Japanese authorities and subjected to repeated visits and interrogations by police agents after her return to Seoul.

Kim Hwallan nevertheless obtained permission to attend the 1928 Methodist Conference in Missouri, and in the same year travelled to Shanghai, Saigon, and France by boat; and from France overland to Jerusalem, to participate in a meeting of the International Missionary Council. On the way to Jerusalem, Kim spent two weeks in Denmark, where she investigated the principles and practices of the Danish Folk High Schools, which the Korean YWCA and YMCA jointly planned to implement in Korea. And on her return, she opened training classes for rural men and women of four to six weeks' duration, normally in winter for men and in spring for women. There are a number of reports on these rural schools, all of which point to their popularity and look forward to their rapid diffusion throughout the land. But this was not to be: four years later the Government-General Education Bureau ordered them to cease. On what grounds? A combination of factors probably accounts for their closure, but for now let me mark their passing with the rueful obituary of Kim Hwallan herself: "The success of this project was too much for the Japanese authorities to overlook..."<sup>29</sup>

In the meantime, and undaunted by memories of police surveillance on the previous occasion, Kim set off in 1929 for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations in Kyoto. On this occasion, however, the Japanese delegation argued that insofar as the focus of deliberations had shifted to political and economic matters, only the Japanese, who bore responsibility for Korea's economy and governance, could rightfully represent the peninsula. The Institute of Pacific Relations executive accepted the logic of the Japanese delegates' position, and the Koreans were duly expelled.

As if such activities were not enough, Kim Hwallan was a founding member and first president of the Kūnuhoe 權友會, the sister-body of the Korean united front organisation, the Shin'ganhoe 新幹會, which was active from 1927 to 1931. There were other matters of

<sup>27</sup> On this ground, the Hitler phenomenon will not submit to A. J. P. Taylor's thesis that Hitler simply did what Germans at that time expected of their politicians, since even if in an abstract sense that might have some truth in terms of his aims, its concrete form belonged to the sacred, the realm of evil, and not simply of mundane national aspirations. For the religious at least, evil belongs to the sacred, as does holiness.

<sup>28</sup> Potts, J. Manning (ed), *Grace Sufficient: The Story of Helen Kim by Herself* (Nashville: The Upper Room Press, 1964), p. 80.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

considerable importance in her life during this period. For one thing, she had her hair cut short while in Marseilles in 1928, and thereby broke a cultural taboo for women, and on her return she thought it advisable to clarify her reasons in print, in a concise but confident article published in the cultural nationalist journal, *Tonggwang* 東光. When in 1929 her father died, she again broke tradition by having her name included with her brothers' on his tombstone. She had already determined not to marry, believing marriage for a woman in Korea at that time was incompatible with devotion to the cause of women's education and social advancement.<sup>30</sup>

And it was on education that she resolved now to focus her energies. If we were to proceed chronologically from here, we would follow her to the College of Education at Columbia University in New York, where she became the first Korean woman to earn a PhD, writing on the topic, "Rural Education and the Regeneration of Korea."

But I will not proceed any further with her story at this point, but instead turn to some issues that this vignette of Kim's life, and my subjects of research generally, raise. These are principally methodological issues, and there are several, but I have time to deal here only briefly with the understanding of the role of "cultural" movements such as religion and gender in history. Both of these cultural issues are closely linked to the study of women's movements in colonial Korea, and so I will endeavour to address them together.

As I argued in the introductory section, the cluster of nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and neo- and post-colonialism reinforce a politization of historiography that is very pervasive. It is all but mandatory that a historical examination respects a supposedly all-encompassing, interlocking political reality. It is assumed that the highest expression of humanity, of aspirations, organisation, civilizational form, and so on, is political. In historical method, this means that religion must be examined in terms of its national, usually political function. If something is apolitical, it is ahistorical. I discovered in my earlier work that in trying to save religion from the nation, I was fooling myself to some extent, since exactly where I thought I was de-centring the nation, I was making it

some sort of default adjudicator, and was busy justifying the motives, intentions and activities of historical figures for whom reality was a religious structure, in relation to national political imperatives. I had to do so in part because of the historical sources themselves, in which religion was being judged precisely this way. But I was quite aware of the fact that the actors I was studying did not measure themselves this way and that the insistence both of their contemporaries and of my contemporary historians that they do so meant that they were being gravely misunderstood and, in historical narrative, or mimetic terms, gravely misrepresented. Further, I could see clearly how difficult it would be to write a history in which an apolitical religious objective could be given greater importance than a national political agenda, or further, in which a national political agenda would have to justify itself to a religious framework.<sup>31</sup>

Women's movements in colonial Korea have been obliged to demonstrate their relevance to supposedly generic national objectives, whether pursued in conjunction with centre-right nationalist or socialist nationalist movements. There was very heavy pressure exerted on women activists in the 1920s and 1930s to consent to the claim that the proper path to women's acceptance and agency in the public realm was participation alongside men in movements on behalf of nationalist political ends. I have argued that the consequences of the women's consent to this claim were the subversion and even annulment of their objectives of transforming the gender structures of their families and communities.<sup>32</sup> There is more than one, single, unified history, and the liberation of a nation and movements for gender change are different stories. What Kim Hwallan's case and a large body of sources from the period also demonstrate is that the avenue most readily and most effectively taken by women to gain recognition and agency in the public realm was, in fact, religion.

The pressures on women during the colonial period have their counterpart in recent historical studies of their movements, in which it is taken for granted that there is a historical teleology in which these movements must find their place and, more importantly, their meaning. The meaning of the movements consists

<sup>30</sup> This deliberate decision not to marry was of itself revolutionary for its time, and was of singular importance in Kim's life and career and example, but for some reason is often passed over in discussions of her contributions to gender reform movements. It is surprisingly not even mentioned in Choi Hyeaeol's recent work (*op. cit.*, 2009), when in fact it is of considerable importance in demonstrating the real independence of mind and objectives of these early female Protestant activists not only from tradition but also, and crucially, from the foreign missionary women.

<sup>31</sup> I have summarized my findings on this subject in my chapter, "Providence and Power: Korean Protestant Responses to Japanese Imperialism," in *Reading Asia: New Research in Asian Studies*, edited by Frans Hüsken & Dick van der Meij (Richmond, Kurzon: 2001), pp.154-172.

in their approach to full, autonomous engagement in the political and economic life of the nation. This is immensely problematic. For any such approach was either very distant or quickly abandoned. Indeed, for the majority of the women's movements, any such approach was not even considered; the historical teleology was in some cases not even approved. And if that is the way in which their historical meaning is measured, we might logically have to conclude that Korean women's history not only of the colonial period but for the whole 600-year Chosŏn dynasty as well was a story of deprivation. (And we would have to conclude the same for almost all males throughout almost all the history of the globe.)

Admittedly, to describe women's history during the colonial period as deferred fulfilment—a revolution postponed—is not the same thing as to characterise Korean women's history as a story of endless delay, centuries of marking time, for the simple reason that the rise of the idea of women's liberation in Korea in the early 20th century is itself a historical phenomenon, and so must be studied synchronically. However, this does not dispose of two important matters. First, the contemporary South Korean political order is described as patriarchal democracy and its economic culture as industrial patriarchy. What status does this imply for women in the public realm? Is the meaning of women's history always something in the future, a never-never story? Secondly, with the exception perhaps of some neo-colonialist approaches, historical studies of the Korean colonial period are dominated by a grand epic framework, in which a nation's history has a proper path—from which there can be aberrations but to which it must ultimately return—blazoned by a central dynamic that is either materialist, in which case it will share some universal characteristics, or spiritual-cultural, in which case it will be particular, perhaps unique. For colonial Korea, its status is an aberration, and the central meaning of its history then is the dynamic that leads to nation-statehood, or politically independent nationhood. Religions and women's movements have their place in history insofar as they belong to this dynamic. The lessons are: that which is apolitical is invisible; in any case, historically inconsequential. And to be political meant to engage in some form of resistance to Japanese rule.

Yet if one pursues the questions whether women in colonial Korea were invisible when they lacked political status, whether political means were the means they chose, and whether political ends were what they regarded as their ends, the answer one comes up with depends on the approach and the sources one chooses to employ. When a macro approach of situating women's movements and history within a so-called wider political history of national imperatives and fortunes is adopted, or one that collapses all historical phenomena that are deemed to be important into a single theoretical statement, it is difficult to support a negative answer without depriving the women in question of historical significance. Yet a micro-historical approach, similar to Wyschogrod's life-narrative approach, will include not only greater detail but also favour more intimate sources.

The first significant work of microhistory is generally believed to be Giovanni Levi's *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist*, published in 1987,<sup>33</sup> and so it is fitting to preface my discussion of the microhistorical answer to the serious shortcomings in the epic-historical approach to matters of nationalism, ideology, religion and social change, with the concise definition proffered by Levi himself in 1990: "To practise micro-history does not mean to look at little objects, but to regard things on a small scale." This does not mean giving case studies of instances of the general, macro-historical narrative that will be expected to flesh out in miniature the pattern and meaning of the big picture of historical forces and changes. On the contrary, micro-history is about discovering fundamental clues about history. It is, above all, opposed to fixing hierarchies of historical subject-matter, where large processes such as modernisation, industrialisation, the formation of nation-states and so on are considered central, even all-encompassing. It is incorrigibly anti-Hegelian. It arises in part from doubts over the validity of identification of peoples with "larger units, be they a nation or a state, be they big parties or trade unions or even the movement of progress itself." (Christian Meier)

Dissatisfaction with the broad depiction of large historical forces is not the only justification for micro-history. There are of course positive grounds. Alf Lüdtke, for example, in his "People Working: Everyday Life and

32 Wells, Kenneth M., "Expanding their Realm: Women and Public Agency in Colonial Korea," in *Women's Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy*, edited by Louise Edwards & Mina Roces (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp.152-169.

33 Giovanni Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [trans. Lydia G. Cochrane]).

German Fascism,” pays attention to “the practical and the emotional dimensions of historical processes,” and in so doing demonstrates persuasively that what some might deem to lie on the surface of historical dynamics is of fundamental importance in understanding “the entire social reality.”<sup>34</sup> Lüdtke is referring to matters of change over time, that is, limiting himself to historical structures, not claiming an all-encompassing theory. Even in cases of power exercised dramatically over groups by virtue of their category—in Lüdtke’s study, the category of race, but we can add religion, gender, class—where he finds a patchwork of practices, various forms of resistance, a range between compliant acceptance and active complicity, the microhistorical approach does not just “fill in” meaning, but reveals a number of subtle but consequential changes and elements of permanency in the historical process that were undetected hitherto. Other studies that have analysed the strategies adopted by survivors of Nazi concentration camps suggest these strategies are meaningful, they are not just private imprints on a history already known, “in spite of the fact that the camps aimed at reducing human beings to a state of utter dependency and exposed them to the arbitrary threat and omnipresent reality of death.”<sup>35</sup>

Micro-historians appear to have taken on the hardest cases to prove their point—politically unconnected religious figures, shockingly unequal and vicious power relationships, poor, rural households—and have come out on top. They have in important ways shown the assumed macro-historical substances such as *the state*, *the industrialisation process*, and even *the family and the individual*, to be misleading.

The micro approach is less apt to mislead because in looking at the small scale, it always does so “with a view to the social, economic, cultural, and political conditions and relationships that are expressed in and through them.”<sup>36</sup> Things naturally occur above the micro dimension, but the higher the level of generality, the thinner, more incomplete the history, where matters are viewed from a great distance.

What challenges does using this approach pose for general history in relation to women’s movements in colonial Korea? I believe I can tentatively pose three

challenges. First, that in their movements for public recognition Korean women turned to religion, not because they could not conceive of political solutions but because they regarded religion as more fundamental than politics. Secondly, that Christianity was not valued so much for its supposed social and political functions, as for the ideals associated with it concerning the value and dignity of the individual, or to be truer to the Korean terms, of personhood (*in’gyōk* 인격). And thirdly, that the principal practical vehicle women chose to gain entry to the public domain was education, believing that through knowledge they could attain economic independence and participate also in the written media.

It is evident that from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korean women who wished to combat gender ideology that excluded them from direct participation in public affairs sought to build social capital in the family or in religion or in both. I am supported in these findings by Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm’s findings cited above in which they note that households are the units that conceive strategies for taking advantage of or coping with social and historical change. My research prompts me to go further: in colonial Korea, households, and the women in them, in many cases *initiated* the changes. In addition to or if necessary in default of family activity, they sought support in religion, usually Protestantism, in part because of the example of single, female missionaries, but more because of the doctrine of individual dignity and responsibility, backed by the supportive structures of church and other communities. Kim Hwallan’s case of an intersection of family and religious support represents a pattern that continued throughout the colonial period and beyond.

As with a large number of cases, Protestant Christianity took hold of Kim’s family through women: introduced to her mother by an itinerant “Bible woman,” or colporteur, in 1905, the religion was adopted by Kim Hwallan and her siblings, and last of all her father, a point that was marked by a dramatic event, a service at which all the animist paraphernalia and the family tablets were incinerated. This conversion to Christianity effected a unification of the family’s religious activities, hitherto divided along gender lines: the males attended to ancestral rites, the

<sup>34</sup> Alf Lüdtke, “People Working: Everyday Life and German Fascism,” *History Workshop Journal*, 50 (2000), p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm, “Household strategies for survival: An introduction,” in *Household Strategies for Survival 1600-2000: Fission, Faction and Cooperation. International Review of Social History: Supplement 8*, edited by Laurence Fontaine & Jürgen Schlumbohm (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2000), p.9.

mother placated the household spirits alone. Gender divisions were further weakened at community level, since males and females attended the same church services, although initially they sat in pews on different sides of the building. Then the emphasis of the Protestant churches of the time on Biblical study and catechism training spurred the spread of female literacy programs within the churches in the 1910s, which had several broader and often unintended consequences for gender relations as women thereby gained access to sources of information far greater than ever before. It was only a natural development for Christian women to organise public women's associations and events independent of both family and church.

A major concern of these associations before 1920 was female liberation. But according to the sources, at this point they felt unfree, as women, not because of politics, or colonialism, but because of the family and kinship system, which hindered them from acting autonomously in the domestic sphere and from participating in the organization of the public realm. They therefore developed strategies in relation to the household, negotiating their objectives with other family members and also persuading the household as a unit to negotiate with so-called wider structures of society. But the mass uprising of March 1919 for national independence, which was largely organised by Protestant leaders in cooperation with an indigenous new religious movement, Ch'öndogyo 천도교, and in which an unusual number of women were active, most of them Protestants, has attracted attention to the political history of Korean women's movements in colonial Korea, and has favoured the view that political objectives were at the top of a hierarchy of aspirations of the women's movements and that Christianity especially was valued for the support it could give to the pursuit of these objectives.

My research so far indicates that this is highly misleading characterisation. I have no problem at all with the view that Korean women's involvement in the March First Movement enhanced their public profile and increased the willingness of some male leaders to give them a greater role in the politics of nationalism, in a way

comparable to some degree with the positive effects for their cause of the British suffragettes' active support of the war effort in World War I. The problem lies in casting political means and ends as the main actors on the stage of the women's historical drama during the whole colonial period.

For Kim Hwallan, both because of her religious creed and because of the immediate, pressing problems of women's lives, there was a deliberate teleological suspension of the national imperative. The national unit was not big enough for her, and she, like Uchimura Kanz in Japan and indeed, Virginia Woolf in England,<sup>37</sup> was made a "citizen of the world" by her beliefs. And the function of her beliefs, according to her own experience, was often to raise fundamental questions about the common assumptions around which society was organised. Like Han Yongun for Buddhism, Kim and other Protestant activists tried to mount a platform on which to challenge the dominant thinking of their fellow Koreans, a platform from which to mount a critique of the world and a rationale for changing it. To do so, they had to construct platforms at the edge of things, and had to create a base there for persuasion, hence they were, initially at any rate, eccentric.

This put Kim and a major stream of Korean Protestantism at the time at odds with the nationalist framework. For a strict nationalist, national liberation is an absolute end. To seek national liberation as a good, but as one good among others, is not to seek it as a nationalist. Kim Hwallan had no doubt that national liberation was a good thing, and she at times worked consciously for it, but it was a relative good that she was prepared to defer in favor of her central mission, the emancipation of women, which she did not see as identical to or dependent on political independence. The former Korean rulers had certainly not supported her idea of female emancipation, and the vast majority of Korean men, including nationalists, still did not. National liberation might or might not be attained; the important thing was that neither the universal substance of her beliefs nor the objectives of her work with women be subordinated or relativised.

36 Hans Medick, "Weaving and surviving in Laichingen, 1650 – 1900: Micro-history as history and as research experience," in *Agrarian Studies: Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge*, edited by James C. Scott and Nina Bhatt (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 287.

37 "As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman I am a citizen of the world." (Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1938), p.197) Woolf was referring to women's lack of psychological investment in war and nationalism, whereas Kim Hwallan was referring to her religious struggle to lift herself out of hatred of Japan and form herself into a woman who wants to serve all women everywhere. In this sense, she stood closer to Uchimura Kanzö.

### KIM KYOSHIN, SOCIAL ACTION, AND DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Very briefly, I believe an appropriate term to apply to Kim's Kyoshin's approach to social reform and activism is faith externalising itself.<sup>38</sup> He viewed social engagement as a natural component of a life of Christian faith that might or might not coincide with social aims and methods of his compatriots. Unlike Kim Hwallan and Yun Ch'ihō and the majority of Protestant activists, Kim Kyoshin did not consider it the business of Christians to engage in social work or create movements or institutions for social change. Kim acknowledged that it was common moral decency to feed the starving before preaching to them and that Christians were interested also in industrial movements for this reason. "So when discussion over amelioration of the rural economy, consumer co-operatives, etc., arises, we sometimes look like advocates of wholesale reform of society.... But the essential function of our faith is not social work.... Even if literacy movements are needed because knowledge is power..., still no rest for our souls will issue from this."<sup>39</sup>

Kim Kyoshin also objected to the common explanation for a minor slump in the growth of the church in the early 1930s, that it was because of its alleged withdrawal from social work.

*Some say it is because it has lost the former reason for its welcome by Koreans. The Korean church used to be the salt of the earth and a light to the world, they say, because it didn't just talk about going to Heaven after death but promoted temperance movements, the removal of prohibition on widow remarriage, and reform of social life, gave clear support for the one-man-one-wife principle, threw itself into rural industry, showed the way ahead for the nation, taught han'gūl at Sunday schools and night classes, eradicating illiteracy and raising national consciousness. Whatever big enterprise was under way, the Church of Christ was at the centre. Now it has forgotten this and talks about going to Heaven.*

*One cannot deny what Christians have done or withhold praise for their achievements. Nevertheless, my objective in believing in the Church of Christ is only to go to Heaven." All those other things can be done better by other organizations such as enlightenment clubs, the [Tonga ilbo] newspaper's "Narod" movement, and so on, and as for raising national consciousness, Poch'ŏn'gyo and Ch'ōndogyo do it better. But the church of Jesus is the only thing that can save a sinner and lead him to Heaven."<sup>40</sup>*

Of critical importance is the way in which Kim coupled national consciousness raising with social activism as an area in which Christians would engage only incidentally if at all, in cases where it might come up in the course of carrying out the central mission of Christian believers in aiding others along the path to heaven. And in fact Kim did not at any stage join a nationalist body or participate in a nationalist movement, nor in his school-teaching career did he challenge Government-General education laws. On the contrary, he accompanied his students to Seoul Central Railway Station to say farewell to Korean soldiers heading off to the Sino-Japanese war-front and later, in the early 1940s, worked under a Japanese foreman in a munitions factory in northern Korea. These are inconvenient facts that have been ignored or even camouflaged by contemporary scholars who wish to use his life narrative in the service of nationalist rather than religious hagiography. But why has Kim Kyoshin's rather pietistic persona been so susceptible to politization?

Partly it is because Kim indulged in the notion of a Korean soul, and it was on this ground that he opposed Kim Hwallan's Denmark-style agricultural Korea and the push for an urban-industrial or a communist-style Korea. But the main reason is that with Ham Sōkhōn 咸錫憲 he developed an idea of providence, he on the providential character of Korean geography and Ham on that of Korean history.<sup>41</sup> Kim aligned Korea's virtues of *chi* 知, *chōng* 清 and *ūi* 意 with the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity, and taught that it was Korea's

38 Cf. Min Kyōngbae 閔庚培, "Kin Kyōshin no mukyōkaishugi to 'Chōsenteki' kirisutokyo 金教臣の無教會主義と'朝鮮的'キリスト教," in *Kan* 韓 8.2 (1979): p. 37.

39 Kim Kyoshin, "Na-ūi shinang- ūi ponsaek 나의 信仰의 本色," in *Sōngsō Chosōn* 聖書朝鮮, August 1934.

40 Kim Kyoshin, "Na-ūi yesugyo 나의 예수教," in *Sōngsō Chosōn*, December 1932.

41 Both contributed to Kim Kyoshin's journal *Sōngsō Chosōn* from the late 1920s to early 1940s. Ham was a much more prolific writer than Kim, however, and is better known in South Korea today for his activities and publications as a public intellectual after 1945. He changed his approach quite dramatically over time and became much more nationalistic in his approach to religious belief to the point of adopting positions that Kim most certainly could not have approved. In his earlier writings, however, Ham was a strong supporter of Kim's line.

mission to spread this throughout the world.<sup>42</sup> One can detect an inconsistency in his approach here: at the same time as he refused to accept any input from outside Korea and argued for the total fusion of Korea with the Bible, he exhorted Koreans to deliver this Korean form to the world. Thus it is true enough to say he gave his faith a nationalist twist, and he developed with Ham an idea of Korea moving from a history built on suffering to one in which it carried out its world-historical mission. Yet even this idea of a mission within temporal history must be relativised by the principle that he repeated in many forms during his life, that “our real country is in Heaven, this world is just a traveller’s house.”<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, the importance of the doctrine of divine providence is that it is itself a theory of history. In this connection, one could apply not only to Kim but also to almost all the Korean Protestant activists, the grammar of divine providence worked out long ago by Giambattista Vico in relation to his thesis on the Ideal Eternal History. Unless one understands the role played by the doctrine of divine providence among Korea’s Protestants from the late nineteenth century, and thereby recognises the religious nature of their starting point and historical vision, it is difficult to see how a satisfactory history could be written of their activities.<sup>44</sup>

## DEATH AND THE NATION

*[The children] played. They did not stop playing except to go and die. To die of destitution. Everywhere and in all times.... No doubt children died everywhere like that—in the Mississippi River Valley, in the Amazon, in the cadaverous villages of Manchuria, in the Sudan and on the plain of Kam. And everywhere throughout the world, as here, they died of misery. The mangoes of misery. The rice of misery. The milk of misery. [Marguerite Duras, The Sea Wall]*<sup>45</sup>

At the point when Korea was losing its political independence to Japan in full earnest, the Christian intellectual and activist, Yun Ch’iho, wrote that the “greatest issue for the dying is how they should be living.”<sup>46</sup> He was at the time the foremost public intellectual living on the peninsula and a widely recognized nationalist leader. In 1911, he was falsely charged with organizing a plot to assassinate the Governor-General of Korea, General Terauchi Masatake, and thrown into jail, where he came close to death himself. Death, of course, is a feature of imperialist invasions and national resistance movements, and to be a martyr for one’s country is considered to be an honourable way of dying. For those religions that emphasize fidelity to and practice of sets of beliefs, dying for these beliefs is also martyrdom and also honourable. But death is also as old as life and is its most certain feature. Yet although it is a constant presence, a part of everyday experience, an inevitable element of social organization and practice, often unpredictable but always final and almost always painful, although another’s death and the prospect of one’s own are among the most difficult things for any person to cope with let alone understand, literal death has become largely absent from historical narratives. Metaphorical deaths, such as the death of the peasantry, a culture, nation, or art form, are certainly the stuff of history, but not normally literal deaths, except in cases of unusual statistical dimensions or when they can be related as in the case of nationalist or ideological struggles to some political movement or teleology.

This is partly the result of the actual growth of secular societies, but partly it is a Freudian slip. Just as William Barrett had to wonder how it was that whole generations took as fundamental truth the assertion that the entire history of the extraordinarily rich development in every major and minor civilisation of the religious quest for meaning and understanding could be reduced to and accounted for by infantile bleatings in the cradle,<sup>47</sup> so

42 Kim Chŏnghwan 金丁煥, “Kin Kyōshin no minzoku seishinshiteki isan: Sōngsō Chosŏn no nikki o chūshin toshite 金教臣の民族精神史的遺産- 聖書朝鮮の日記お中心として,” *Kan* 8.2 (1979): pp 160-161.

43 Kim Kyoshin, *Diary*, 25 March 1937.

44 Indeed, one does need to go back as far as Vico to recover a vocabulary on the relation of divine providence to history. A. Robert Caponigri’s *Time & Idea: The Theory of History of Giambattista Vico* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953) is a good start, and Maeve Edith Albano’s *Vico and Providence* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986) is particularly helpful, but one needs to go to the originals: Vico’s first and second volumes of *New Science* and *On the Study Methods of our Time*. I am engaged in a long-term study of this issue in relation to Korean history, tentatively titled “People and Politics, Providence and Power,” and so I shall not go into it in any more detail here.

45 Quoted in Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 61.

46 Yun Ch’iho 尹致昊, “Kumiin ūi Chosŏnin’gwan e taehayo 구미인의 조선인관에 대하여,” in *Han’guk taep’yo sup’il munhak chŏnjip* 1 한국대표수필문학선집 1 (Seoul 서울: Ŭryu munhwasa 을유문화사, 1975), p.117. No precise date has been supplied, but it is likely to have been shortly before or following Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910.

47 William Barrett, *The Truants: Adventures Among the Intellectuals* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982).

we might wonder how it can be that in historiography we could have failed to include something so universal, inescapable and final as death among the most compelling factors in human choices, hopes and apprehensions of meaning. Whereas there are quite natural and sound reasons for some of this silence in historical writings, it is nevertheless the case that religions, in particular salvation religions, have a great deal to say about death, not only in relation to individual grief and destiny but also in relation to the meaning of the whole canvas of lived life and the question of historical destiny. The politization of history does not allow much room for consideration of the religious approaches to death and consequently the meanings they attach to life and the reasons for choices made while living.

In this regard, I wish to analyse the case of Chŏn Yŏngt'aek, whose loss of an infant daughter in the early 1920s due to the imprisonment of his wife for nationalist activities while pregnant, is normally presented as a casualty of imperialism and an indirect martyrdom, but which he comes to terms with in a quite different manner. In effect, he personalises the political, but beyond that he locates, in his literary writings, both his personal loss and its political connection on a broad canvas the central motif of which is the essential spirituality of life. The difference between his canvas and that of the common representation of his daughter's death, illustrates how the personal and historical richness of this tragic experience has been flattened by the thinness of our historical language and categories.

Chŏn Yŏngt'aek (1894-1968) began writing short stories in the 1910s, at a time when what literary scholars call Modern Korean Literature was in its early formative stage, following the enlightenment phase of the late nineteenth century. It was a time when various movements are identified: naturalism, realism, humanism, "new tendency" writers, and so on. But if one were to take these movements as a starting point for an evaluation of Chŏn's significance as a writer in this period, it would be counter-productive. For Chŏn did not really belong to any of these movements or phases; he is quite unplaceable in these terms; his writings were different. Some critics have explained this by observing, usually a little dismissively,

that this is because he was just a Christian writer. This is significant, in that it does recognise that there might be a category of writing that one may call religious literature, and because it sidelines such literature as of no real consequence.

Reviewing the critical reception of Chŏn's works, Cho Chin'gi 조진기 observed that his writings have been subject to less appreciation than warranted, since scholars have viewed him mainly in terms of his life, such as his commitment to Christianity and to humanism, not in terms of his literary works themselves. In this sense, the critical reception of Chŏn contrasts markedly with that afforded Kim Tong'in 金東仁, with whom Chŏn created the first purely literary journal, *Ch'angjo* 創造 (Creation), in Japan in 1918. And Cho concludes in much the same way as myself, that Chŏn's literature has been under appreciated as it has been categorized as literature of Christianity.<sup>48</sup> And so the question rises for literary studies also: why has there been so little attention to religious underpinnings of the development of Modern Korean Literature? Whereas no one questions the value of the many studies that relate the literature of the KAPF writers to socialist ideologies, there has been almost no serious work done on the relation of writers such as Chŏn Yŏngt'aek, Chu Yohan 朱耀翰, Chu Yosöp 朱耀燮, Yi Kwangsu, Yun Dongju 尹東柱 and many others to religious worldviews. To be sure, Han Yongun 韓龍雲 is touted as a Buddhist poet, but until quite recently, the principle focus has invariably been on his writings' nationalist credentials.<sup>49</sup>

One reason for the lack of attention to religious writings is doubtless habituation to the growth of secular society and beliefs in western nations and the development of similar conditions in South Korea. But we need to go further than this, for much of what fuelled secularization itself derives from religious language and categories in the West. "It is fascinating," wrote Paul Feyerabend, "to see how many modern ideas emerged from detailed and rather sophisticated theological debates."<sup>50</sup> But we have forgotten the influence of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a writing of a kind and an influence that bears comparison with Karl Marx's works, and of Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, which is a much earlier and much more acute investigation of the human condition

48 Cho Chin'gi 조진기, "Chŏn Yŏngt'aek ch'ogi sosŏl-gwa hyŏnsil inshik - 1920-nyŏndae riŏllijŭm munhak-kwa kwallyŏnhayŏ 전영택 초기 소설과 현실인식 - 1920년대 리얼리즘문학과 관련하여," in *Yŏngnam ōmunhak* 영남어문학 10 (1983): p. 213.

49 The chief exceptions to the rule are Gregory Evon and Park Pori, and of course Jung-Shim Lee, a contributor to this issue of *Korean Histories*.

50 Paul Feyerabend, *op.cit.*, p.7.

than Foucault's anti-humanism thesis on how in our search for liberty we humans strip ourselves of freedom. Luther's is in some ways a better analysis than Foucault's partly because it does not fall into the academic trap of proclaiming itself to be a breakthrough in our understanding. Whereas Foucault labours the point that moves purporting to liberate humans sexually were a progressive captivity, the major world religions had already been aware of this fundamental characteristic of human efforts to rid themselves of all restraints to their autonomy for many centuries, discerning that every effort to pull ourselves up by our boot strings has sunk us further into the mire. And of course they have given their respective diagnoses of this age-old dilemma, which are neither more nor less disprovable than Foucault's but possibly more persuasive and long-lasting, for they relate it to something fundamental about the human condition, more than simply a sin of the humanist enterprise but the very grounds for its failure; more than an epistemological breakdown but something inescapable that relates to the basis of the human desire for knowledge. Unlike China's ancient cultural heroes and the scientific geniuses of much more recent times, neither Christ nor Buddha contributed a single piece of artifactual knowledge, yet their contribution to civilisation is immense, notwithstanding M. Polanyi's claim, again not disprovable, that Augustine set back the progress of science and knowledge in Europe a thousand years.

Chŏn himself was aware of the somewhat dismissive approach to the religious substance of his works, but not particularly bothered by it, as far as one can tell from this recollection that he included in the "Writer's Preface" to his 1965 *Ōmun'gak* collected works: "Referring to my works, critics have described my earlier pieces as belonging to naturalism and my later works to humanism. Whatever they say is all right by me; I just wrote whatever I wanted to write." But then he added, "It is natural that who I am as well as my religious attitudes are directly reflected there." This remark frames my inquiry into what we might mean by religious, and in this case Christian literature, and its relation to history. As in the case of Wyschogrod's and Irwin's insistence on the need to read the writings and lives of such religious thinkers as Simone Weil as a connected narrative, so it is advisable to treat Chŏn's case as an enactment of one's beliefs in one's writings.

In 1919, Chŏn Yŏngt'aek married his fiancée shortly before she was arrested and imprisoned for her participation in the March First Movement in P'yongyang. She was pregnant when jailed and their child, a daughter, died aged three months as a result of malnutrition and other deprivations his wife suffered in prison. This was an extremely bitter time and there were numerous trials for the couple over the next decade.

The two major influences on Chŏn's development up to his participation as a young writer in the creation of *Ch'angjo* in 1918 were his father and the Protestant leader An Ch'angho. His father, Chŏn Sŏg'yŏng 全錫泳, was an early dissenter from the traditional neo-Confucian framework, traveling between Seoul, Inch'ŏn, and Shanghai, where fled for a time because of connections with the Kaehwadang 開化黨 (Reform Party). He established a school in his hometown of Chinnamp'o and sent his son to P'yongyang to study English when quite young, before enrolling him in 1908 in Taesŏng College, the school founded by the Protestant colleagues, Yi Sŏnghun 李昇薰 and An Ch'angho. His father was renowned for his concern and generosity towards the farmhands, and Chŏn's writings reflect this in their constant attention to the impoverished and unfortunate. Chŏn could stay at Taesŏng barely two years before having to return home on his father's untimely death. Thereafter he became a devoted reader of the writings of Ch'oe Namsŏn 崔南善 and Yi Kwangsu, but the most significant event in his life was his conversion to Christianity, following the lead of an elder brother.

On becoming a Christian, Chŏn became associated with key participants in events leading to and following the March First movement, such as No Chŏngil 노정일 and Kim Hongshik 金홍식. He developed a natural blend of committed faith and devoted nationalism. He had no dramatic conversion experience, but the consequences were deep: he gave up medical studies and undertook theological training to become a Methodist minister. His whole life became situated in his decision to become a Christian. But on going to Japan he found his natural niche among the foremost literary figures, Chu Yohan, Yi Kwangsu, Kim Tongin and Kim Hwan 金煥, all of whom were from the same northern region, Sŏbuk 西北, and were thereby distinguished from Yŏm Sangsŏp's 廉想涉 group centred on Seoul and Kyŏnggido.<sup>51</sup>

51 P'yo Ōnbok 표연복, "Nŭlbom Chŏn Yŏngt'aeg-ŭi saengae-wa sasang 늘범 전영택의 생애와 사상," *Kidokkyo sasang* 기독교 사상 (January 1966), pp 181-192.



The passport of An Ch'angho



Kim Tongin, Chu Yohan and Chŏn Yŏngt'aek



Kim Kyoshin and Ham Sŏkhŏn



Chŏn joined the *Ch'angjo* group with intention of departing from the enlightenment frame of literature and developing colloquial language literature.<sup>52</sup> His views that he professed at the time of launching the publication of *Ch'angjo* reveals his early conception of what Korean literature should be: it should not remain at the level of either revealing or edifying concerning the social matters in Korea; literature should engage with matters of “life” itself. To the extent that his works highlighted the matters of life, it may be natural that death becomes an important motif on the one hand and that his autobiographical details flow into the making of his works on the other. These two aspects can be understood more precisely in relation to their connection to his Christianity, on which I will comment more later.

*Ch'angjo* was significant as the first journal to be devoted exclusively to literature. It was followed by Yŏm Sangsŏp's *P'yehŏ* 廢墟 (*Wasteland*), with which it competed as a rival for a while, but they joined hands

to create *Chosŏn Mundan* 朝鮮文壇. Kim Tongin moved from a simple naturalist position to psychological plots and character delineation. At that time Chŏn published his short stories – “Ch'ŏnch'i-nya? Ch'ŏnje-nya? [Idiot? Genius?]” and “Togyag-ŭl mashinŭn yŏin [The woman who drinks poison]” - about which he recalled that the painter Kim Ch'anyŏng 金瓚永 fell in love with the titles and Chu Yohan ironically remarked that he had grown out of childhood and entered his dotage!<sup>53</sup>

In 1924, he became editor-in-chief of *Shin Saengmyŏng* 新生明, and participated in the *Chosŏn mundan* journal alongside his brother-in-law, Pang In'gŭn 方仁根, pen-name Ch'unhae 春海, who had married Chŏn's sister Chŏn Yudŏk 劉德傳, an activist in the women's movement. Chŏn ended up doing the lion's share of the work, because the nominal editor, Yi Kwangsu, was busy with the *Tonga Ilbo* newspaper. Chŏn's commitment to Christian publication activities is reflected in his involvement in publishing *Sin saengmyŏng*, *Sae saram* 새사람, *Kidok-*

52 Kim Yongsu 김양수, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

53 Chŏn Yŏngt'aek 田榮澤, “Mundan-ŭi kŭ shijŏr-ŭl hoegoham 문단의 그 시절을 회고함,” in *Chosŏn ilbo* 朝鮮日報, 21 September 1933.

*kyo sinmun* 基督教新聞, and *Pogŭm sinmun* 福音新聞.

Did Chŏn hold a coherent idea of what constituted religious literature? His writings, short stories and essays indicate that he did. Chŏn was a particularly conscious Christian, who related his faith to every element of life. He was in this respect hardly exceptional, for at this stage no Korean who was a Protestant Christian began as one, and there was no natural Christian environment, no tradition, no social milieu, no domestic precedents and no general understanding of what Christianity meant. His essays and journalism reveal that he was quite deliberate in incessantly relating his new beliefs, as a coherent view of human life in the actual world, to his literary activities. He was self-critical, and also critical of the mindset and what he considered shallowness of many of his fellow Christians.

If we turn to his hopes for *Ch'angjo*, that it would leave behind the moral didacticism of the enlightenment literature and develop prose that reflected actual life experiences in colloquial language, it is evident that Chŏn perceived an element of populism in the Christian message that he encountered through An Ch'angho and like-minded reformers. The reason behind the adoption by the missionaries of the pure *han'gŭl* script rather than the classical writing system, he opined in 1936, was the fact that Christianity is essentially a religion of the masses (*taejung* 대중) and commoners (*p'yŏngmin* 평민), and so the elite vehicle was rejected. Christianity was the only field in which pure *han'gŭl* was used. That this happened at a time when the people (*minjung* 민중) were being introduced to a new way of looking at life, and that the new religion did not honour the divisions between old and young and male and female, gave Christianity a most singular position and significance. By now, he pointed out, 17 million bibles had been distributed, with an average lately of 60-70,000 copies printed per year.<sup>54</sup>

But what of the relation between religion and literature? Chŏn believed that history and experience demonstrated that the creation, publication and distribution of written material, especially of literature, played a huge role in the shaping of a society or nation, especially at times when they are undergoing revitalisation. He cited Dante's *Divine Comedy* as being behind the European artistic renaissance and maintained that the French Rev-

olution had its genesis in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Rousseau's social contract theory, and the liberation of black slaves in the USA in writings about the harrowing condition of the slaves. In Christian history, the Reformation sprang from Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and the manifold writings of Luther and Melancthon, and the use of the German vernacular. Germany's reformation, he opined in a very interesting insight, hinged on the production and selling of texts.<sup>55</sup>

We find the clearest statement of an inextricable relation between religion and literature in an essay published in 1939, where he argued that in primitive societies, religious art always developed alongside literature so that it was not possible to demarcate one from the other. Religion and literature were not two categories but one. Beliefs, prayers, liturgies, were all formed through literary expressions, and the texts of all religions, especially Christianity and Buddhism, were works of literature. Noble and truthful literature was the fragrance and light of religion. Works not penned by religious figures also carried the flavor and colouring of religion, for at bottom literature and religion spoke essentially of humans and the world; they tasted, drew and depicted human life, boring down to its deepest layers. Chŏn cites several passages from the Old and New Testaments to illustrate how he gained his greatest literary experiences and inspiration from them. From his childhood, he learned spiritual truths and beautiful expressions and idioms simultaneously through the same medium.

Chŏn noted that although Christ left no writings of his own, his sayings rang with poetry that was sublime and difficult to match: "The foxes have holes and the birds have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." The opening lines of the Sermon on the Mount were high poetry, and his parables were another instance of the literary quality of his sayings. Could Aesop's fables or Tolstoy's folk stories really compare, he asked. The power and pathos of Job surpassed that of any modern play he knew, and the Song of Solomon ranked among the greatest love poems ever written. He regarded Hosea as inspirations for novels and the prophecies, such as the new heaven and the new earth passage in Malachi, as sublime instances of the indivisible connection between religion and literature.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, although this was written in a rather different

<sup>54</sup> Chŏn Yŏngt'aek, "Kidokkyo-wa Chosŏn munja 기독교와 조선문자," in *Han'gŭl* 한글 (September 1936).

<sup>55</sup> Chŏn Yŏngt'aek, "Kidokkyo munhak undong 기독교 문학운동," in *Kidok shinbo* 基督新報, 16 January 1929.

<sup>56</sup> Chŏn Yŏngt'aek, "Sŏngsŏwa munjang 성서와 문장," in *Munjang* 문장 (April 1939).

time and circumstance, I will summarise a reasonably sophisticated theory of what constitutes religious literature that he penned in South Korea in 1957.<sup>57</sup> Chŏn opens with a passage from the Sermon on the Mount:

*The birds of the air neither sew nor do they reap...  
Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not nor do  
they spin,  
Yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like  
one of these*

and comments: “The more one reads this passage the more one’s faith is deepened and the more one reads it the more one’s poetic senses are uplifted... It is at one and the same time a confession of a strong and healthy faith and a literary expression of the highest order.” The reason for this, he continues, is that in former times great people of faith were poets: they related human life to the cosmos directly, and what others failed to see or hear, that they passed on through a verbal medium. Both literature and religion rise from the roots of human life, of humans who while physical beings, aspire for limitless and eternal existence. Christianity deals with the conflict inherent in this world between material needs and desires and eternal aspirations. Chŏn appeals to St Augustine and Pascal as men who perceived in all humans a god-shaped hole that they sought to fill: the image and voice of God in every human. Human culture is that which is fashioned in defiance of that hole, and so all cultures are relativised in relation to God, though all are by the same token educable or elevatable, and it is in this that literature serves an important role: although it is fettered by the limits of its own cultural environment, it is not paralysed by it.

It is very difficult, Chŏn maintains in the same essay, to define the essential character of Christian literature. In a very broad sense it means literature that embeds the times and conditions of people’s lives in a religious framework or explanation of those conditions. More narrowly, it refers to the production of a literary work, where the process is deeply rooted in and fully informed by one’s faith. In Western literature, this is the case with Dante, Milton, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Chesterton, Francois Mauriac and Paul Claudel. There we see the record of humans in consequential negotiation with

an actual, existing, personal god, not the god of the philosophers invented by reason but one that moves into the lives of sincere human individuals. It is a story framed by loss and alienation followed by a spiritual movement in the midst of human life that moves towards rediscovery, recovery and reconciliation. True religious literature should embody this framework, and it can only arise from a writer whose character and life, and whose orientation, exist within this framework.

The encounter of an individual soul with the actuality of the divine at a point in time leads to what Kierkegaard called the “concept of dread”: the spectre of the loss of existence itself leading to authentication of one’s existence. World War I made this dread a reality and necessitated the questions: what is a human, what does it mean to live, what is the world and for what does one live in it? As a result, Dostoevsky became popular as a novelist of dread, evoking the gulf that lies at the heart of existence. All his novels set the world against the Christian view of life, its meanings and orientations, and the possibility of redemption. It is not necessary that Christian literature take religious characters, religious life-styles or church activities as its themes. What is required is that Christian faith inform the writing from the bottom up.<sup>58</sup>

But for Chŏn, the distinctive work of Christian literature is that although like others its practitioners must grapple with suffering, misfortune, and oppression, it shows that hope and deliverance are present in the pain itself. In naturalism, realism and the like, pain is pain, a fact, something necessarily built into the natural order or the system humans create. WWII had a huge impact in the West, and encouraged a rise in Nietzsche’s thought and Sartre’s new brand of humanism, which Chŏn contrasts with Kierkegaard’s interpretation of this sort of human experience and dilemma. One is the working out of a denial of god, the other of the affirmation of god, the way of faith. There is a sickness unto death, but after or by means of death there is real life. Appealing once more to Kierkegaard, Chŏn asserts that this simply follows the framework of St Paul and Pascal: wrestling with God. The refinding of self and God in this wrestling amidst suffering, this is Christian literature, and the antidote to the despair of losing both oneself and God.<sup>59</sup> To be sure, we might add, each death, especially that of one’s child, and

<sup>57</sup> Chŏn Yŏngt’aek, “Munhangnon 문학론,” in *Kidokkyo sasang* 기독교사상 (January 1957).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

especially one caused by the oppressive acts of others, may be “the rice of misery”, but in Chŏn’s view tragedy is not the last word. For human history does not have the last word on human destiny.

There are different ways to characterise the types of fiction Chŏn wrote. One can discern a serious attempt to examine death and separation. These themes figure large in “Hyesŏn’s Death 혜선의 죽음”; “Idiot? Genius?”; “Destiny 운명”; “Spring of Life 생명의 봄”; “The Woman Who Drinks Poison”; “K and His Mother’s Death K와 어머니의 죽음” (incomplete); and “Hwasubun 화수분”. Then there are (semi-) autobiographical works, which include “Spring of Life” (written from the perspective of the husband whose wife was imprisoned, released, and revived after sickness) and “Loneliness” (written from the imagined perspective of his own daughter who describes her parents’ life). The former reaches the level of Christian exploration of life after death, an exploration mediated through his thoughts on Luther’s awakening. For example, “White chicken 흰닭” describes the protagonist’s sympathy for the chicken which is left alone after he feeds his guests with chicken he has been raising; “Picture 사진” deals sympathetically with a schoolgirl bearing the burden of ugliness; and “Windy Evening 바람부는 저녁” portrays a forlorn old woman who is ignorant and maltreated.

It is in relation to the theme of death, on which Chŏn wrote his best pieces, that Chŏn’s writings might best be termed religious literature, in the sense that he himself espoused, for without any reference to any religious tradition, ritual or doctrine his quite unemotive language and depiction of people and events in his narratives of death compel the reader to search for meanings within the temporal order that nevertheless transcend it. In this respect Chŏn’s unflinching “objectivity” in these narratives compares well with the writings of Graham Greene.

Chŏn’s first published work, “Hyesŏn’s Death” (1918), not only explores death but the condition of womanhood in Korea. Indeed, in all his treatments of death, women feature either as the main character or in tandem with a male partner as an equal protagonist in the drama. In this earliest work, the uneducated Hyesŏn discovers that her husband has fallen in love with an educated woman while studying in Japan. Hoping that new education may change herself and hence his attitude towards her, she attends a girls’ school even though it was not customary then for a

married woman to do so. There, a friend tries to persuade Hyesŏn to give up on her husband, on the grounds that it is a mistaken idea of virtue among Korean women at large to think of their husband as the unquestioned object of loyalty and chastity. But Hyesŏn is unable or unwilling to appreciate her friend’s point, and upon discovering that her husband had gone ahead and married his lover after having filed for divorce, she regards this development as her destiny and throws herself into the Han River.

The most poignant of Chŏn’s writings on death are those through which he struggled to come to terms, along with his wife, with the death of their infant daughter. Yet despite the autobiographical underlay of these writings, the absence in them of sentimentality is admirable, evidence of strong literary discipline but perhaps also of the sufficiency of the religious meaning suffusing them to carry the weight of the painful experience.

“The Woman Who Drinks Poison”, published in 1920, is a short story through which Chŏn dramatizes his and his wife’s struggle over their daughter’s death. The story as a whole portrays the ways in which the couple finally accepts their daughter’s death under and within the providence of the Christian God. In the postscript, which it appears he added after Korea’s liberation in 1945, Chŏn confirms that this piece was written to commemorate his own child’s death.

The narrative contains a brief but important phrase that refers to a child as “God’s gift.” The phrase appears in words spoken by a dove during a set of dialogues among fowls and animals. A possible construction of Chŏn’s view is that human beings receive God’s gifts such as children and take care of them as divine gifts. But in certain situations, the “gift” can turn into a “poison.” Chŏn’s postscript, which contains an autobiographical account, allows one to piece together the reference to poison in the story as follows: he and his wife received God’s gift, their child; but his wife actively participated in the March First movement and was arrested and imprisoned, as a result of which the divine gift suffered malnutrition and death. Seeing the child suffer and die was poisonous to the couple, but there was not much they could do about it.

In 1925, Chŏn published in *Chosŏn Mundan* the short story “Hwasubun”, the piece that is today the most well-known of his writings. Also narrated in the first person, this story follows Chŏn’s own standard for religious writings of addressing the conflict inherent in this world between material needs and desires and eternal

aspirations. As one critic has noted, it portrays the tragedy of a family in composed strokes, unemotionally. Unlike the “New Tendency” writers, it did not exude a politically charged atmosphere but sustained to the end an objective delineation of the couple who, owing to the difficulty of their impoverished lives, froze to death together in their mutual longing, leaving their infant daughter to be picked up by another, without intruding his own feelings. And thus a clear picture of the basic human-heartedness in life is revealed in the worst of situations.<sup>60</sup>

Set in old Seoul, the story is narrated by a master of a family with a wife and a few children, a member of a social class wealthy enough to hire a hand to help around the house. Hwasubun is the manservant’s name, and as was the custom, he and his wife and two daughters, aged three and nine, live in the master’s compound and receive lodging as payment. They own nothing but the clothes they are in and often go hungry.

The story opens with the sound of Hwasubun sadly wailing in the middle of a wintry night, which the master hears. A neighbour, a rice merchant, had suggested to Hwasubun’s wife that she give up her elder daughter to a wealthy lady who was passing by shortly. Hwasubun says it is up to her, which precipitates severe agonising in the mother, a scene that is very well depicted. She resolves to give up her daughter for the daughter’s and family’s sake, and the daughter, without even slight hesitation, follows the lady. The daughter’s response is in such contrast to the painful deliberation and anxiety the mother suffered that the cruelty of poverty is underscored without any spoken words or commentary, a narrative strength that runs through the entire story. Heart-broken, the mother searches in vain for her husband in the village to talk about retracting the decision, but in vain, and she has to inform him later in the evening. Hence his sad wailing that night.

A few days later, Hwasubun, whose father and elder brother had already died, has to leave to take care of the small farm of his second brother, who has been laid low by an accident. After waiting a long time for his return, his wife decides to join her husband, since she had injured her hand and was unable to make a livelihood for herself and infant daughter in the cold winter. She persuades the master to write a letter to Hwasubun, telling him she is going to join him, fastens her daughter on her back and departs.

One late winter day, his sister, whose in-law family introduced Hwasubun in the first place, visits the master. She tells them about Hwasubun falling ill while working in his brother’s place and how after receiving his wife’s letter he leaves immediately to meet her. Close to sunset and from the top of a hill, he spies a greyish lump under a pine tree. It is his wife and daughter. Hwasubun holds her and her eyes open but she cannot talk. Neither can he.

Next morning a woodcutter passes by and finds two corpses hugging each other. A child between them has just woken up, sitting with the sun on her back, banging on the bodies. He picks her up and takes her away on his ox, leaving the dead parents where they lie.

“Hwasubun” seems to be a development of the same theme mentioned in “The Woman Who Drinks Poison,” in the sense that the couple in the later story partially but significantly reflect Chŏn and his wife in their terrible situations. In “Hwasubun”, Chŏn lets the child survive while making the couple die. In this sense, he stresses the importance of the spirit and soul (in this story, of the couple, who really struggle to give life to the child) over and beyond physical death.

## CONCLUSION

Literature falls pre-eminently under the order of language, before the historical, and yet in Chŏn Yŏngt’aek’s case as in many others, it bears an essential relation with history. It might therefore offer a lead in the recovery of a language that can heighten rather than flatten the immediacy of living humans in their time and place to an incomprehensible world and thereby restore the ability to relate religion more meaningfully to history. To do so requires us to recognise that the inspiration, motivation and solutions of members of religious systems who engage in social movements are normally not confined to and are frequently incompatible with those that derive from a material or secular conception of society and history, and that for the religious person, death’s meaning cannot be covered by a political interpretation, even where political conditions directly cause it.

A major obstacle to such recognition is that religious language, and with it religious literature, appears esoteric, a sideshow, a private matter, an aberration, unless it is diluted to conform to either “ordinary” language or the “discourse” language of contemporary scholarship. But neither ordinariness nor academic categories are

<sup>60</sup> Kim Yangsu, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

religion's subject. Referring to a verse from Psalm 77 in the Old Testament etched on the gravestone of a fisherman's drowned son—"Thy way *is* in the sea, and thy path in the great waters: and thy footsteps are not known"—Adam Nicholson comments: "That is not consolation, nor the muffling of experience by religion: it is the heightening and realising of experience through language, a statement of the cruelty of things and the unknowable purpose of the universe. A lament written in the seventh or eighth century BC, translated 400 years ago, by Laurence Chaderton's company in Cambridge, communicating itself now in a way which is quite unaffected, neither literary nor academic, not historical, nor reconstructionist, but transmitting a nearly incredible immediacy from one end of human civilisation to another."<sup>61</sup>

It is now a truism that we can never restore matters as they used to be, since they were inextricably part of their time. This, indeed, is what Vico pointed out centuries ago, and the claim with which Wyschogrod concluded her book, *Saints and Postmodernism*. Something artistic is lost with the passing of classical Greece, but so with it, Vico aptly observed, is the rather bloodthirsty culture of the time, which made heroes violent, unashamedly lethal in

intent and act. We don't want to restore the Great Britain of the King James Bible, where royal power was wedded to divine, and to interpretations of the divine, where dissenters were executed, where religious and military and legal power were fused. Nor should we belittle the actual negative consequences of the arrogance of power, such as that exercised by imperial powers over their subjects.

But we certainly do have to discover anew a way of expressing religious realities. For that, we have to restore some principles, such as the depth of death and the poignant unknowableness of life. We are in critical need now of language that reconnects, bridges us to human experience across time, so that we might grasp how they saw matters and what might have been meant, when someone like Socrates said that philosophy is a preparation for death. And when a Korean religious leader, Chŏn Yŏngt'aek, the bereaved lover of solitude, struggled in his literary sanctuary with the ways in which death—its reality, its inevitability and its parallels in so many other breaks and separations in human experience—itsself serves as a point of connection, joining one empathetically with others both across the ages and in one's own time.

<sup>61</sup> Adam Nicholson, *Power and Glory: Jacobean England and the Making of the King James Bible* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 242-243.