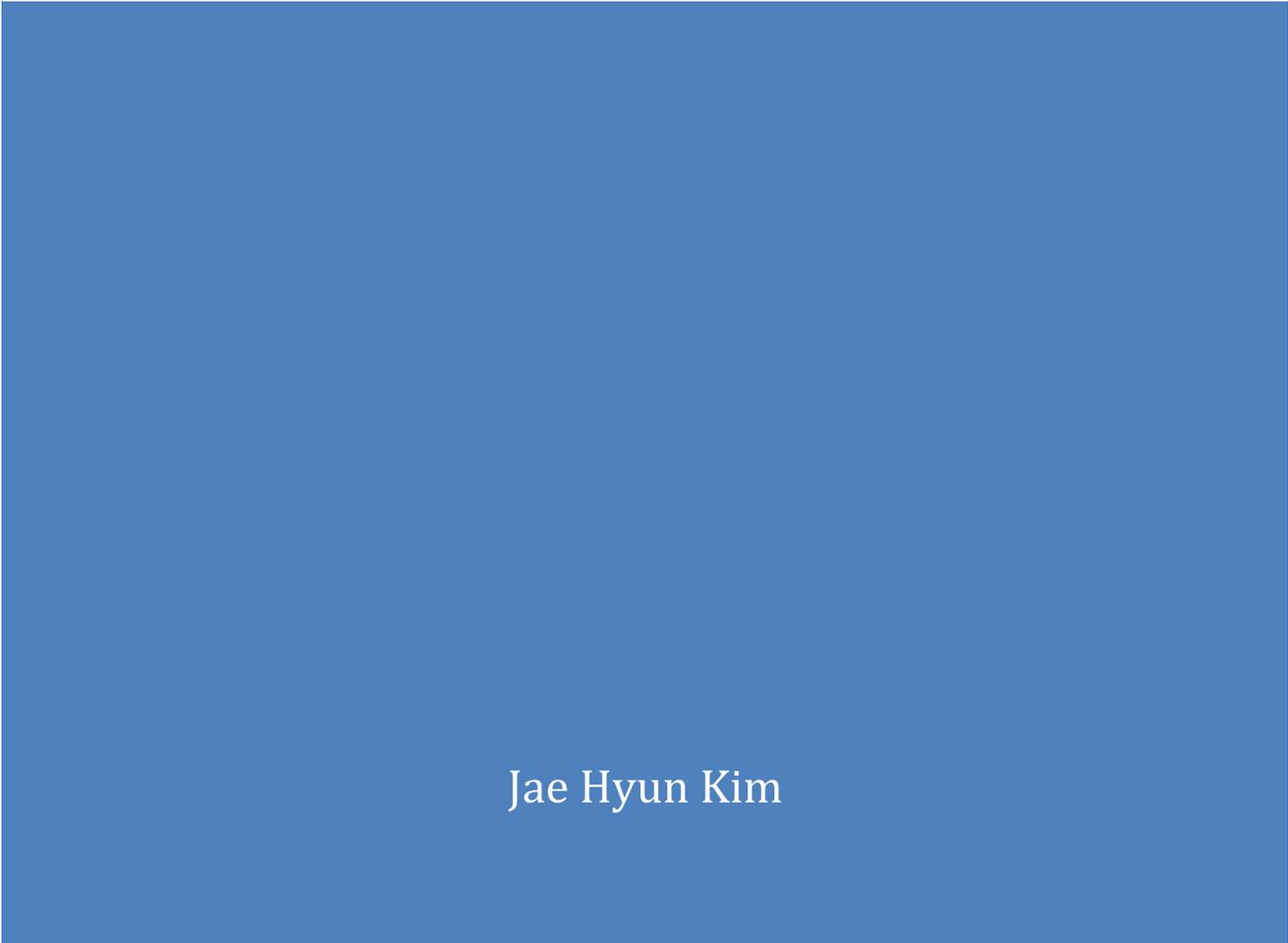




REDEFINING THE NAME AND MEANING
OF THE ABRAHAMIC GOD: A CASE STUDY
OF CHRISTIANITY IN KOREA



Jae Hyun Kim

Introduction

A global demographic study in 2015 reveals that among seven billion inhabitants on Earth, approximately four billion of them are Christians, Muslims, or Jews (Wormald). In Christianity alone, an estimate of 21,000 denominations existed in 1982, and that number grew to approximately 43,000 by 2012 (Barrett 561). Evidently, the number of the denominations is not only very high but also increasing rapidly.

However, all of these religions and denominations share the same origin: the religion of Abraham. Thus, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, at their core, arguably worship the same, all-powerful god. Nevertheless, all three religions have their own distinct scriptures, religious views, and teachings. If they all follow the words from the same god, however, how do their practices and teachings differ so significantly from one another? To add to the three religions from Abrahamic religion, why is the number of denominations and sects within them constantly growing?

This seemingly excessive branching and division of Abrahamic religion, surprisingly, may not be entirely driven by religious motives. In this paper, I argue that communities often embrace a religion that fits their social, historical, and spiritual needs to extend the communities' narratives. Whether intentional or not, the communities consequently interpret and redefine a pre-existing religion to parallel and further their narratives, eventually leading to the creation of a new denomination or religion. Specifically, this paper will examine how South Korea hybridized Christianity with its traditional religion, Korean shamanism, in an attempt to mend for the losses during Japanese colonization in World War II and modernize along with the Western civilizations. By "shamanizing" Christianity and creating a unique Korean Christianity

framework, South Koreans rebuilt the weakened nation without completely abandoning their old religion, culture, and history.

Historical context of Christianity in Korea

The exact origin of Korean shamanism, or *muism*, remains uncertain, because the traditional and ethnic religion of Korea has been transmitted down the generations mainly by verbal means (Lee 135). Regardless, Korean shamanism continues to have had a strong influence in religious and cultural views of the nation.

A central belief of Korean shamanism lies on shaman's ability to communicate and interact with spirits and gods. Shamans, or *mudang*, are usually women who are chosen and possessed by a spirit or god. Though their power varies by the type and strength of the spirit or god that inhabit their bodies, shamans can carry out shamanistic rituals to exorcise evil spirits, talk to deceased individuals or gods, and bless a living individual with materialistic fortunes. With such abilities, shamans can escort the spirit of a deceased individual to heaven and translate communication between a living individual and a deceased individual. Thus, many Koreans have depended on shamans for communicating with their deceased ancestors and family members, receiving blessings during times of financial and social hardships, or even appeasing rain gods in drought seasons (H. Kim).

During Japanese colonization of Korea in World War II, however, Japanese government claimed Korean culture and shamanism to be primitive and attempted to eradicate them. By this time, Japan had successfully embraced Western influences from commercial and educational exchange relationship with Germany in the late 19th century and gained a significant amount of political, economic, and military power (Robertson 36). Thus, in an attempt to “modernize” Korea and legitimize their rule in Korea, Japanese authority forced Koreans to assimilate into

Japan's supposedly modernized culture, language, and religion. Beyond threatening the continuation of Korean culture and religion, Korea's natural resources and human labor were exploited for decades (Clark 11-14).

After nearly 35 years of such oppression, the United States forces finally liberated Korea from Japan at the end of World War II. However, merely a few years later, Korea was dragged into the proxy war between the United States of America and Soviet Union in the Cold War. With Soviet Union supporting North Korea and the United States supporting South Korea, a civil war broke out and resulted in the division of Korea into two nations in 1949 (A. Kim 114).

Evidently, Korea was left in a devastating state by the end of first half of twentieth century. South Korea had faced not only political and economic turmoil, but also cultural and national identity crisis (Clark 11-14). In the midst of this continuous catastrophe, South Koreans were looking for a way to rebuild and strengthen the nation from its bottom, and Christian missionaries served as a catalyst for that change (A. Kim 113-114).

The role of Christian missionaries in South Korea

By the end of World War II, South Korean citizens were left defeated and demoralized in Korea's traditional political, religious, and economic power and capacity. Many elites and scholars of South Korea attributed Japan's recent political, technological, and economic advancement and its victory over Korea to Japan's reformation and embracement of Western influences. Thus, South Koreans began to perceive Westernization to be the key to modernize and strengthen the weakened country (C. Park 140).

By the end of the World War II, Christian missionaries from the United States had been expanding across South Korea and began to be noticed nationally. When Korea ended its self-imposed isolation and opened its door to Western countries for trades and missionaries in 1880s,

the Christian missionaries, mainly those of Protestantism, started coming to Korea (Yi 243). Though most Koreans initially remained unengaged in spiritual level, Koreans significantly benefited from the services that the missionaries provided and became widely exposed to Western values, technology, and educational system throughout 20th century (Y. Park 509). For instance, the missionaries built Korea's first orphanages for blind children and developed several philanthropic institutions. Furthermore, they enriched the educational system of Korea by establishing a continuous curriculum from kindergarten to college that was much more accessible than the pre-existing, elite-oriented education system in Korea (A. Kim 113).

As the Christian missionaries continued to provide such services after the World War II, they gained a highly positive and favorable reputation among South Korean communities. Additionally, Koreans became exposed to Western culture and values by interactions with the missionaries during their philanthropic services. With such a strong influence from the missionaries and lack of frequent contact with other groups from Western countries, South Koreans mainly associated Christianity with the advanced Western civilization (Y. Park 507).

Thus, many South Korean communities perceived accepting Christianity to be the gateway into an advanced and modernized society. In hopes of restoring the nation and their own situations, many South Koreans began converting. Before Japanese colonization of Korea, Catholics, Protestants, and other forms of Christians made up only 1% of South Korean population in 1900. By 1970, however, Christians made up 18% of the population and 29% of the population by 2010 (Connor).

Though the massive conversion to Christianity throughout South Korea during the first half of 20th century can be largely attributed to the historical, political, and economic context of the nation, social and spiritual factors played a key role as well.

Similarity between Korean shamanism and Christianity

At first glance, Korean shamanism and Christianity differ drastically. While Korean shamanism is an ethnic religion that centralizes in Korean communities and emphasizes co-existence with spirits and gods, Christianity is world's most popular religion that is strictly monotheistic.

However, the missionaries and converted Korean clergy emphasized the subtle similarities between the two religions and successfully attracted more Korean converts. As a result of such emphasis on shamanistic elements present in Christianity and adaptation of the religion to fit South Korean communities' mainstream cultural and spiritual perspectives, a unique, "shamanized" form of Christianity developed in South Korea.

For example, rankings exist among spirits and gods in Korean shamanism. Among them, *Hanunim* is the most powerful and supreme deity of them all and governs everything on both heaven and earth, including the fate of humanity. In the times of greatest hardships, people prayed to *Hanunim* for help and mercy. Interestingly, the name *Hanunim* can be interpreted as either god of heaven or the *only* god, which resembles God in Christianity (A. Kim 123).

God in Christianity is the eternal and omnipotent figure that created all things. Similar to believers of Korean shamanism, Christians pray to God in times of challenges and hardships. Upon becoming aware of the similarity, the Christian missionaries and Korean clergy preached that *Hanunim* and Christian god are the same figure and began referring to Christian god as *Hanunim* when teaching South Koreans about Christianity. By emphasizing that Christianity also worships the same god *Hanunim*, South Koreans felt more comfortable and inclined to embrace the imported religion (Y. Park 510-512). By supposedly continuing to serve the same god, Korean communities were seemingly getting closer to a modernized society without abandoning

their traditional religion. If anything, the continuation only strengthened Koreans' belief in *Hanunim*, knowing that *Hanunim* is not merely a weak deity that was inferior to Japanese military and religion.

The naming of God to simply attract more converts, however, stands out, because such practice does not align with the narratives in the Bible. When Moses asks God what he should call Him, God answers, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you'" (*New International Version*, Exodus 3:14). Arguably, the puzzling statement suggests that God cannot be named and His nature cannot be described in a name. Despite God's dismissal of the attempt to be named, the Christian missionaries and Korean clergy applied shamanistic deity's name to Him. By "shamanizing" the name of God, South Korea's shamanistic religious narrative continues on, just under a religion with a different name.

Unlike Christianity that stresses the "hereafter" life, however, shamanism focuses on this-worldly values. Primarily, shamans often perform *guts*, a shamanistic ritual that involves appeasing spirits and gods, to bless individuals with materialistic luck (Han 335). For instance, *chaesu-gut* is a popular type of *guts* that worships two gods of greed and money in order to bless an individual with luck in his or her business and financial situations. Even today, many Korean citizens seek out and pay shamans for such blessing rituals during times of financial hardships (Park 40).

To attract more Korean converts, Christian missionaries and Korean clergy molded and presented Christianity in a light that meets Korea's religion, culture, and needs. Unlike churches in the United States, for example, Korean churches generally emphasize materialistic blessings and teachings during sermons. In addition, Korean churches established a common practice of tithing, or *gamsahonguem*, which allows church-goers to donate money in an envelope with a list

of wishes that usually seek for materialistic success, such as physical wellbeing of family members or growth in their businesses (Park 121).

Evidently, this unique Korean-Christian practice of *gamsahonggeom* is very similar to shamanistic ritual *guts*. In both *gamsahonggeom* and *guts*, an individual pays money for materialistic blessings. As *guts* have served a common cultural and religious practice to seek out during times of stress, an adaptation of such practice in Christianity appealed to Korean crowd (Park 121).

When 921 Korean Christians were surveyed regarding their motivation for believing in Christianity in 1981, 30.6 percent of the respondents stated physical and mental healing, 37.6 percent wanted material blessings, and only 16.9 percent hoped for salvation (Park 121). Clearly, materialistic blessing aspect has been a strongly stressed part of Christianity and remained as one of the primary reasons for Koreans to believe in Christianity.

Another similarity that was often emphasized by Christian missionaries and Korean clergy included miracles. In addition to providing *guts*, shamans also communicate with spirits and gods to exorcise evil spirits and heal people. Similarly, in Bible, Jesus Christ cures leprosy, blindness, muteness, deafness, and various diseases and such miracles were often mentioned during sermons in Korean churches (*New International Version*. Matthew 8:2-3; Matthew 12:22; Mark 7:32-35; Matthew 15:30; Park 122).

With the emphasis on parallels between shamans and Jesus Christ, religious practices that lead to materialistic blessings, the naming of Christian god as *Hanunim*, and hope to modernize, Korean communities embraced this unique, shamanized form of Christianity without completely abandoning Korea's traditional culture and religion.

Conclusion

Around the time Christian missionaries started to arrive, South Korea was in dire need for change. After complete defeat and colonization during World War II, South Korea was dispirited and unconfident in its own religion, political and military power, and culture. *Hanunim*, Korean shamanism's most supreme god, had seemingly failed to protect them in Korean communities' perspective. Meanwhile, with globalization, their neighboring countries were thriving economically from embracing Western civilization influences.

In hopes of rebuilding the weakened nation, many South Korean communities embraced Christianity as they viewed it as the step towards modernization and Westernization. At the same time, the Christian missionaries and converted Korean clergy reinterpreted Christianity to fit South Korea's history, culture, and economy and thus to attract more converts. By shamanizing Christianity in Korea, South Korea continues on their narrative as a country protected under the *Hanunim* and rebuilt the nation.

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