

# An Interpretation of the Triune God in a Neo-Confucian Cultural Context (A Draft)

Sung-Won Kim, KNU

## I. Introduction

Non-Eurocentric world perspectives have erupted and shaken the fixed Eurocentric world view in the late modern era.<sup>1)</sup> In the theological world diverse comparative and complex approaches have emerged, because the long fixed interpretation of the triune God from Eurocentric perspective may not effectively convey the truth to the people in different cultures.<sup>2)</sup> Indeed an apologetic interpretation of the triune God from non-Eurocentric perspective is demanded specially in the circle of conservative-evangelical theologies.

However, somewhat fortunately, the Christian concept of God, which this essay precisely deals with, has relatively less contradictions or conflicts in encountering Confucian religious cultures rather than other Christian doctrines in the East Asian context.<sup>3)</sup> The attributes of God as eternity, oneness, infinity, and creativity of God are not completely strange ideas for those who have been accustomed with Taoism, Confucianism, and a part of Buddhism as their cultural background. Of course, there are exceptions for those who have polytheistic cultures in Pacific Islands, India, and other places. But here a prime concern is to attempt an interpretation of the triune God from an East Asian perspective for effective communication of the Biblical concept of God.

Theological coherence and empirical adequacy of the oneness, eternity, infinity, creativity, administration, holiness of God need to be carefully elucidated and maintained again for an adequate understanding in the Neo-Confucian cultural context, that is prevalent in Korea, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hongkong, and a part of the culture of Japan.<sup>4)</sup>

What our Church confesses in general is that "We believe in one eternally existent, infinite God, Sovereign of the universe; that He only is God, creative and administrative, holy in nature, attributes, and purpose; that He, as God, is Triune in essential being, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." (Genesis 1; Leviticus 19:2; Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Isaiah 5:16; 6:1-7; 40:18-31; Matthew 3:16-17; 28:19-20; John 14:6-27; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Galatians 4:4-6; Ephesians 2:13-18)

## I. Oneness of God

One of the towering attributes of God is oneness. The identity of Christianity is precisely based on three distinctive characteristics: the radical oneness of God, the distinctiveness of Jesus Christ, and the extraordinary communal Church activities, which are ultimately different from other religious communities and activities among various religions.

Judaism and Christianity uniquely worshiped one God in the mist of worshiping multiple gods in the ancient world. Deut. 6:4 and Mark 12:29 emphasize the point.<sup>51</sup> The radical oneness of God is the prime significance in understanding of Christianity. Specially it is extremely important in the pluralistic-religious cultures, that has many gods of idols, principles, figures, and diverse creatures. Specially the pluralistic trends of the postmodern epoch evoke hindering challenges to a clear articulation of the "oneness of God" issue.

The issue of the "one and many" has been one of the most difficult problems in the Western philosophical and religious tradition. However, in spite of diverse challenges and conflicts on the issue of the one and many, in the Western rationalistic or logocentric modern tradition, the Christian orthodox theological heritage has well maintained the oneness of God up to the 21st century in accordance with the Biblical truth.

But in the tradition of organic understanding of the universe as a whole harmonious-systemic entity, question of one and many issue, inner and outer, objective and subjective distinctions are not accounted as seriously as in the West. In the East Asian culture "one and many" has not been that much matter. The principle of wholism and harmony has been pervaded in the Neo-Confucian cultures. The Heavenly Principle, Tao, the Great Ultimate, which have been interpreted as one identical feature in the tradition, are neither one nor many. It is there in the universe as more than a numerical-ontological entity. The question of the oneness of God is treated as not "numerical" but "ultimate" issue in these religio-philosophical traditions.<sup>61</sup>

The Heavenly Principle, which is actually a principle of nature,<sup>71</sup> is beyond taking a mode of being in the category of "one and many." It is inclusive of the universe, yet the Heavenly Principle pursue the universe to follow it, as it is the way of harmony and adequate being. It is persuasive rather than coercive like Wesleyan Arminius theological understanding.

But the Heavenly Mandate, as the term denotes, is coercive rather than persuasive, because it determines the destiny of each entity, that is rather closer to Calvinistic determinism. Interesting thing is that the Heavenly Principle and Heavenly Mandate including Tao are identically interpreted in the tradition. It looks like two side of one coin, that one is persuasive and the other is coercive. But in general this culture believes that the deterministic dimension is stronger than the aspect of free agency between the nature and human being.<sup>81</sup>

The Tao is the way that each entity ought to follow. Tao is neither persuasive nor coercive, but rather it is just there in each context. Tao is neither determined nor a determinant. Tao is neither objectively named nor scientifically categorized. But it is still the cosmo-ontological principle.<sup>9)</sup>

God is beyond the numerical category of "one and many." God is more than an existence in a way of being as one and many entities. God is more than a ontological being. However, when God is expressed as One, The oneness is deemed a symbolic feature as the only object of worship and personal relationship. God can be neither objectively described nor scientifically categorized. The way God is expressed is to use symbolic reference. The symbolically signified God as One refers to the God is the only ultimate object of worship.

Diverse lower religions which have beliefs in various creatures and idols in the Asia-Pacific region need the idea of oneness of God as one ultimate object of worship. Diverse gods cause conflicts in beliefs and relationships between human and gods. Each different god acts and functions in different ways as appears in the various descriptions on gods. And the difference evokes hostiles from one another in religious activities, and it would expand to other social aspects. The diversity of religions and plurality of religious ideas cause conflicts and even to wars between the tribes and nations when they do not concede one another. Without right understanding of the "oneness of God" and adequate dialogue, there would be no peace on the earth. In this context the cultural understanding of the oneness of God is critically important to wherever it is applicable.

## II. The Triune God

Oneness of God is a partner issue with the understanding of the Triune God. The Triune God has been described in the Bible with an image of family, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A significant implication of the image of family is the personality of God, that God is not abstract concept but personal. Family oriented culture can understand better, and individually oriented culture tends to be trapped into complex understanding.

The triune God is also not easy to understand for those who are programed in a way of numerically calculative thinking system. They are painfully facing the conflicts of "one and many" issue. Another challenge to understand the triune God seems to be personified ideas of the trinity, which causes difficulty to grasp a proper idea of the personality of God, because natural religions do not take the personal aspects of the absolute.

One of the solutions for the trinity issue is to use the triquetra concept: "three cornered" idea, which is a well known symbol for understanding the trinity as a best possible rational imagination. "The three distinct and equal arcs illustrate equality of the Trinity members. The continuous form of the arcs demonstrates the eternal nature of God. The arcs are intertwined,

expressing the inseparable nature of the trinity. The center shows a triangle, a common symbol of the trinity."

When the issue of the triune God meets with the "one and many" issue in East Asian culture, wholism and harmony oriented interpretation of the universe, encounters it in a relatively less serious manner. Of course the triquetra concept is helpful to understand the triune God, but it is not necessary always to employ a concept for adequate understanding. The wholism would absorb the conflicts of the trinity and convey the truth of the trinity in East-Asian culture.

The Heavenly Principle, Heavenly Mandate, the Great Ultimate, and Tao are identical feature in Neo-confucian religion-philosophical scheme. The idea of God, Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ as a triune feature is understandable, but the *persona* of each Being may not be adequately communicated. Here, faith and religious experience as Christian principles of understanding need to be employed for possible elucidation of the *persona* of the trinity.<sup>10)</sup>

### 3. Eternity and Infinity of God

"God is not in time," as Augustine says, but yet God works in time. So it would be more appropriate to express that "God is free from time." God is the source of time as time was created by God. God is primordial to time, yet God exercise in time. Time is not an abstract dimension but the fundamental ground for movement of the universe. Therefore God is the beginning alpha and the ending omega of the universe. The infinity of God implies that God is transcendental from space, yet God works in space and time. Indeed "God is free from space," but God works in space and the space is created by God.

Neo-confucian time moves between events in a circular way instead of flowing from alpha to omega in a lineal way. There is no such entities which are entirely free from time in the Neo-confucian universe. Indeed, there is no such thing as eternal being, but only the temporal nature exist itself. A cyclical understanding of time in East-Asian culture does not have beginning nor ending. In this sense the Heavenly Principle is eternal, but the Heavenly Principle is always within the nature, and without nature there is no Principle and Tao.

In the fundamental level time is a lineal flowing ground for events rather than cyclical turning, because the universe is operated by the Divine harmony of conditional and essential features as that nothing repeats itself, but always new event emerges and perishes. The actualized past does not perpetually perish but remain to condition for new emerging events. Moral responsibility in question can be articulated and determined in the mist of the actualized past remains, namely the Divine judgement administrates on the time where the actualized past remains.

Here, the operative and administrative God is not coercive but persuasive. God does not engage in deterministic way but in a way of luring for right mode of being to be actualized. As the time is the fundamental ground for lineal events, there is a choice of each event in a lineal flow of time. The choice presupposes free agency and time to make a choice possible. As long as there is a choice of the free agency, there must be responsibility for the choice to be made. God is persuasive for a right mode of being to be actualized, and if it does not happen, God administers the event to move toward a corrective direction. This God's persuasive operation is an expression of love of the Divine attributes.

#### 4. God the Creator

The East-Asian cultural concept of the Great Ultimate is relevant to the God the creator. The Great Ultimate, which is the symbol of Korean National flag, is the originator or source of the universe. The way the Great Ultimate create the universe is to beget movement and tranquility, Yin and Yang, and myriad things are harmonized and are coming to be. Actually it begets natural event in each actual cosmo-ontological occasion rather than pure creative activities.

The Great Ultimate is more than a being, but Neo-Confucian Scholars wrestled with this issue and ended up with that it is the ultimate of nonbeing. Something to exist is an event coming to be out of nonbeing like creation *ex nihilo*.

Creation *ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing, is the key idea of Christian theory of creation. The Great Ultimate begets the universe, and it engages in the natural activities for harmony and continuous operation. But God created the universe out of nothing. Something to be is out of nothing as a pure creative event.

The transcendental God, as extra-creative feature, is the source of creation which is more than an intelligent designer of the universe in the way to operate and administer the universe. The transcendental dimension of God's aseity and unconditional existence makes God wholly different from the Great Ultimate, which is ultimately a part of the universe. God is not the ultimate of nonbeing, but God is the operator and administrator of the universe.

God has a distinctive character of holiness which the Great Ultimate does not contain. When the Great Ultimate is identified with the Heavenly Principle, as the Heavenly Principle pertains to ethical dimension of humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, the Great Ultimate may be related to the moral attributes of God. But essentially the idea of holiness as implying to set apart and as the object of owe and *tremendum*, is qualitatively different from the natural Heavenly Principle.

#### 5. Closing remarks

In the late modernity or at the dawn of the postmodern era the issue of closer inter-religious encountering arises with different mode of challenges even to the evangelical theologies.<sup>11)</sup> As the world became a global community in the late modern epoch, postmodern pluralism emerges from the complex encountering various religious ideas and cultural diversity. It is unavoidable to encounter and indispensable to have dialogue with them. If it is a reality, then we must find out a positive way to ride this rough waves.

In this pluralistic context what this short essay tries to submit is that one of the key ideas to help an expansion of the Church in East Asia is to utilize the affinitive concepts of the Heavenly Principle, Great Ultimate, Heavenly Mandate, and Tao for effective understanding the triune God. As the comparison flourishes, the truth will reveal and impact the people to discover the right object of worship and to believe in God.

The distinctive attributes of God, the holiness, love, and life are fundamentally different from the Heavenly Principle, Tao, and Heavenly Mandate of Neo-confucianism. An interpretation oriented from the system of wholism and harmony may be helpful to understand the oneness and triune God, but this system searches ultimately for equilibrium, which is neither positive nor negative. But God is positive and administrative for activation of the holiness, love, and life.

The holiness is more than harmony and appropriateness in the universe. It is the purity and ultimate beauty. The holiness is "to set apart" from the nihilistic world views. It is more than the nihilistic *nirvana* of non-being or a contingent way of intellectual enlightenment. The holiness is the source of love and moral standard. The holiness as the source of love is more than compassion and mercy. It is basically a ontological mode of being. The life begotten by God is more than a way of well being, it is the eternal and victorious living over the death. The triune God is the source of the universe, and the originator of holiness, love, and life.