

Christianity in Kim Hyun-seung's poetry

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This article attempts to analyze how Kim Hyun-seung's thoughts about Christianity have changed throughout his poetic works. Considered to be a Puritan-like-figure, Kim Hyun-seung is regarded as the most representative Christian poet in Korea. His works, often written in a solemn mood, are characterized by prayer and devotion to God. In Autumn, the significant season for Kim, he gets immersed in religious contemplation. As a solely wandering bird in his works, the raven symbolizes his religious soul. However, Kim was skeptical about the religion during his middle period due to the limitations of Christianity. His frustration was accompanied by solid solitude with the loss of God, which is in opposition to Kierkegaardian solitude. After suffering from a crisis of death, he returned to Christianity with absolute faith in his final years. His oscillation between the religious faith and the recognition of reality reflects his persistent pursuit of religious ethics, which cannot be fully satiated.

Keywords: Kim Hyun-seung; Christianity; solid solitude; absolute faith; raven

1. Introduction

Since its introduction during the late Joseon dynasty, Christianity has had considerable influence on Korean culture. In the sphere of Korean literature, its influence was rather late, and references can be found from the early 20th century. Before then, its presence was so scarce that it is not easy to discover specific influences upon literary works. As for genres, the religious influences were greater in fictions than poetry. Christianity could not be easily infused with the Korean poetry tradition. It was incompatible with the indigenous culture, for shamanism and Buddhism had been deeply embedded in the Korean poetic world. It was predominantly the Chinese tradition, including especially Buddhism and Taoism, that influenced the pre-modern Korean literature.

Among major Korean poets, some wrote significantly Christian poems worthy of attention. Among them, Kim Hyun-seung (김 현승 Gim Hyeonseung)¹ (1913-1975) is generally regarded as the most

¹ While 'Gim Hyeonseung' is the spelling based on the official Romanization system at present, 'Kim Hyun-seung' is the one that has been actually used for the past decades. It is desirable to adopt Revised Romanization of Korean in order to represent Korean pronunciations. However, there is a severe limitation in the usage in this paper. The spellings of the poet and other Korean names and titles referred to in this paper as well as other texts are not based on the established systems. They were

significant. As one of the major modern poets, his religious presentation is most highly evaluated among those who embodied Christian ideas in poetic forms. Although there were other poets or fictional writers who drew on Christianity into works, few writers, especially poets, rival Kim in terms of devotion to Christianity and subsequent contribution to Christianizing Korean poetry.² Under the influences of especially T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Rainer Maria Rilke, he is evaluated as significantly Westernized among the early generation of modern Korean poets. Kim himself recalls that he learned various features of modern poetry from T.S. Eliot (1985: 296-297). As Kim Hyun indicates, he is exceptional in Korea where a majority of poets elicit poetic origin from the Buddhist tradition (2014: 25).

Among his approximately 500 poems written for 4 decades, many works, especially major ones, are related to Christianity, explicitly or implicitly. As Christianity arguably pervades his corpus, the study of his poetry has been focused on his relation to Christian ideas. He frequently alludes to the Bible and ancient texts. As Kim In-seob notes, no other Korean poets used Biblical expressions more frequently than Kim (2014: 16). It is not surprising considering that the most dominant influence on his life itself as well as his poetic world was Christianity. Born as a son of a Christian minister, he lived in a Christian milieu throughout his life. Even his elder brother and son became Christian ministers. His father was the 5th minister of Yangrim Church, which was founded in 1905 by Eugene Bell (1868-1925), a missionary sent by the Southern Presbyterian Church in the United States. Led by the faithful father, he was educated in Presbyterian mission schools, entirely from elementary to university levels. He retrospectively accounts for childhood:

Fundamentally, it is probably the Bible that influences my poems, knowingly or not . . . I prefer the New Testament [to the Old Testament], especially the four Gospels. It is because the four Gospels present Jesus' actions and words. Jesus' words are all specific and poetic . . . How can He be so noble, humanitarian, solitary, mild, and considerate? I have read

written in some conventional methods that have been used by Koreans unaware of the rules of Romanization systems. As such spellings have long been used, mainly in English abstracts of Korean articles, they cannot but be used for referencing purposes. For this reason, the authors use the conventional spellings for the names and titles.

² Besides Kim, Yun Dong-ju, Park Mok-wol, Chung Ji-yong and Park Du-jin are regarded as poets representatively concerned with Christianity. However, in their works and lives, Christianity is not so central as in Kim's poetic world. No poet wrote religious poems so profoundly as Kim. Yun wrote merely about ten religious poems during a limited period of career. Park Mok-wol became a Christian only in his later days (Lee 2006: 199). Meanwhile, Chung took anxieties of youth as religious faith (Kim 2007: 96).

Jesus' words and acts since childhood. So I can reassure you that the wonderful poems [that is Jesus' words] affected the life of my poems (Kim 1985: 297-298).³

As he confesses, he has been greatly inspired by Christianity since childhood. Arguably, the image of Jesus contributed to the formation of his poetic world. As he regards Jesus' words as "the wonderful poem," the Biblical messages' influences upon his poems can be reaffirmed. Actually, the four Gospels are abundant with metaphors, which the poet probably felt to be poetically appealing (Shin 1996: 325). It needs to be noted that Kim's viewpoint upon Jesus is different from the orthodox conception in Christianity. As Kim Yoonjeong discusses, he regards Jesus as a human rather than a transcendental being equivalent to God (2010: 130). It was the humanitarian aspects of Jesus rather than the Divine that attracted Kim. Actually, his thought about Jesus is against the core idea of Christianity. In Christianity, Jesus as the Messiah occupies the second position in Trinity. However, Kim overemphasizes the human aspects of Jesus. It needs to be noted that Kim's religious ideas, from the early period, have not fully conformed to the orthodox ideas. The liminality of his early religious stance foreshadows his deviance in later years. Despite his image as a Christian poet, Kim did not always hold on to Christian ideas throughout his career. Two major shifts in his perspective upon Christianity can be found, which serves as a criterion for dividing his career into a few periods. Kim's poems can be generally divided into three phases: the early, middle, and later phases. Some critics divide it rather differently, into 4 or 5 periods. Such opinions, however, are not generally accepted.

³ The original reads as follows: 기본적으로 내 시에 아는 듯 모르는 듯 세력을 미치고 있는 것은 기독교의 성경일 것이다....나는 그보다 신약을 더 좋아하고 그 중에서도 특히 사복음(四福音)을 좋아한다. 그 이유는 사복음에는 예수의 행동과 말이 적혀져 있기 때문이다. 예수의 말은 모두가 구체적이며 시적이다....그렇게 고결하고 인정받고 고독하고 부드러우면서도 자상할 수가 있을까. 나는 이 예수의 언행(言行)을 어려서부터 읽었다. 그러므로 이 훌륭한 시가 내 시의 일생에 영향을 미치지 않았다고 내가 어떻게 장담할 수 있을 것인가.

Kim occasionally inserts Chinese characters, probably in order to emphasize the significance of words or clarify the meanings of Sino-Korean words. For a Chinese rooted pronunciation may refer to several meanings. He tends to use Chinese characters instead of Korean characters also in poems as well as prose works. Unlike the above citation using the brackets, Korean letters are frequently not written without bracket. Chinese characters were used even for the titles of anthologies and poems when first published. In such cases, the authors wrote them in the original forms. Nowadays Chinese characters are rarely found in printed poems. However, during the mid-20th century, Chinese letters were used much more frequently, or habitually, in the daily lives of Koreans, especially in newspapers.

As for the translations in this article, all translations of Korean prose works are the authors' unless otherwise stated. In translating the poems, however, we partly relied on pre-existing translations. There are some English and French translations of his main poems, for example *Kim Hyeonseung La Solitude Absolue* (Circé and Oxymoron 2010). We examined how his poems were translated, and then took them into account: we did not merely copy, but partly modified them.

As his numerous poems were collected in several books, it is convenient to classify the works by anthologies. *Kim Hyun-seung Sicho* (金顯承時抄 “Kim Hyun-seung Poems Collection,” 1957) and *Onghojauui Norae* (擁護者의 노래 “Song of Advocate,” 1963) can be classified as early collections. *Gyeongohan Godok* (堅固한 고독 “Solid Solitude,” 1968) and *Jeoldae Godok* (絶對 고독 “Absolute Solitude,” 1970) belong to the middle period. The later period works include *Nalgae* (날개 “Wings,” 1973), *Kim Hyun-seung Si Jeonjip* (金顯承詩全集 “Kim Hyun-seung Complete Anthology of Poems,” 1974) and *Majimak Jisang-eseo* (마지막 地上에서 “On the Last Ground,” 1975).

It is evident that he averted from Christianity during the middle period, approximately from the mid-1960s to 1972. Significantly, the aversion was accompanied by his immersion into solitude. In the later period, however, he returned to Christianity. His deviation is not exceptional in the Korean literary tradition. In Korea, Christian literature mirrored the conflict between the Christian culture and preexisting indigenous culture, and its various efforts to overcome the struggle (Kim 2005: 245).

In order to analyze how his works underwent the religious turns, I will focus on representative works of each period. The poems to be mainly analyzed include *Gaeului Gido* (가을의 祈禱 “A Prayer in Autumn,” 1956) and *Nunmul* (눈물 “Tears,” 1956) among the early works, while *Jemok* (題目 “Title,” 1965) and *Jeoldae Godok* (絶對 고독 “Absolute Solitude,” 1968) are chosen for the middle period. Finally, *Majimak Jisang-eseo* (마지막 地上에서 “On the Last Ground,” 1975) in the later period will be analyzed. Also as the titles of collections, *Jeoldae Godok* and *Majimak Jisang-eseo* are explicitly representative works. Actually, this paper is mainly intended to systemize the preexisting research on his corpus. Thus, the chosen representative works might serve that purpose.

2. Christianity in early poems

Probably his most known poem is *Gaeului Gido* included in *Kim Hyun-seung Sicho*. It has been beloved by general readers who favor solemn mood, for which he is evaluated as a sort of Puritan poet by some critics (Choi 2014: 372). It seems that Korean critics, as well as general readers, do not precisely use the term Puritan. They tend to use it to emphasize his religious purity. By nature, Kim liked such a mood, often with a tea or coffee. This is why he came to be called *dahyeong* 茶兄⁴ by his younger acquaintances. The poet himself notes that he has written poems with a Puritan mind until the middle period (Kim

⁴ Da means ‘tea’ and *hyeong* ‘elderly brother.’ As a senior, he is known to have often enjoyed teas with visitors.

1985: 273). Throughout his life, he sincerely pursued personal and social morality in works and life, which is characteristic of Puritanism. He was deeply concerned with how to put into practice the Puritan ideals. However, it does not mean that he followed the original doctrines of Puritanism in the 18th century. Thus, no critic associates him with any specific religious movement of Puritans. Then there remains a question as to what Puritanism means for Kim. He associates Puritanism with his sincere pursuit of conscience and morality. This stems from his observation as he describes what he saw in his middle school days. He would visit some missionaries' houses, which became a historical site in Yangrim-dong, Gwangju. He saw a Puritan missionary make a spoken promise to buy firewood at a price from a seller. A few days later, another seller suggested a much lower price for firewood. However, the missionary declined his suggestion as he conscientiously valued the promise (Kim 2021: 19-20). Kim remarks that he highly evaluates this kind of conscience. He seems to address Puritanism as the most representative case of keeping conscience for the religious faith. This is why Kim Woochang highly evaluates him as a rare moralist (2014: 99-101).

Generally, Koreans feel more emotional in autumn. In Korea, autumn has multi-faceted images, especially in literature. It is not easy to characterize autumn with a few words. However, it is undeniable that it has often been associated with depression and loneliness.⁵ In other aspects, it is also mainly regarded as the season of harvest and fertility. Kim is one of the numerous Korean writers who are deeply concerned with autumn. Kim wrote many poems including 'autumn' in the titles, not other seasons, especially during his early period. As many critics agree, autumn is obviously the most important season for him. He explains what autumn means for himself:

It was my pleasure to achieve the deepest poems in autumn. So I have lived without feeling the loneliness or sorrow of autumn. Where there was loneliness, there was a prayer in autumn, and that became a poem with added rhythm (Kim 1985: 415).⁶

Autumn is the season most suitable for his religious contemplation. During the season, he does not banally feel melancholy, but solitarily gets immersed in solemn moods. This state of mind far from common sentimentality leads to the ripening of his religious spirit. As manifested in the title, *Gaeului Gido* representatively illustrates such a solemn mood:

⁵ Some representative poems showing such depressed feeling are Kim Gwang-gyun's *Chuilseojeong* [추일서정 "Autumn Day's Emotion"], Park Jaesam's *Ureumi Taneun Gang* [울음이 타는 강 "A River with Burning Cry"] and Lee Seongbu's *Byeo* [벼 "Rice"].

⁶ 가을에는 가장 깊은 시를 얻는 것이 나의 기쁨이었다. 이리하여 나는 일생 동안 가을의 외로움이나 슬픔을 모르고 살아왔다. 외로움이 있는 곳엔 가을마다 기도가 있었고 그 기도에 리듬을 붙이면 시가 되었다.

가을에는
기도하게 하소서.....
落葉들이 지는 때를 기다려 내게 주신
謙虛한 母國語로 나를 채우소서.

가을에는
사랑하게 하소서.....

오직 한 사람을 택하게 하소서,
가장 아름다운 열매를 위하여 이 肥沃한
時間을 가꾸게 하소서.

가을에는
호을로 있게 하소서.....
나의 영혼,
굽이치는 바다와
百畝의 골짜기를 지나,
마른 나뭇가지 위에 다다른 까마귀같이.

In autumn, Lord
Let me pray
Fill me with the humble mother tongue you gave me
waiting for the time when autumn leaves fall.

In autumn, Lord
Let me love

Let me choose only one,
for the most beautiful fruit
Let me manage this time in fertility.

In autumn, Lord
Let me be all alone
My soul,
passing through the meandering sea
and the valley of lilies,

Reaches a dry branch like that raven did.

Autumn renders a solemn mood for him to pursue his religious ideal through prayer. In the sedate time, his confessional wish for prayer shows his religious will. The poem's literary style is similar to that of Lord's Prayer. The style and tone of the original Korean poem are similar to those of Lord's Prayer translated into Korean. The prayer shows his piety to God as the absolute being. The act of prayer determines the relationship between God and him. He establishes a relationship with God in a hierarchical relationship (Choi 1996). His purified spirit can be sincerely represented by the mother tongue. There are linguistic and historical reasons. In his opinion, Korean has a phonetic system that can effectively represent various pronunciations. Additionally, he thinks Korean has a profound vocabulary of adjectives, especially ones expressing the feeling of stimuli called *gamgagaeo* (感覺語). Thus, he found the capacity of Korean to express ideas and feeling more delicately than in other languages (Kim 1985: 27). Also in the historical context, he seems to feel freed when he was using Korean after the emancipation from the Japanese colonization. Probably, he is free from the trauma of the Japanese colonization Koreans suffered from. Kim's writing activity was far from being vigorous during the colonial period, with only 16 poems until 1945 in the anthology published by Kim Hyun-seung Memorial Association.

In the third stanza, autumn offers profound fertility, which is characteristic of Korean culture. With this profundity, he expresses an aspiration to love God, in continuance of the second stanza's affectionate mood. The time for harvest is also the time for attaining religious maturity. The seasonal metaphor of nature is pronounced in this stanza. The poet "discovers God through nature, and shows a humble attitude of subordinating himself" (Yu 2007: 108).

In the final stanza, he desires to be solitary for the religious purpose. His aspiration to be solitary, especially in autumn can be understood from his remark upon Rilke's "Autumn Days": "In autumn, I too often have an impulse to wander solely far away from home like in Rilke's poems I want to leave home, for I wish to solely reach the spiritual height that nobody knows" (Kim 1985: 364).⁷ Feeling identified with Rilke (Shin 2019: 131), he wishes to pursue the spiritual essence alone without being disrupted by secular matters. What the solitude implies in this context can be comprehended by appreciating the significant religious symbols, which might seem merely natural objects in lyrical poems.

⁷ 나도 가을에는 릴케의 시와 같이 집을 떠난 먼 속에서 호올로 방황하고 싶은 마음의 충동을 종종 경험한다....그러면서도 내가 집을 떠나고 싶어하는 것은 나 혼자 아무도 모를 정신의 고지(高地)를 점유하고 싶은 때문이다.

The most conspicuous symbol is the raven as an objective correlative (Moon 2014: 601), the bird almost solely found in his works.⁸ It is a significant symbol the poet uses throughout the long span of his career. He came to endow the black bird with the significant implications through personal experiences, rather than through the influences of Oriental literary traditions.⁹ As he confesses in his short prose *Gyeoul Kkamagwi* (겨울 까마귀 “Winter Raven,” 1974), he was deeply impressed by the sight of ravens flying near his house at Yangnim-dong in Gwangju, where he lived from 1919 to 1926. Ravens would fly towards Mudeung mountain, located around the eastern part of Gwangju, from a nearby bamboo forest in the morning and return to the forest in the evening. He could hear even the fluttering sounds of ravens flying right above his house. Sometimes he saw a few ravens sitting silently on branches of a royal foxglove tree (Kim 1985: 397-9). The birds left such a deep impression that he later wanted to spend his final years listening to the cry of ravens flying southwards toward his home (Kim 2021: 14-15). He explains what the dark bird means for himself:

During that period, I expressed raven as an image of wandering poet in the sky, or a bird of silence It seemed to the eyes of my mind like a bird that embodied human solitude and heavenly punishment intensively through its color and sound (Kim 1985: 397).¹⁰

As a bird solely wandering, it is a symbol of his religious spirit. This symbolization is manifest as it is called *Yeonghonui sae* (영혼의 새 “Bird of soul”) in the poem *Gyeoul Kkamagwi* (겨울 까마귀 “Winter Raven,” 1965). Besides this poem, other numerous poems feature the raven, from the very early one *Kkamagwi* (까마귀 “Raven,” 1935) to the ones written during his final period. The solitude it symbolizes

⁸ In his very early poems, some other birds like sparrow, nightingale and rooster are found. However, unlike the raven, these birds are not considered to be important. They are represented rather as examples of some ideas he conveys.

⁹ Like in many other cultures including the Western one, the raven is an important symbol in Korean culture, remarkably in Korean literary tradition. There are a large number of stories, especially folktales, or verses that feature the raven. It harbors multi-faceted implications, which are partly similar to those in other cultures in some aspects. Although its traits are partly shared by other cultures, its differences are worthy of attention in order to comprehend the cultural background. In Korea, the raven has both positive and negative implications. Traditionally, it was mainly regarded as positive rather than negative, which is contrasted with the Western tradition. Its negative images appeared rather recently. An aspect of its traditional implications seems to be similar to Kim's thought about it. It has been regarded as related to death, insofar as it was thought to bring food to ancestors in the afterlife. It is supposed to link between the present and afterlife (Maximova and Kim 2017). Although its role of transgressing the borderline between life and death might be similar to that of the raven in Kim's poetry, there is no evidence that this idea had a direct influence upon Kim. The poetic image of the deadly bird seems to have been formulated through his personal observation and impression.

¹⁰ 그 때 나는 까마귀를 하늘의 유랑시인이란 이미지로 표현하거나 또는 침묵의 새라고 표현하였다. . . . 인간의 고독과 인간들의 천형을 자기 한 몸에 그 빛깔과 그 소리로 집중하여 형상화한 듯한 새라고 나의 마음의 눈에는 보였기 때문이다.

is what he was occupied with for his whole career. This is why he is called ‘the poet of solitude,’ though its implications are varied by period. Its way of flight reflects the path his soul treaded. The “meandering sea” supposedly symbolizes the present secular world filled with adversities. By contrast, “the valley of lilies” arguably symbolizes a peaceful state of mind, as it is connected with “the lily of the valleys” (Carrol and Prickett 1997: 761) in Song of Solomon 2:1 in the Bible (Song and Yoon 2001: 22). The final destination is the dry branch. The dry branch is an important symbol associated with Christianity often found especially in Kim’s early poems. Trees including dry branches often appearing in his poems are the main objects he feels identified with (Kim 2009: 68; Park 2011: 264). As many critics generally agree, the withered dry branch often symbolizes the old poet himself with a weakened body. Physically weakened, he can be in a state better to pursue a religious spirit. The more solitary and weakened he is, the more the absolute God is worshipped. The raven oriented toward the heaven may symbolize transcendence and salvation.

As another early representative work, *Nunmul* evinces his devotion to Christian ideas:

더러는
沃土에 떨어지는 작은 生命이고저.....

흙도 티도,
금가지 않은
나의 全體는 오직 이뿐!

더욱 값진 것으로
들이라 하올제,

나의 가장 나아중 지니인 것도 오직 이뿐!

아름다운 나무의 꽃이 시뭇을 보시고
열매를 맺게하신 당신은,

나의 웃음을 만드신 후에
새로이 나의 눈물을 지어 주시다.

Often

I wish to be a small seed falling to the fertile ground. . . .

These are all I have!
flawless, spotless,
unbroken.

When I am asked to offer
what is most precious,

These are the only ones I have left!

You saw the flowers of a beautiful tree withering
and made it bear fruit,

After giving me laughter,
You have renewed my tears.

This poem at a glance might seem to be one that expresses the speaker’s emotion about nature. However, the poetic words that refer to the objects of nature are endowed with Christian implications. The Christian spirit is deeply rooted in his early poems that appear to portray the world as merely lyrical. “Through clear images, he presented the poetic world in which he pursued religious ethics” (Nam 2005: 1). His lyricism in the early period is combined with Christianity. The poet appropriates the poetic world, often seemingly merely emotional, from a Christian viewpoint. This interpretation can be substantiated by his own explanation:

The Christian spirit underlies this poem. This poem suddenly hit upon me one day while grieving over the loss of my beloved young son.

I tried to appease the wounds of my heart by faith, and wrote this poem with that mind.

“If humans have something to devote to God, what is it? It is not laughter that is easily changeable. If there is one that does not corrupt on earth, it may be only tears shed in front of God.” This might be the poem’s main subject (Kim 1985: 262-3).¹¹

¹¹ 이 시의 기저에는 기독교 정신이 깔려있다. 이 시는 내가 그렇게도 아끼던 나의 어린 아들을 잃고 나서 애통해 하던 중 어느 날 문득 얻어진 시다.

내 가슴의 상처를 믿음으로 달래려 하였었고, 그러한 심정으로 이 시를 썼었다.

“인간이 신 앞에 드릴 것이 있다면 그 무엇이겠는가. 그것은 변하기 쉬운 웃음이 아니다. 이 지상에 오직 썩지 않는 것이 있다면 그것은 신 앞에서 흘리는 눈물 뿐일 것이다.”라는 것이 이 시의 주제라고 할 수 있을 것이다.

He clarifies that the Christian spirit is embedded in the poem. Explaining what motivated him to write it, he states the main theme. By this account, we can grasp what the poetic words imply. The fall of a small seed symbolizes the death of his son (Kim 1986: 202). Although the sorrow remains unavoidable, the speaker retains a religious stance. The tears suggest a way of surmounting the sorrow through the religion. His thought of surmounting through tears is similar to that in the Bible, which can be found in Psalm 126:5, “They that sow with tears will reap in joy” (Carrol and Prickett 1997: 713). This is a facet of the religious influences upon his consciousness. If a common man had lost his son, he would not have had positive feelings about God. However, the poet tries to overcome the bitterness through the affirmation of God. For this reason, the speaker’s tears are renewed, that is endowed with religious significance. His sorrow for the lost son was sublimated into a spiritual divinity. He endeavors to seek a path toward eternity by accepting the sorrow positively. For this reason, it can be evaluated as the poem of purification, surmounting, and wish (Kim 1996: 204).

3. Aversion from Christianity in the middle period

The middle period is the phase most discussed by critics. In this period, his skepticism about Christianity surfaced, though it had been latent in the earlier period. As he confesses, he was frustrated at the limitations of Christianity in reforming the present society (Kim 1985: 276-278). He noticed that Puritan ideas were not practiced by hypocritical church-goers. In terms of religious skepticism, Kim was not an exceptional case. There was a controversy over the secularization of Christianity in Korea during the 1960s when his skepticism grew. “The reflection on Christianity found in the works of contemporary writers tends to sharply express the contradictions and conflicts created in the space between Christian ideals and the ethics of real lives” (Bang 2017). As one of such oscillating cases, the poet himself confesses the change in his religious viewpoint in his poems:

Initiated by the poem “Title,” significant changes occurred in my poetic world. I left the simple world of lyricism that had been maintained until the middle period, and stepped into the world of ideas associated with the rectification of God and religious faith. . . . In my mental problems, as a human being, I came to be faced with a new solitude. This is differentiated from the solitude caused by the social reason mentioned before. In a word, it is the solitude with lost God (Kim 1977: 208-209).¹²

¹² 시 『제목』 을 계기로 하여 나의 시세계에는 적지 않은 변화가 일어났다 나는 중기까지 유지하여 오던 단순한 서정의 세계를 떠나, 신과 신앙에 대한 변혁을 내용으로 한 관념의 세계에 발을 들여놓았다...정신상의 문제로는 나는

Insofar as he speculates on the religion from a viewpoint of reason and morality, his stance is considered, in some aspects, to be similar to that of Deism (Kim 2010). It can be admitted that Kim shares some aspects of Deism, since he thinks about Christianity from a rational viewpoint and emphasizes morality, as Kim Yoonjeong points to the similar aspects. However, she does not sufficiently discuss the other aspects of Deism, including natural theology. It needs to be noted that there is a limitation in Kim’s assimilation to Deists. As Kim himself has never mentioned Deism, he seems not to have been interested in Deism. The “middle period,” to which the poet refers, is actually the early period by the division of periods in this paper. The poet remarks that the content of his poems until then was simply lyrical, but it would be improper to undervalue them as merely lyrical. In order to emphasize his intensified concern with the religion during the following period, and to differentiate the later poems from the previous ones, the poet seems to exaggerate the early lyrical aspects. What is significant is that his religious change was not an abrupt transition. What was latent in his inner mind began to surface in *Jemok*. His poem *Inganeun Godokhada* (人間은 孤獨하다 “Human is Solitary,” 1957) published 8 years earlier bears witness to it (Moon 1984: 182). *Jemok* marks the borderline he is to transgress further towards the religious negation. It shows the inner struggle of the poet at the threshold:

떠날 것인가
남을 것인가.

나아가 화목할 것인가
쫓김을 당할 것인가.

어떻게 할 것인가,
나는 네게로 흐르는가
너를 거슬러 내게로 오르는가.

두 손에 고삐를 잡을 것인가
품안에 안길 것인가.

허물을 지고 갈 것인가

인간으로서 새로운 고독에 직면해야 하였다. 이것은 앞서 말한 사회적인 이유로서의 고독과도 그 성질이 다르다. 그것은 한마디로 신을 잃은 고독이다.

허물을 물을 것인가.

어떻게 할 것인가
눈이 밝을 것인가
마음이 착할 것인가.

어떻게 할 것인가
알아야 할 것인가
살고 볼 것인가.

필 것인가
빛을 뿌릴 것인가.

간직할 것인가
바람을 일으킬 것인가.

하나인가
그 중에 하나인가.

어떻게 할 것인가
뛰어 들 것인가
뛰어 넘을 것인가.

波濤가 될 것인가
가라앉아 眞珠의 눈이 될 것인가.

어떻게 할 것인가,
끝장을 볼 것인가
죽을 때 죽을 것인가.

무덤에 들 것인가
무덤 밖에서 텅굴 것인가.

To leave
or to stay.

To go on harmonious

or to be chased.

What to do,
I flow towards you
or to rise towards self against you.

To hold reins in two hands
or to be embraced.

To go on with defects
or to question defects.

What to do
To have bright eyes
or be good-minded.

What to do
To perceive
or to survive.

To bloom
or to shed light.

To bear in mind
or to raise wind.

One
or one among them.

What to do
To plunge into
or to cross over.

To be waves
or to sink down to be an eye of pearl.

What to do,
To go to the end
or to die when dying.

To be in a tomb
or to roll outside the tomb.

There is an array of pairs in binary opposition. Though no question marks are used, the lines in contrast actually form questions. Although all the pairs are different from each other, what underlies and subsequently constitutes the opposition is one factor: the inner struggle between the pro-Christianity and anti-Christianity. There is a continuing struggle between the gravity to retain the pre-existing devotion to God and the resistant will to proclaim self-subjectivity against Christianity. His undetermined state persists throughout the poem. From the first stanza, he cannot make a choice between the two opposite ways. Leaving implies his departure from his prior state, that is his poetic world devoted to God. By contrast, remaining means adhering to the existing poetic world. This can be substantiated by the poet's explanation of the poem above. Taking this into account, Lee Seung-ha persuasively points out that it can be read as "To leave from God/ to remain within God" (2006: 208). In this light, Oh Hyung-jung argues, "As an expression of the question that emerges within him, we can see the state of anguish to leave God for a moment and take a step toward the value of self-existence" (2001: 16).

The second stanza seems to be vaguer. It can be conjectured, however, that its undetermined state is also associated with his relationship with God (Moon 1984: 182). "To go on harmonious" may imply maintaining his affirmative relationship with God. This is contrasted with "to be chased." This contradictory tension appears more clearly in the next stanza. The relationship between the speaker and "you" can be regarded as that between the poet and God. The contrast between the directions of flow reflects the struggle between centripetal and centrifugal impulses: one towards God and the other away from it (Yu 1996: 455). This inner contradiction runs parallel to that between the plunge and crossing in the fourth stanza from the end. "To plunge" might be read as 'To plunge into God,' which implies staying in subordination to God; "to cross over" also can be read as 'to cross over God,' that is surmounting and further negating God. The struggle in the attitude to God is intertwined with the inner conflict of subjectivity in the following stanza. Taking hold of the reins, in this light, can be interpreted as the pursuit of self-subjectivity; while being embraced in arms might imply the subordination to divinity.

What underlies the inner struggle in the dilemma is the poet's perception of religious defects. The next pairs of opposition are constructed around it. "To go on with defects" may mean not raising questions to the limitations and defects of religious tenets. This runs parallel to the next. Lightening eyes probably means opening eyes to new reason and will. Goodness, on the other hand, means continuing to practice religious virtues without the awareness of religious defects.

Besides this interconnection between the stanzas, the following waves are equated with the wind above, while "the eye of pearl" is contrasted with it. The shining pearl in the revised version of his poem *I Eodumi Naege Waseo* (이 어둠이 내게 와서 "This Darkness Comes to Me," 1973) hints at the implications of the pearl's eye. The pearl in the sea mud symbolizes the religious spirit or faith in the troubled world. Jewelry generally symbolizes the permanency of religious faith for its concreteness in Kim's writings (Shin 1996: 340).

The inner struggle persists towards the final stanza that deals with the borderline between life and death. It is possible to interpret that entering the grave means dying, whereas rolling over outside the grave means being cast away (Yu 1996: 455). Dying implies entering the afterlife, that is returning to the spiritual sphere. Thus, it indicates following the normal path of Christians. Kim thought that a religion is meaningful when it pursues eternity beyond the present world (Kim 1985: 430-431). By contrast, not entering the place of death implies deviating from it. In the long run, he cannot find an answer to the questions he raised. As compared to Hamlet (Yu 1996: 454), Kim is trapped in a dilemma.

From this undetermined state, he turns towards skepticism about Christianity. The significant symptom that surfaces in conjunction with his inner change is solitude. As the poet himself emphasizes, solitude is the key concept throughout his career. However, this solitude is differentiated from the solitude found in his earlier works. The poet himself offers an explanation for his own solitude:

It is, in a word, a solitude deprived of God. It is a solitude felt in the void when the faith I had rested on collapsed. Thus my solitude is deeply related to Christianity, yet differentiated from Kierkegaardian solitude. Kierkegaard defined humans as a being of solitude. However, in order to escape from the solitude, he endeavored to grasp Christ with open arms. Thus, the Kierkegaardian solitude is the means by which one ultimately gains salvation. . . . However, my solitude is not the solitude that leads to salvation, but that deprived of salvation, surrendering it. It is pure solitude in itself, not as a tool. Therefore, my solitude is the most genuine solitude in the world (Kim 1977: 507).¹³

¹³ 그것은 한 마디로 신을 잃은 고독이다. 내가 지금까지 의지해 왔던 거대한 믿음이 무너졌을 때에 공허에서 느끼는 고독이었다. 그러므로 나의 고독은 기독교와 밀접한 관련이 있는 고독이면서도 키에르케고르 등의 고독과도 다르다.

His solitude at this point is not the commonsensical solitude interchangeable with loneliness. To clarify the solitude, he posits it in opposition to Kierkegaardian solitude. The Kierkegaardian solitude is a prerequisite for one to become a true Christian. For Kierkegaard, one must become “so introverted, that one is, quite literally, entirely alone in the world, alone before God” (Amir 2014: 4). Opposite to this solitude is his own one since it results from the loss of God. His solitude results from being faced with the limitations in the divinity he was seeking. The result of this inner conflict of self is solitude. This solitude is existential solitude, which is especially opposed to the solitude in *Gaeului Gido*. The solitude in the early poem was a prerequisite for the pursuit of Christianity. He associates this existential solitude with his poems. The solitude allows him to be freed from outer distraction. In the solitude, he can get a pure state of mind, in which he can perceive what is genuinely worthy in reality. As he emphasizes his social duty, social morality is really worthy for him. This substantiates several critics’ opinion that Kim’s change is a turn to reality from Christianity. Embodying this recognition in poetic form is a task through which he finds pleasure. Such solitude culminates in *Jeoldae Godok*, which marks the development of *Gyeongohan Godok*. In this representative work of the later middle period, he expresses his perception of the absolute state of solitude:

나는 이제야 내가 생각하던
영원의 먼 끝을 만지게 되었다.

그 끝에서 나는 눈을 비비고
비로소 나의 오랜 잠을 깬다.

내가 만지는 손끝에서
영원의 별들은 흩어져 빛을 잃지만,
내가 만지는 손끝에서
나는 내게로 오히려 더 가까이 다가오는
따뜻한 체온을 새로이 느낀다.
이 체온으로 나는 내게서 끝나는
나의 영원을 외로이 내 가슴에 품어 준다.

키에르케고르는 인간을 고독한 존재로 규정하였지만, 이 고독을 벗어나기 위하여 팔을 벌리고 그리스도를 붙잡으려 하였다. 그러므로 키에르케고르의 고독은 궁극적으로 구원에 이르기 위한 수단으로서의 고독이었다....그러나 나의 고독은 구원에 이르는 고독이 아니라, 구원을 잃어버리는, 구원을 포기하는 고독이다. 수단으로서의 고독이 아니라 나의 고독은 순수한 고독 자체일 뿐이다. 그러므로 나의 고독이야말로 이 세상에서 가장 진정한 고독이다.

꿈으로 고이 안을 받친
내 언어의 날개들을
내 손끝에서 이제는 티끌처럼 날려 보내고 만다.

나는 내게서 끝나는
아름다운 영원을
내 주름 잡힌 손으로 어루만지며 어루만지며,
더 나아갈 수 없는 그 끝에서
드디어 입을 다문다--나의 詩와 함께.

I finally touched the far end of eternity
I had been thinking of.

At the end, I rub my eyes
and awake from my long sleep.

At the end of my touching hands
though the stars of eternity are scattered losing light,
At the end of my touching hands
I freshly feel the bodily temperature
coming towards me more closely.
With this bodily temperature, I solely embrace
in my bosom my eternity that ends within me.

And the wings of my language
beautifully stuffed with a dream
I now drop with the tips of my fingers, like dust.

Caressing the beautiful eternity
that ends for me
touching and touching with my creased hands,
at the end where I cannot advance more
I finally close my mouth – with my poem.

It portrays the absolute state of solitude towards which he has been progressing, unnoticeably or obscurely, for many years. The germs of his skepticism that can be slightly detected in his earlier works are fully developed in this poem. From the beginning, his negation of Christianity is implied. The “far

end of eternity” reflects his state of mind driven to the extreme. The eternity means eternal life, the nucleus of Christian ideas. Thus, ironically mentioning the end of eternity signifies the negation of the core idea of Christianity (Lee 2013: 160).

At this point, Kim perceives reality by awakening from the dreamy illusion. Such recognition is expressed through the symbolic contrast in the following. The “stars of eternity” are contrasted with “the bodily temperature.” The lights of stars are representative of heaven. Thus, the lost light of the stars implies the loss of religious faith. In contrast, the bodily temperature represents worldly matter. He has upset the hierarchical relation between the sacred and secular, that is the religious value system. Taking this stance, he further says that he casts away his language filled with the dream, which is a futile wish or illusion. This proclaims his willingness to escape from the illusionary words of former poems. Though his language has constructed the poet himself, it is merely dust now. Finally, unable to advance anymore, he declares silence. The poet’s proclamation of the emancipation from God culminates in this work (Lee 2013: 160).

4. Return to Christianity

The later period poems manifest Kim’s return to Christianity. The final four years of his career prior to death are marked by his return to the religious faith. There was an accident through which he reversed his mind. At the wedding ceremony of his second son, he lost consciousness due to a high blood pressure. It was on March 1973, three years after the publication of *Absolute Solitude*. Without consciousness, he was at the threshold of death for 2 months. Awakening from this deadly state, he returned to God. “Through the indirect experience of death, Kim turns from the ‘absolute solitude’ to ‘absolute unsolitude’” (Lee 2006: 220). In an interview with Kim Jooyoun 2 years after suffering from the deadly state, he confesses:

Since recovering from the fall the year before last year, I have been constantly living in a religious redemption. I have been anxiously concerned with how to juxtapose literature and religion for a quite long time . . . Now I’m not in a struggle. I’m determined to become a faithful son to God (Kim 2014: 88).¹⁴

¹⁴ 제작년에 쓰러졌다 일어나고 난 다음부터 나는 주옥 종교적인 반성의 생활입니다. 문학과 신앙을 어떻게 양립시킬 것인가 하는 고민을 무척 오래 해왔습니다만....지금은 아무 고민이 없어요. 하나님의 충실한 아들이 되려는 다짐뿐입니다요.

Since Kim returned to Christianity after surviving the crisis of death, he is considered to be similar to Jonah by some critics. Several critics including Park Min-young regard Kim Hyun-seung’s life as similar to that of Jonah. The identification of Kim with Jonah can be substantiated by his poem *I Eodumi Naege Waseo*. It was originally written in 1967, but revised after his suffering. In the revised version, a mention of Jonah is added, “This darkness comes to me/ blocks me/ inside the fish of Jonah.”¹⁵ Manifestly feeling identified with Jonah, he abandoned his skepticism about Christianity. Kim’s identification with Jonah does not mean that he feels identified with Jesus whom Jonah is considered to symbolize. Jonah represents one who repented and thus was forgiven. Korean critics’ notion of Jonah is similar to that in Judaism.¹⁶ Korean literary critics in many cases tend to employ religious terms as common-sensical concepts in ways mainly known to the Korean public.

Kim feels identified with Jonah in this aspect. In the fear of death, he gave up his inner will of resistance against the religion. The changes in his thought become more apparent in his repentance: “But Heavenly Father has awakened me again to give me a chance to repent of my past, so that I have now restored my faith, better than before suffering from the high blood pressure, and making effort to make advances in faith with the awareness of my sin” (Kim 1985: 394).¹⁷ This underlies his drastic turn to the absolute dependence, as he retrospectively remarks, “my remaining life may be an absolute dependence” (Kim 1985: 240). The absolute dependence is starkly opposite to the absolute solitude. Since the absolute solitude was conspicuous in the middle period, the expression “absolute dependence” was deliberately used to revert his skeptical stance.

The poem that epitomizes his return to Christianity prior to his impending death is *Majimak Jisang-eseo*, also the title of the final anthology. Written two months before his death, it is regarded as “a poem of testament” (Moon 2014: 610). It presents a metaphorical image of his mind:

산까마귀
긴 울음을 남기고
地平線을 넘어간다.

¹⁵ 이 어둠이 내게 와서/ 요나의 고기 속에/ 나를 가둔다.

¹⁶ In Judaism, the story of Jonah represents the teaching of *teshuvah*, also spelled *teshuvah*, which means the ability to repent and be forgiven by God. “It has long been recognized that *teshuvah* represents a central religious-moral category in Judaism. It is through repentance that we acknowledge our moral failings, repair our relationships with others, become reconciled to God, and return to proper path” (Newman 2010: 1).

¹⁷ 그러나 하나님 아버지께서는 나를 다시 깨어나게 하시어 나의 과거를 회개할 기회를 주시고, 그리하여 나는 고통의 증세를 앓기 전보다 신앙을 회복하고 나 자신의 죄과를 깨닫고 신앙에 전진하려고 노력하고 있다.

四方은 고요하다!
 오늘 하루 아무 일도 일어나지 않았다.

넋이여, 그 나라의 무덤은 평안한가.

Mountain raven
 leaving a long cry
 crosses the horizon.

Silence everywhere!
 Nothing occurred today.

My soul, is the tomb of that country peaceful?

As many critics agree, the raven, like in other poems, represents the religious soul of the poet. As Park Min-young indicates, “since its first appearance in his debut poem *Eorin Saebyeogeun Urireul Chajaonda Hamnida* [어린 새벽은 우리를 찾아온다 합니다 “Early Dawn Visits Us,” 1934], the raven has sung in representing the poet in *Sankkamagwi Ureumsori* [산까마귀 울음소리 “Cry of Mountain Raven,” 1972], *Gyeoul Kkamagwi* [겨울 까마귀 “Winter Raven,” 1965] and so on” (2013: 94). Its role as the poet’s soul was also mentioned in discussing *Gaeului Gido*. Like in the early poem, the poet is identified with the raven. The reappearance of the raven, with its spiritual role equivalent to those in his former poems, signals his return to Christianity. The long cry it leaves implies the poems he wrote, the achievement of a lifelong effort. For the poet, writing poems constituted the core of his life. As the boundary between earth and heaven, the horizon implies the border between life and death. Crossing the horizon symbolizes entering into the sphere of eternal spirit.

In the second stanza, the speaker implicitly hints at what lies deep inside his mind. At present, silence is ambient without noise. It is so as he is emancipated from secular matters on the ground: the present world he lives in. What the speaker says in the following is unexpected or even striking. The reason why he says nothing occurred is that he returns to heaven as the original home (Moon 2014: 610). As he once mentioned, he had learned that the afterlife is more important than the present world (Kim 1985: 271). Thus, he seeks peace in the heaven symbolized by “that country.” Heaven is the destination where he desires to reach the religious ideal that he has been struggling to attain throughout his life. He thought that religion is indeed meaningful when eternity is attained beyond the present life (Kim 2010: 117).

The final question marks the end of not only this poem but also his corpus and further entire life. His later works can be considered to conclude his corpus in the process of oscillation. There was an attempt to overcome and surmount the limitations of Christianity in the middle period. The attempt was not wholly unsuccessful. However, he eventually returned to God.

5. Conclusion

Retracing the way Kim has treaded throughout his life, we could see how he profoundly embodied his religious thoughts in various poetic expressions. His religious shifts might seem to be self-contradictory at a surface level. However, his oscillation between the religious devotion and concern with reality is not merely an abrupt impulsive deviance. Although seemingly self-contradictory or paradoxical, it is the result of his persistent pursuit of conscience and its practice. Like many other Christians, Kim sought salvation by resting on God. He sincerely kept the religious faith, maintaining a respectable moral life. However, he could not but be faced and thus baffled by the limitations of Christianity in reality. His aversion to God does not mean the abandonment of faith he had kept, but reflects his faithful will to moral achievements uncompromising with secular matters. This elucidates what Christianity signifies for the poet, beyond selfish hope for salvation. It is significant that Kim did not avert forever, but returned to the religion in the end. Despite the frustration, he came to be reattached to it in the fear of impending death. It can be conjectured that he could not endure the loss of Christianity. Although limited undeniably, the religion was the sole haven where his soul could find rest. Therefore, his denial of Christianity for the limited period does not suffice to entirely negate or redefine his religious identity.

By profoundly creating the Christian poems, Kim has greatly contributed to the development of Christian poetry in Korea (Tsutomu 1996: 148-149). As his main works were reviewed, we can place them in the trends of Christian poems in Korea. As the leading figure among Christian poets during the mid-20th century, he exemplifies some main ways Christian poems were created in Korea. It was after the Korean War that Christian poems began to be significantly developed. Beyond the narrow range of scanty works in the early 20th century, Christian poems came to be more diversified in the 1950s, with their main concern with the prayer of redemption and criticism of society. Following this, Christian poems proliferated and settled as a trend in the 60s. In the 1970s, with the rise of Minjung theology, Christian poems turned to concern with the salvation of oppressed have-nots (Kang 1992: 48). Thus, Kim's works share much in common with the contemporary trends of Christian poems.

Kim demonstrates Christianity has contributed to the diversification of Korean poetry, and Korean literature and culture in a larger context. The novel ideas and virtues of Christianity were quite

different from those of the traditional religions and the cultural backdrop. Christianity opened a new realm, extending the horizon of Korean poetry. Korean poets could create works from different viewpoints beyond the cultural boundary. The Christian ideas of prayer, redemption and salvation, exemplified by Kim, could not be found in the pre-Christian period. As cultural as well as religious products, Kim's works reflect how Christianity influenced the collective consciousness of Koreans.

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