The Conversion from ‘Hananim’ to ‘God’: The Term Question in Korea among the Protestant Missions (1882-1911)
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Abstract

It would not be an exaggeration to say that no issue has been more controversial in the history of Christian missions in Korea than translating the name of God into vernacular languages, known as the Term Question, since the progress of Christian missions has essentially depended on the ability of indigenous people to acknowledge the Christian God in terms that made sense within their traditional worldview. It was also because the Korean people had totally different concepts of god due to their polytheistic and pantheistic contexts. The Term Question in Korea emerged among the Protestant missions from 1882 to 1911. It was the issue of whether the name of the Korean Supreme Being (Hananim) could be adopted as the name of God in the vernacular Bible translation or whether a foreign-loan word from a biblical language should be introduced as the name of God. To a deeper and wider extent, the question underlying the terminological controversy was the issue of ‘whether the Christian God had preceded among the indigenous peoples before Christian missionaries’ arrival’ or whether there was a radical discontinuity of monotheistic belief among the indigenous peoples between ‘pre-Christian past’ and ‘Christian present’.

This paper argues that a deep-seated primitive form of monotheism, consonant with Christian belief, had existed among the Koreans since the twenty-fourth century BC. That is, the Koreans in the pre-historic period were originally monotheists who worshipped a Supreme Being who was the same God as the proclaimed by the foreign missionaries. As a result, the term Hananim in the Korean Bible translation played a significant role in growth of the early Korean churches because, in Koreans’ view, Hananim is situated atop the hierarchical structure of gods and spirits as the highest being, so the resonance of this term was uniquely suited to pave the way for an understanding of the monotheistic God of Christianity as being distinctively Korean as well as universal. Hence, the adoption of the term Hananim in the Korean Bible translation was crucial in preparing a link between the Korean religious culture and the imported Christian faith, prompting an effective transition for the Korean people from the indigenous notion of god, Hananim, to that of Christian image.

According to Andrew F. Walls, conversion, derived from the Greek noun epistrophe or verb epistropheo (to turn, return or turn around), is neither ‘a matter of substituting something new for something old (that is proselytising)’ nor ‘a matter of adding something new to something old, as a supplement or in synthesis’, yet conversion is ‘turning what is already there’,

including ‘the elements of the pre-conversion settings’, in a new direction to Christ.\(^5\) In view of this fact, in the minds of the missionaries in Korea, the Christian God, clothed in the dress of primitive monotheism, and bearing the name of \textit{Hananim}, had preceded the arrival of foreign missionaries in Korea. Therefore, \textit{Hananim}, the Korean ‘Unknown God’\(^6\) whom the Korean people had unconsciously worshipped through their own indigenous religion since the twenty-fourth century BC, had been not \textit{substituted} but \textit{converted} by the Korea missionaries into a new \textit{Hananim}, the Only One, the Triune and Incarnate God of Christianity.

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\(^6\) The Book of Acts 17:22-23